Third story in the "Like None Other" universe. During his final year at Hogwarts, relationships will splinter as Harry confronts secrets long-buried and faces the greatest challenge of them all.

Notes

**Timeline and Caveats**: This story begins shortly before Harry's seventh year at Hogwarts and assumes he has lived through the experiences of canon years 1-5. Instead of Half-Blood Prince, he then lived through the events of *A Year Like None Other* and *A Summer Like None Other*. Nothing from canon books 6 and 7 is necessarily true in this universe, though some elements from those books may be utilized. Major differences from canon: Snape in this story --is-- a pureblood; Vernon and Petunia Dursley have both died; and most notably, Snape has adopted both Harry and Draco. Minor differences include a wealth of details such as the fact that Draco's birthday falls on a different date. For more information, read
the preceding stories....

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August 8, 1997

*Mmmmm.* House-elf cooking really was good, thought Harry as he licked the last traces of salt from his fingers. His father would have given him a look for that, at the very least. His brother would have sneered, or more likely, said something scathing about Gryffindor manners.

As it was, though, both Snape and Draco had already finished lunch and left the table. If Harry listened closely, he could hear the sporadic sound of chopping coming from Snape's private potions laboratory, and the slight rustling of robes as Snape moved from one counter to another.

His hearing wasn't good enough to discern what Draco was doing in the bedroom, but Harry figured he was probably writing a letter to Rhiannon. He wrote one almost every day, after all. Long letters, sheet after sheet of parchment filled with Draco's graceful script. He even wrote the letters by hand instead of dictating them to the spelled quill he tended to use for his essays.

Harry didn't think that was because Draco favoured the personal touch, however. More likely, he just didn't want Harry hearing the content of his letters. They were definitely love-letters, and Harry didn't need to read--or hear--them to realise as much. He knew just from seeing Draco's expression as he rolled up the scroll.

*Head over heels.* No other way to describe it, really.

Then Draco would notice Harry looking, and his features would shift into aloof lines, as if he were embarrassed to have been caught looking so love-struck. The expression of cool disdain never really worked, though. The giddiness still dancing in Draco's eyes gave him away every time.

So far, Harry had managed to ignore the impulse to tease Draco about it. Harry wouldn't have thought twice about teasing Seamus or Dean or Ron, but Draco? He was more brittle, somehow. Plus, he was likely to take it wrong, considering how critical Harry had been of his relationship with Rhiannon.

Harry still had his doubts, still thought that Draco was on the rebound from Pansy's betrayal, but now, he saw that there was no point in saying so. All that would do was alienate Draco. Harry nodded to himself, determined. He liked having a brother. Loved it, in fact, and he wasn't about to do anything that would drive Draco away.

*Not one negative word about Rhiannon,* Harry promised himself. *Not a single one.*

Harry glanced at his empty plate, wondering if he should ask the elves for more chips. That was one of the best things about being back at Hogwarts--no more cooking duties. Not that Harry minded so very much; he was used to that after all his summers with the Dursleys, but it was also nice to know that if he wanted food now, all he had to do was toss some powder into the Floo and announce his order. That would change when school started, of course. Harry would move back to Gryffindor and except for the occasional meal down here, he'd eat in the Great Hall with everyone else.

Well, when he wasn't sneaking down to the kitchens for a bite of this or that.

After a moment, Harry decided he wasn't feeling peckish enough for a second helping of chips. Really, he ought to write some letters of his own. It had been almost a week since the Order meeting, and apart from Percy's memorial service, Harry hadn't set foot outside the castle. He wondered how Ron was holding up.
Harry dragged some parchment from a drawer and tried to think of what to write. Trouble was, he couldn't think of anything. Ron knew that Harry hadn't liked Percy much, so sympathy was bound to sound fake as hell, even if Harry meant it in the best way. Even worse, if Harry just wrote a regular letter, ignoring the horrible events at the Ministry . . . well, that would be awfully cold, wouldn't it?

Maybe he should write to Hermione, instead. Yeah, that was easier. So much so, in fact, that Harry wasted no time getting started.

Dear Hermione,

How are you? I hope Draco isn't driving you mental with his constant stream of letters to Rhiannon. When you agreed to make sure his post got passed along, you probably weren't expecting him to write almost every day. Knowing you, though, I suspect you're not too annoyed.

Of course she wasn't. After all, the letters proved that Draco was becoming more attached to his girlfriend--and by extension, more tolerant of all things Muggle.

So, seventh year. You know, part of me really can't believe it's already here. Maybe that's because I spent so much of sixth year out of classes. Not that I really regret it--what I ended up with is worth more than what I missed out on, but I still do a double-take when I realise that this next year is really my last. I don't know, maybe I'd feel the same way in any case. It's hard for me to think of leaving Hogwarts, even though I do have another home, now.

Draco spends hours every day reading those Muggle Studies books you gave him, and I've been steadily working my way through your translation of the Bulgarian mirror book. With N.E.W.T.s this year, I think I won't have much time to devote to that once term starts, which makes me wish I had more time to figure out the mirror, first! Mastering a mirror is turning out to be practically impossible, by the way. You know how my magic is these days! I dropped the mirror you gave me, but I have another one to practise with, now. Fat lot of good that does me. The mirror won't listen to me no matter what I try.

Harry sighed, biting his quill for a few moments before he resumed writing.

Say hallo to your parents for me. Are you writing Ron? I can't think of what to say to him, even though I feel horrible about Percy dying. You know what I mean, I'm sure.

Well, here's something that ought to make you smile, anyway. Draco wants me to go live in Slytherin, this year. He knows perfectly well that I won't, of course, but he's brought it up three times since we left Devon. He says it would only be fair, claiming that since I'll be on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, the school as a whole will need some kind of reminder that I'm in Slytherin, too. I've told him that my special crest will have to be enough, and that's that, but you know Draco. He's not likely to give it up unless Dad tells him to, full stop. And you know, I don't think Severus would ask me to move to Slytherin, but he gets this --look-- in his eye when Draco goes on about people needing to believe I'm a Slytherin in more than name only. I'm actually a little worried about what it might mean. Maybe he just wants me to eat at their table more, you think?

Enjoy the rest of your summer and whatever you do, don't study too much!

Love,

Harry
Harry blew on the ink to dry it, then tapped the parchment with a finger, murmuring the incantation to roll and seal the scroll.

"Owl this with yours, would you?" he asked as he opened the door to the bedroom he and Draco shared.

Draco hadn't been writing a letter at all, though. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed, holding his ferret on his lap.

"No, Loki," Draco was saying, clearly exasperated. "You can't play with Sals like that. Harry'll have my head."

Harry dropped the scroll on his night table as he shook his head. "Was your pet trying to eat mine? Again?"

Draco glanced up. "I told you, Loki's just playing--"

"Yeah, with Sals between his jaws. I'm not exactly brimming with confidence in his intentions." Focussing on the snake image in the corner of his glasses, Harry started hissing. "Sals. Where are you, Sals? It's all right. The big rat can't get into your special box, you know. You'll be safe in there."

Sals came peeking out from beneath the bed, her tongue flickering as she bobbed her head to and fro as though checking for the "big rat." Harry wasn't trying to be snide when he put it that way. It just seemed that Parseltongue had no more exact word for ferret.

Scooping Sals up, Harry held her cradled in both his palms as he sat down on his bed. Since she was still moving in restless circles over his skin, Harry whispered to her a bit more, promising that Loki wouldn't hurt her.

Meanwhile, Draco lowered Loki to the floor, stroking the length of the ferret's back once before he let the animal go. Then, he leaned back against his headboard, his arms crossed as he studied Harry. "You don't know how easy you have it, being able to have a proper conversation with your pet."

"Sure I do." Harry tickled Sals under the chin one more time, and then gently set her next to the glass box he'd charmed to keep her safe. He watched as she slithered inside and coiled up. "I can't speak to owls, you know."

"Ha. With your history, that'll be next amazing talent you sprout."

"Well, it's not as though you have no talents of your own," said Harry, smiling. Now that he knew Draco, he could understand their past enmity quite a bit better. How many times had the other boy used hatred and cruel remarks to cover up jealousy and insecurity?

Too many to count, Harry was starting to think. "What was it that Dad said a couple of days ago? Makings of a Potions Master if you apply yourself?"

Draco scoffed. "As if I'd want to teach at a wizarding school. I'd have to live in, and I don't imagine that would fit in well with Rhiannon's opera career. No, I'm set on a brilliant rise to become the Ministry's top-ranking Auror."

"Going to out-rank your own brother, are you?" Harry laughed as he kicked off his trainers and stretched out on his bed.
"Of course I am," said Draco smugly. "Don't worry, though. I'm not in the least opposed to nepotism. I'll give you all the choice assignments. Though possibly not the ones investigating illegal brewing, not unless you get quite a bit better at Potions."

"Not much way to avoid that, is there? Seeing as I have to take the class even though it's not even required any longer." Harry's frown grew even more pronounced. "And as if that's not enough, Dad has to have me brewing during the summer, too! I didn't mind helping out with the Wolfsbane project before we went to Devon, but I didn't expect to have to brew all sorts of other things now that we're back. Before we know it, school'll start up again. I'd rather have my holiday actually be one."

Draco shrugged, which sparked Harry's sense of outrage even further. It was all well and good for Draco, who actually liked brewing. "If we hadn't got away to Devon, Dad would have had me slaving over a hot cauldron every day this summer, I bet!"

Draco rolled his eyes. "You really are dense sometimes. You mean you truly didn't realise?"

The question--or maybe the knowing way Draco asked it--made Harry's gaze narrow. He hated it when Snape and Draco kept things from him. "Realise what?"

"Severus wanted to make sure that you weren't brooding about what happened at the Burrow."

Harry swallowed. Yeah, the memorial service for Percy had been awful, all right. Somehow, Harry hadn't expected it to be. Maybe because at the Order meeting, the Weasleys had been holding up pretty well. The ones he'd seen, at least.

To tell the truth, Harry's biggest worry when they Apparated to the service had been about Draco. The last funeral he'd seen had been Pansy's, and Harry figured that Draco would be reminded of how much he'd loved her. Of how much he'd lost.

But no, Draco hadn't been bothered at all to sit through the memorial service.

Harry had, though.

Pansy Parkinson's funeral had been a rather restrained affair, he realised now. Perhaps that was the Slytherin way to go about things. The Weasleys were about as far from Slytherins as anyone could get, though. They were heart-broken with grief, and didn't try to hide that fact.

Harry still ached with sympathy when he remembered the way fat tears had oozed out Ron's eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Suddenly, _Ron doesn't do subtle_ wasn't so amusing, after all.

All the Weasleys had been crying, but Ginny had positively wept, and Mrs Weasley had actually thrown herself onto the empty casket and wailed. But then, she had every cause. Losing a child was her very worst fear, and now, it had come true.

Harry had shuddered, remembering the boggart he'd had to deal with during Aran's test near the end of the last term. If his father died, he didn't know what he'd do, but he doubted he'd handle it much better than Molly Weasley was dealing with this death.

"You would," said Snape firmly once they'd made it back home and Harry had admitted what was on his mind. "You must understand, Harry, that what the Weasleys are mourning now is not merely Percy himself. They're mourning the death of possibility. He died estranged from them, siding firmly with Fudge despite the man's obvious incapacity for logical thought, and because he's gone,
they'll never have a chance to reconcile. It's a double death, in a way."

Harry had nodded his understanding, but scowled when he caught the look on Draco's face. "Shut up. Right now."

Draco had raised his chin. "Oh, I like that! I didn't even say anything!"

"You were going to," Harry had retorted, eyes narrowed. "I can tell."

"And what was I going to say, then?"

"That weeping and wailing like that is very lower-class!"

Draco's voice had taken on a distinct chill. "In point of fact, I would describe their behaviour as weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. But if I looked disgusted just now, it was at the thought that were I to die, my own mother would sit stone-faced and beautiful all through my funeral, breaking up only on the inside! And of course Lucius would only ever have thought that if I lacked enough cunning to figure out how to stay alive, then I bloody well must have deserved an early grave!"

"Oh." Harry had gulped, ashamed of jumping to conclusions. "Er, sorry, then. But . . . well, not that I'd want you to die, but when you do, your funeral won't be like that. You have me now, and Dad, and--"

"Oh, you'll weep buckets, I'm sure," said Draco, and not sarcastically. But then his voice shifted. "And you, Severus? Will you drop Slytherin decorum for a few seconds if you lose a son?"

Snape's eyes had flashed a warning that this was no joking matter. "I am not going to lose a son. The two of you are strong and healthy and more than twenty years my junior. Now, as it's late and we have a long day of brewing tomorrow, I suggest you both get some sleep."

Long day of brewing . . . Snape had explained that by stating that their summer practicals had been "woefully neglected," but now that Draco had explained, Harry could see the ploy for what it had been. Snape hadn't wanted Harry and Draco dwelling on death the day after the funeral.

"Would you really drop Potions if you didn't care about Severus' good opinion?" Draco suddenly asked, moving to the edge of his bed and leaning forward a bit. "I can't believe that. You may not enjoy the class, but you're certainly clever enough to decide that being over-qualified for the Auror's programme can only be to your benefit."

Harry rolled onto his side, one eyebrow cocked. "I thought you believed I'd get in on my name alone, no matter what."

"Oh, I do believe that," Draco freely admitted. "But you don't like that idea, so you'll make yourself as qualified as possible, I thought."

"Yeah, probably so." Harry chuckled. "Potions isn't so bad, these days. When I talk about dropping it if I hadn't been adopted, I really mean, I'd drop it if I still hated the very thought of walking into that room. Severus really wasn't very nice to me, you know. Hell, you were there!"

"And thought you deserved every point lost, and twice as many detentions," said Draco, chuckling too. "I'm happy we're past all that. Though, I don't know. Maybe without the old enmity to keep things lively, classes this year will just be . . . boring."

"Oh, I don't know. Things were pretty lively last year after you got admitted into classes again--"
"Only because we had the world's biggest *git* for Defence."

Harry smiled, popping his hands behind his head as he lay on his back again. "Yeah, but Dad was really something, eh? When I think back to Aran, that's what I remember. But that reminds me . . . I wonder what this Maura Morrighan'll be like. Would it be too much to ask, you think, that we end up having two decent years of Defence instruction? Just two out of seven?"

"One, you mean," said Draco, a little darkly.

Harry quickly rolled on his side to face his brother. "Remus was excellent!"

"Says the boy who got private tutelage." Draco sniffed.

"Oh, like you wanted private tutelage from him!"

"Touché."

Uh-oh. Draco looked like he was about to start brooding about his mother unknowingly having to live with Remus, so Harry spoke quickly to distract him. "I wonder what's going to be wrong with Morrighan? Probably Dumbledore knows by now to be careful that she's not some Death Eater on Polyjuice, and since she's a shepherdess and with animals all the time, I doubt she's prejudiced against Parselmouths--"

"A shepherdess?" asked Draco, his voice going a little bit squeaky. "You can't be serious."

"She's got a herd of hippogriffs or something."

Draco blanched, perhaps remembering his run-in with Buckbeak. "What's she going to teach us, some version of Care of Magical Creatures?"

"I had pretty much the same reaction," said Harry ruefully. "But Dumbledore seemed to think she'd be great."

"What a relief," drawled Draco. "His judgement's never once been in error before!"

"Yeah, I know. Dumbledore approving of her isn't exactly a glowing recommendation. Well, what the worst case? Er . . . she's never even heard of Voldemort?"

"Because she's been living out in the wilds with her herd!"

"Well, not exactly the wilds. Dumbledore told me she was from Ireland."

"Same thing! That's the absolute back of beyond, don't you know--"

Harry frowned. "Don't let Seamus hear you say that. You're lucky enough he didn't crack your skull open when you called him a potato-head last year."

"I did *not* call him anything quite so plebeian," drawled Draco. "Potato-head, honestly. I have much better insults at hand."

"You called him exactly that. When you flooed up to Gryffindor that time, when Dad's mark was burning."

"Oh." Draco swallowed. "All right. I'll admit that in the stress of worrying about Severus, I might have said a thing like that."
Harry chuckled, seeing right through the excuse. "Sure it wasn't the stress of being without a wand and surrounded by Gryffindors who thought you'd snuck into the tower to kill me in my sleep?"

"Oh, no, that couldn't have had anything to do with it," said Draco, his tone light and breezy.

Harry grinned at that, and let it go. Sitting up, he grabbed the notebooks stacked on his night table. Just as he'd told Hermione, he'd been reading them every chance he got, but it was tough slogging. He didn't think he could fault Hermione's translation, though. The subject matter was just so technical. Who would ever have guessed that mirrors would be so difficult to enchant?

"Yeah, I'd better get back to it, too," said Draco, pulling a Muggle Studies text off the pile on his night table. "I want to be caught up to seventh year before term starts."

"Learn anything interesting, yet?"

"Mostly, that I wouldn't understand the subject at all if I hadn't spent time with Rhiannon this summer. Can you imagine? The first book I read tried to explain a telly, and didn't even have any pictures go with the explanation! I'd never have caught on properly if I hadn't watched one for myself." Draco slanted him a glance as he settled in to read. "Did you know they're fairly new? Just fifty years or so."

"Uh, yeah. I didn't know how new exactly, but yeah."

Draco nodded. "All right, then I'll believe the book. But I thought, you know . . . I don't know, I just sort of thought that Muggles had almost always had them."

"I think the Muggle world changes a lot. Faster than this one, at any rate."

Draco looked mildly horrified. "You mean everything I'm studying is going to be out of date soon?"

"Probably not that soon, but someday, yeah." Harry shrugged. "But the history stuff, that won't change, right?"

"A good thing fourth year seems to focus on history, then," Draco muttered. "Quiet now, Harry. I'm trying to concentrate."

Harry shot Draco a mild glare. He wasn't the one nattering on about the telly . . . but he wanted to concentrate too, so he didn't make a fuss.

The room lapsed into silence as both boys began to study in earnest.

"Anything in the post?" asked Draco the next night when Snape came in from a meeting with the headmaster.

Strange, thought Harry. Draco asked that all the time, of course. He was always hoping for a letter from Rhiannon. Usually, though, he sounded almost chirpy at the prospect. Tonight he sounded cautious. Or maybe, resigned.

Snape shook his head. "Nothing."

Draco sighed, but not theatrically, not this time. "All right. I wish that owls could deliver things down here, that's all."
"They don't deliver to Gryffindor either, if that's any consolation," said Harry.

"It's not."

"It's not always convenient dealing with the owls and their routines," said Snape, sounding cross. "Now, if you'll excuse me?" He whirled and went down the hall to his bedroom.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I wonder what's got into him?"

As it turned out, Harry didn't have to wonder long. Snape was still scowling as they all sat down to dinner that night.

Harry wasn't exactly sure he should ask, but the man had said he didn't want to be a closed book, so . . . "Dad? Something on your mind?"

"I've received my class lists."

Oh. That didn't sound so bad.

"My advanced courses have dropped to fewer than half the usual number of students."

Harry frowned, thinking that over. "Just because the Ministry dropped the Potions N.E.W.T. from Auror apprentice requirements? I'm pretty sure Draco and I are the only ones interested in applying for that, and we're both still in your class--"

"Besides," Draco put in, "weren't the offices of MLE destroyed along with all the rest? So maybe the new policy got . . . er, blown to bits?"

"A pity MLE wasn't blown to bits before they formulated their asinine new policy," said Snape coldly.

"Dad!" Harry tried for a laugh, but it came out like a weak, strangled thing. "You don't mean that--"

"I think you're old enough to understand macabre humour. And no, Draco, the policy stands. It was published in the Ministry career circulars that go out across Britain, which makes it official until rescinded. As for my class lists . . ." Snape sneered. "Another bloody circular was distributed a few days ago. The new heads of several other departments have decided that if MLE felt my Potions curricula to be too challenging, it must be so. Never mind that they've barely got their feet wet and are in no position to be changing things already."

"They did it for something to do," said Draco after a moment, his voice contemplative. "So nobody could accuse them of sitting about on their hands while the Ministry is physically rebuilt."

Snape's face creased as he scowled. "They wouldn't have done it at all if MLE hadn't taken it into their daft head to muck about where no mucking was needed."

Harry nodded. "They think if MLE did it, it must be all right, as ideas go--"

Snape snorted. "As if you, in particular, haven't made it perfectly clear that you agree with this nonsense about my courses being too challenging."

Harry winced. "It's not that I agree, exactly. It's just . . . I'm not like you and Draco, naturally good at Potions and eager to spend hours brewing them."

"And do you suppose that the province of a father is to allow you to give up on worthwhile
endeavours merely because they don't come to you as easily as speaking to snakes and throwing off Imperius?" Snape's gaze abruptly sharpened. "You do agree it's worthwhile, one would hope."

"Yeah, of course," said Harry, stung. "All I have to do is think of Remus!"

"Of course," drawled Snape.

"I know you don't despise him as much as you used to, so enough with the attitude. It's just--" Harry ran his hands through his hair, mussing it. He decided to ignore Draco's blatantly fastidious shudder. "Not everybody needs to be an expert at it, all right?"

"Aurors who wish to survive the war do," stressed Snape, speaking at the same time as Draco.

"You're just used to everything coming easy," the other boy said, raising his chin. "Flying, and getting on with snakes and hippogriffs, and all the rest! Well, sometimes magic is actual work, Harry."

"I know that, or did you not notice how hard I had to work to get mine back?"

Draco scoffed. "And then you end up with powers like Merlin's own. Yes, I do so pity you, Harry."

"Shut up--"

"Yes, well I shall, just as soon as you stop insulting Dad, whinging on about Potions being such a bane to your existence!"

"Now, now, Draco," said Snape in a suspiciously cheerful tone. "If your brother wishes to express in no uncertain terms his utter failure to appreciate the fine discipline of Potions, he is at liberty. After all, I did tell him that here in the privacy of his own home, he has leave to say any stupid thing he likes."

"Yes, I suppose--"

Harry crossed his arms tightly in front of him. "I don't appreciate being called stupid just because I don't much care for brewing."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I consider your comments, not you, to be idiotic. I think you understand that perfectly well."

"Yeah, yeah..." Harry relaxed his arms, shrugging for good measure. "So who's on the list, anyway?"

Snape wordlessly withdrew a narrow scroll from his robes and passed it to Harry, who winced a little when he saw just how short the list of names for seventh-year was. "Ouch. I see what you mean. Just me, Draco, Hermione, Neville, Ernie, Padma, and Terry. What happened to Ron?"

The Potions Master shrugged. "He has apparently declined."

Draco looked happy about that, blast him, though he did say, "Still, why is Longbottom bothering to keep on? At least Weasley had a smidgen of aptitude."

"A Potions N.E.W.T. must still be required to go very far in Herbology," murmured Harry as he scanned the rest of his father's class list. "And Ron was already a little iffy about whether he needed more Potions at all, since he's not sure what he wants to do after Hogwarts."

"Perhaps Mr Longbottom's summer session has rendered him more prepared than usual," said
Snape.

Harry threw his father a grateful smile, hoping that Neville had learned a lot, and hadn't been too miserable doing it. But things in Austria had probably gone well, since Snape had said he'd tried to find a tutor whose teaching style would work better for Neville. Harry went back to looking at the list. "Oh. As far as I can tell, you have all the seventh-years in your ethics course."

"Only because Albus has made it an absolute requirement," said Snape, his tone sour.

Harry grinned. "You know, Dad, you never have struck me as the kind of teacher who longs to be popular. But if you do want that, all you have to do is ask to teach Defence. You were brilliant last year, absolutely bloody brilliant. I bet you'll get another standing ovation when the headmaster makes the announcement, and--"

"It was hardly a standing ovation. And you know I've no real desire to devote less time to Potions--"

"But we need some decent Defence instruction for once! Look at what just happened to the Ministry! If this Rufus Scrimgeour is a hard-nosed practical kind of leader, like the headmaster seemed to think, he ought to make sure we get a good teacher, especially now that the war's on in earnest. I mean, we haven't had anybody worth a grain of salt since Remus--"

"The Ministry has interfered enough in Hogwarts already, in my view," drawled Snape.

Oh, right. That had been a particularly bad argument to use, Harry realised.

"You're forgetting about the curse, Harry," said Draco.

"No, I'm not. Dad could always go back to Potions after one year of teaching Defence--"

"Do you know that for certain? Have you analysed this curse, then? Do you know exactly how it operates?" Draco's glare was fierce. "Severus might end up unable to stay at Hogwarts at all. And isn't that a good idea, with the war and all, to remove a place of refuge, not to mention that this insane idea of yours could undermine the adoption wards!"

"Well, you know we could always ward the cottage," Harry pointed out. "Er... why haven't we done that, by the way?"

"Don't you recall our discussion about my rooms here regarding me as the owner? Twenty years of habitation?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "But you said the warding spells could attach themselves to the Dursley house no matter how long they'd lived there, because they held clear title."

Snape gave him an incredulous look.

"What?"

Draco actually made a choking noise.

Harry shot him a nasty look before gesturing for Snape to answer.

"Do you really think," his father finally asked, "that I would have brought you, injured and bleeding, to any place that Voldemort could possibly associate with me?"

"But it's Unplottable, and under Fidelius--"
"Plots within plots, I told you," murmured Draco, shaking his head.

"I arranged for the title to be clouded, long ago. I knew the cottage might need to serve as a bolt-hole at some point. I wanted it to have every protection possible, mundane as well as magical."

Harry had to admit, that did make sense. "And you haven't lived in the cottage enough for it to believe you're the owner regardless. Right."

Snape shrugged. "Besides which, any attempt to ward the cottage would require your cousin's presence there. Since the attempt would doubtless fail, it seems foolish to endanger him."

"Well, we'd have to include Dudley in the Fidelius spell, of course--"

Snape's lips tightened, the expression grim. "I can tell you from personal observation that Voldemort does not possess much respect for Light magic. He believes, for example, that torture combined with Legilimency can overcome the strictures imposed by Fidelius. The results are far from pleasant."

"All right, all right." Harry gave up, on all of it. He wouldn't get his Dad teaching Defence again. He just hoped that they'd get somebody decent.

Maura Morrighan . . . Harry had his doubts.

Draco tilted his head a little to one side, looking at the scroll Harry was still holding. "Maybe it's a good thing that your sixth- and seventh-year classes are so small, Severus. Don't you always say you have too much marking to do? Considering that you're taking on this ethics course, you probably need to be reading fewer Potions essays."

Snape's scowl actually got worse. "Which brings me to the subject of this afternoon's conference with the headmaster. He has determined that as my advanced classes are so reduced in size, the sixth and seventh years should be combined, thus reducing my teaching load to compensate for the addition of ethics!"

Harry blinked, and looked at the parchment in his hand again. "Oh, we'll be in class with Luna."

"That nutter who was hanging about in whatever classes she felt like, last year?" Draco barked a laugh. "Please. How did she earn an Outstanding on her Potions O.W.L.?"

"My personal theory," drawled Severus, "is that she bribed the scoring committee."

"Luna wouldn't do that."

Snape's voice went completely dark. "Are you quite certain?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Yeah, quite. The way Luna tends to think, that wouldn't even cross her mind. And if it did, she'd offer them a radish."

Snape inclined his head as though to concede the point.

"Must've been luck," Harry decided.

"The purpose of the O.W.L. requirement is to winnow out students who depend on luck--"

Harry couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, come on. You've invented a bunch of potions, and improved the Wolfsbane and all that. Are you going to tell me that you've never had a bit of luck when you were trying new things?"
"Inspiration," corrected Snape coolly. "Intuition, gleaned from long years observing the interactions of potions components--"

"There's some luck in all that."

Snape sighed. "I can see I'll never make a true brewer out of you. Alas. Well, at least you'll learn to master the challenging seventh-year potions I assign. But enough of that. Draco, would you set the menu for us?"

"I want a hamburger," called Harry as Draco got up and moved toward the Floo.

"We'll see if you really do want that. You're getting whatever suits."

Interesting, Harry thought. Apparently he'd wanted a steak and chips, while *Draco* ended up with a hamburger. Not with chips, though. His was accompanied by roasted baby red potatoes flecked with some green spice. Parsley, Harry decided when the scent of it came wafting his way. And probably some garlic, too.

Still, Harry couldn't help but laugh. "You really wanted that, Draco? I remember you thought it was disgusting to watch me eat one."

"I don't think I did want this," said Draco slowly. "I was thinking of something more like braised quail, or perhaps a fillet of sole in a light cream sauce . . ." 

"You didn't want it at all?"

Draco cleared his throat. "Well, I was reading about Muggle foods a few days ago, and I remember thinking I should probably have tried one of these while it was summer and I had the chance. But I haven't given it a thought, since."

"First time we've ordered whatever suits in a while, though." Harry grinned. "The elves are keeping track, you think?"

"That's a bit creepy." Shrugging, Draco looked down at his plate, then picked up his knife and fork.

"Oh, come on. Pick it up with your hands, already! You know that's the way, you've seen me eat them!"

"I've also seen you chew with your mouth open. Forgive me if I don't consider you to be the epitome of fine manners." With that, though, Draco did set down his utensils and reach out with his fingers. He picked the hamburger up gingerly, like he thought it was a snake about to bite him.

It was a bit of a struggle, but Harry managed not to laugh. He turned his attention to his own meal and asked Snape how things were going with re-building the Ministry. The Obliviators who hadn't been at work on the day of the blast had been working 'round-the-clock shifts ever since. Because the Muggle news had widely reported the explosion--no way around that, as the streets surrounding the Ministry had caved in--there wasn't much chance of making all Britain forget the entire incident. The Obliviators, however, had managed to persuade the news media that the cave-in was the result of a terrorist attack. Meanwhile, the Ministry structure itself was being re-built as quickly as possible, the layout and design precisely as before.

"For expediency's sake, I imagine," murmured Draco as he set down his hamburger and started in on his potatoes.
"Eh, maybe not," said Harry. "That's kind of a government thing, isn't it, that they don't much like change. I remember in primary school, we learned that when parts of Parliament were destroyed during World War II, they were re-built to look exactly the same as before, even though . . . huh, can't remember. Something about how all the members didn't even have a seat."

"World War II?" asked Draco, his voice completely blank.

"Oh, come on, you've got to have heard of that." Harry frowned. "You told me once that Muggles had weapons that could level whole cities. I'm pretty sure that's World War II stuff, right there."

"I don't know about the war," said Draco stiffly.

"It's only the biggest event of the entire century!"

"For Muggles, so I expect I'll get to it as I keep on with the books Hermione gave me. We wizards most likely had other things on our minds."

"Grindelwald, for example," said Snape, who had just polished off the last of his endive salad. "His rise and defeat occupies roughly the same time period, I believe."

Personally, Harry thought that if most wizards had never even heard of the world wars, then Muggle Studies should probably be a required class. But he didn't have much hope of winning that argument, so he skipped to the other thing that was bothering him.

"The terrorist attack explanation," he said, a little slowly. "That's . . . I don't know. It seems a bit harsh to make Londoners think the city has been targeted like that, when it hasn't. Well, not exactly."

"The most successful sort of lie is usually something close to the truth," said Snape, sipping the tea that had appeared for him. "It was an attack, and Voldemort isn't far removed from a terrorist, as I understand the term."

"He's not, but it still just seems . . ." Harry shivered.

"Like war," said Snape softly. "I've lived through one; I know how unsettling it can be to adjust."

"Yeah, maybe that's it." Harry tapped his fingertips on the table, but stopped when he realised it would look like he was brooding.

"Dessert?" asked Snape, clearly changing the subject. Harry shook his head.

"None for me either, thank you," said Draco. "I want to write to Rhiannon again."

Harry's lips turned down. He wasn't going to speak against Draco's romance, but he did think he ought to point something out, particularly since Draco had been so anxious, earlier. "You're writing her almost every day."

"So?"

"Well, how many times has she written you?"

"Two, not that it's any of your concern."

Harry cleared his throat, wondering if he ought to scrap this whole line of thought. In the end, though, he couldn't. "Is a letter a day such a good idea? You don't want Rhiannon to end up wondering if you're, you know, obsessed or something. I mean, enough to let her know you haven't
forgotten her and you miss her and all that, but... she might think it's a bit weird, getting so many letters all the time."

"She'll think I'm in love."

"Well, I think--"

"I do believe Draco understands what you think," Snape interrupted. "He's an adult, in case it slipped your notice. He's able to decide for himself exactly how often he will pen letters to his petite amie."

"Quite so," said Draco smugly. "Well-said, Severus."

Snape's brow furrowed. Harry could tell it meant he was annoyed by the flattery. "Furthermore," the man went on without a pause, "Draco is perfectly well-aware that the Grangers are doing him an enormous favour in helping to transfer his post. I feel certain that he will not continue to inconvenience them with an excessive number of letters to pass along, particularly since their daughter will soon return to school."

Harry could almost, almost, hear Draco gulping.

"All right, I'll be more considerate," he finally said, his voice grudging, that time.

"Quite so," said Snape, almost as smugly as Draco had. One tap of his wand and the table cleared itself.

Harry abruptly stood up. "I... actually, I... er, I have some things for you, Draco."

"Hmm?"

Harry wasn't sure why he felt quite so embarrassed and tongue-tied. That was one thing that really set him apart from Draco, who had practically delivered a speech when it had been his turn to give presents. "Yeah. You know, for your birthday. It is your regular one today. I mean, it's your former birthday, you know. The eighth of August?"

"Is it? I hadn't given it a single thought," said Draco, chin lifted high, even as he adjusted his sitting position so he could shove his hands into his pockets. His expression was almost completely shuttered. Closed-off, like he was too proud to show that he was hurt.

But why should he be hurt? Harry couldn't have given him presents when he'd turned seventeen, considering that Draco had aged himself in secret. And he couldn't have had them ready for their dual party, since that had been a surprise to him as well.

Waiting until Draco's proper birthday rolled around had been the best Harry could manage. And what was Draco expecting, anyway? This was the usual day for him to get his presents, wasn't it...

Oh. Oh, no.

Harry saw then, what he hadn't seen before. No wonder Draco had asked specifically if anything had come for him. For once, he hadn't been thinking of Rhiannon at all. He'd been thinking of people who'd known him all his life. People like his mother.

Harry's stomach felt like it sank into his toes as the full truth came to him. Draco had been waiting all day, hoping to get a gift, or maybe even just a card or a letter. Something, anything, that would
tell him that his mother was thinking about him, that she wished him well.

And that woman . . . that goddamned horrible woman hadn't sent a thing!

Harry clenched his fists, wishing he could blast Narcissa Malfoy across whatever room she was in, at the moment. She knew it was her son's birthday, damn it all! She didn't have any excuse for neglecting him like this, since she had no way of knowing that Draco had taken the aging potion. Well, unless she happened to be looking at his birth certificate, but that hardly seemed likely, considering she was in France and it was almost certainly tucked away somewhere at Malfoy Manor.

Of course, she might have felt her parental burden lift, the way Severus had . . . but no, probably not. After all, Narcissa Malfoy had given up her parental rights when Draco had been emancipated. The Wizard Family Services casewitch had made the whole thing sound like it had been done in a legal, official manner, too. Like a binding magical contract, something like that.

So as far as Draco's mother could possibly know, today was Draco's birthday. And not just any birthday, but his coming of age! That was supposed to be a highly significant day for wizarding families! Narcissa Malfoy had to acknowledge it in some way, didn't she?

A card, a note, even just an owl Draco would recognize, so he'd know his mother was thinking of him!

And instead, he'd received nothing. Absolutely nothing.

When Harry glanced at Draco, the other boy's face looked chiselled from stone. Unfortunately, that made him resemble the statue of Lucius standing beneath the Owlery.

In that moment, Harry hated Narcissa Malfoy like never before.

"Yeah, I have some presents for you," he said, feeling horrible that he hadn't handed them over sooner. What had made him think that waiting for Draco's "real" birthday had been such a good idea? He wanted to kick himself. Hard.

"There's no need," said Draco in a dull voice. "That is, I appreciate the sentiment, Harry. Of course I do. But you've given me so much already that I . . . well, gifts aren't what makes a family real, in any case."

Harry wondered if Draco was thinking of his mother when he said that.

"Maybe not, but they're important all the same," said Harry, trying to smile. He suddenly saw what had never been clear to him before. It was all right, sometimes, to want presents. It didn't make you just like Dudley. Or, that was, like how Dudley used to be.

"You don't have to rub it in--"

Harry shook his head. "I wasn't. I didn't mean . . . oh, hell. Let me just go get your presents."

As Harry pulled them out of their hiding places, he thought it was likely a miracle that Draco hadn't found all of them, every last one. But that, of course, was why he'd been extra careful when he'd owl-ordered. He'd arranged for his purchases to go directly to Dumbledore, and then he'd snuck them down to the dungeons at times when he was sure that Draco was busy in the Potions lab. Still, it had been a bit tricky managing the whole thing.
Though, it had given him a chance to have a couple of chats with Dumbledore, so that was all right. "And I think it wisest, in the circumstances, that she come here at intervals, rather than have you go to her--" Snape was saying as Harry came back into the living room, three brightly wrapped packages in his hands.

"Rhiannon's coming here to visit Draco?" he asked, a bit confused. "Er, won't that require reciprocal magic, like with Dudley?"

"Not Rhiannon," said Draco in heavy tones. "Marsha. How's this for a birthday surprise? Apparently Severus thinks we're both still mental enough to need professional assistance--"

"I did not say that, nor do I think it," Snape interrupted, shaking his head. "The good doctor has helped you both; that is what I think."

"Is it safe for her to come here, though?"

"Honestly, Harry." Draco rolled his eyes. "I know you think I ought to pay less attention to blood status, but you ought to pay a little more, as there are actual ramifications. She's a squib, and squibs have no trouble seeing or entering Hogwarts."

"I meant," said Harry, setting down the presents since the biggest one was making his arms start to ache a bit, "is it safe for her to be seen coming here? If any of the Death Eaters get wind of the fact that she's our own personal therapist, I can't imagine what they'd do. Oh, wait--I can imagine! And why's that, hmm?"

"Oh." Draco's voice was very small. "I didn't think of that."

"Appropriate measures are being taken to safeguard the good doctor."

Harry nodded, deciding he didn't need to know the details. More information was better than less, but sometimes, the best course of all, he thought, was for him to trust his father to handle things. Sitting down at the table, he gestured toward the gifts. "So... happy belated birthday!"

Draco didn't make a move to take them, which was so different from his antics at Christmas that it said a lot. The Narcissa factor was getting to him, obviously. Or maybe he was even thinking about Lucius, dead now, but not quite gone, on account of that portrait. Either way, he needed a distraction.

Harry pushed the presents across the table. "Really, I am sorry I didn't have them for you at our party. But, perils of a surprise party, I guess."

Draco's expression cleared, like he was making a conscious effort to put his troubles from his mind. "Well, let's see. The last time you chose a present for me, it ended up saving my life. Quite a legacy, Harry. I can't imagine how you'll top it."

Harry just smiled. He'd been a bit worried, when Draco had started speaking, that the other boy was going to complain that Harry's Christmas present had scarred him. He certainly did still feel self-conscious about the large marred area on his chest, Harry knew. He'd kept it concealed all summer.

Rhiannon had never even seen it, or at least, not as far as Harry knew.

"You'll just have to open them," said Harry, resisting an urge to smirk.
"I know that look!" accused Draco. "You got me something made by the Weasley twins!"

"And if I did? Those chocolates that make me speak Parseltongue could be dead useful."

"True, true." Draco flashed him a quick smile, then finally reached out for one of the three gifts.

"No snitch wrapping paper, this time?"

Harry shook his head. He hadn't taken his business back to that shop, that was for certain.

Draco drew in a quick breath when he'd torn off the plain green wrappings and lifted off the top of the large, flat box. "New Quidditch robes? Oooh, really nice ones, too."

Harry grinned. "Well, you know. You're definitely going to lose against Gryffindor, but you might as well look good doing it."

"Wanker."

"Prat."

"So good to see you both behaving as adults," drawled Snape.

"All in good fun, Severus. Thank you, Harry."

"That's the present present," replied Harry.

"Pardon?"

"You're my brother past, present, and future? That bit?"

"Ah." Draco pulled another wrapped box towards him and looked at Harry in question.

"Past."

"Do tell. Whatever could it be, whatever could it be . . . a ferret, perhaps? That would be unoriginal of you, but then, you are about three-fifths Gryffindor, by my reckoning . . ."

"That's right, it's the world's smallest ferret."

"Sure it is." Draco had got into the box by then. "Oh. Gloves. You must have been in a mood to attire me?"

"Not particularly."

"You didn't think to borrow a pair of my own, to measure?" asked Draco as he tried to tug them on. "Bit snug, these are."

"They're my size."

"Come again?"

Suddenly nervous, Harry cleared his throat. Time for the speech, then. Not that he'd really prepared one. He knew what he wanted to say. "It's just . . . well, I could hardly put my actual hand in the box, but what I was trying to say was . . . I wish I'd given it to you already, Draco. When you first asked? You remember, my hand, that day on the train?"

"I haven't forgotten," said Draco, shaking his head. "It's just as well you turned me down. Better,
probably, considering that Lucius was the one who told me to befriend you. He never did explain
his exact plan, but I somehow doubt it would have been to your benefit."

Harry made a face. "Yeah, I can't really imagine that."

"So you see?" Draco gave him an encouraging nod. "We'd never have become real friends if you'd
shaken my hand, that day. Sooner or later, Lucius would have ordered me to betray you, and back
then I'd have done it, no questions asked. So . . . it's like Severus says. Even unfortunate decisions
can turn out for good when you take the long view."

Harry shot their father a glance. "I see we both get the same lectures."

"Not all the same. I'd definitely bet my vault on that." Draco's voice lightened as he continued.
"But thank you for the gloves, Harry. I appreciate the sentiment. Truly."

Harry nodded as he pushed the last present over. The biggest box of all. "Now, for your future."

"I can't imagine . . ." Draco pulled the wrappings off a little more slowly, this time. Harry wasn't
sure if he was trying to make his birthday last, or if he was a little reluctant to face Harry's vision of
his future. When he lifted his last present out of its wrappings, though, his reaction was a little anti-
climactic. "What is it?"

Harry pulled the boom box towards him and pointed at the controls as he talked. "Well, this knob
tunes the radio. . . er, that's like a Muggle wireless. And in here is where you put CD's, which
are disks with music recorded onto them. I got you some to start you out."

Draco fished until he found them. "Beetles is spelled wrong--"

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it really is."

"Trust me."

Draco's smile at that was slight, but somehow very warm. "I do. Good feeling, really."

"Yeah, for me, too."

Using a perfectly manicured fingernail, Draco slit the plastic wrapping on the CD case and pulled
the disk out. Harry showed him how to load it. "You push here to make it play."

Draco pressed the button three times in a row. "It doesn't work."

"It's not plugged in."

"And not likely to be," put in Snape, giving Harry a pointed look.

"Oh, right. Electricity," Draco said, nodding like he thought knowing the word made him wise
beyond his years. "Can't it use batteries?"

Harry whistled. "You have been studying. And yeah, it can, but like Dad said, not here. Too much
magic around. I thought you understood about that. You knew you'd have to call Rhiannon from
Grimmauld Place if we could find you a mobile . . ."

"I was just asking if it would function on batteries, not expecting them to work here." Draco ran his
hands over the portable stereo, sighing. "So this is my future, eh? Muggle accoutrements? You've
changed your mind about Rhiannon?"

Harry had no trouble, that time, interpreting his father's glance. A warning, pure through. Not that Harry would have said anything to upset Draco on his birthday--or sort-of birthday.

"I don't know what'll happen, romance-wise," Harry said softly. "But I do know that you've taken a giant step into a new world. Whatever happens, I don't expect you'll step back, eh?"

Draco smiled. "Muggles are actually quite interesting when you look at them with an open mind."

"An open mind?"

"Well, more of one, anyway," admitted Draco. "Did you know, all these machines and such are fairly new? It's not just the telly. Go back just a few hundred years and Muggles were living much more like we do, only without the magic."

"Industrial Revolution, yeah."

Draco's smile grew wider. "Now I'm thinking it's a good thing you were Muggle-raised. I mean, I'd hate to have to go to Hermione with every question."

"She wouldn't mind."

"Probably not." Standing, Draco scooped up his presents. "Thank you, Harry. It was good of you to remember."

"I should have had them ready earlier."

Draco shook his head. "No, I understand. Twelve times an hour, at least, I remember the attack on the Ministry and wonder what the Dark Lord is planning next. You've had a lot on your mind . . . I think everyone must, these days." He gave a wan smile.

The other boy was thinking of his mother again, Harry just knew it.

And as much as Harry detested Narcissa Malfoy, he suddenly wished she would get in touch. For her to abandon Draco like this . . . well, she'd done it before, so it wasn't as though Harry was in any doubt about her utter selfishness, but he stillachéd for his brother. In fact, he acheđ so much that he wanted to do or say anything he could to make things better.

"Er, maybe your mother did send you something. The package could have gone astray, or maybe that redirecting spell lingered on as an echo after Dumbledore cancelled it, and your present got sent to Devon, or--"

"Harry," said Snape in a warning tone.

Draco just shook his head. "It's all right, Severus. If Harry's astute enough to read my mood . . . well, that sorts. We are brothers, after all."

"I just wish--"

That time, Harry stopped on his own.

"I'm sure my mother has her reasons," said Draco, shaking his head. "She must feel she needs to stay underground, and she knows well enough that even anonymous owls can sometimes be traced. Besides . . ."
"Besides?" prompted Snape, standing up and coming around to Draco's side of the table.

Draco's smile that time was still wan, but somehow lopsided, as well. "I haven't written her on the Continent, you see. A Malfoy family owl could likely find her, but I'm supposedly estranged from my father, so it would raise eyebrows for me to have access to one. But if she wrote me first, I'd feel I have to reply. And if that got noticed . . . it'd raise questions best left unasked, you see? She's supposed to be a loyal Death Eater, and I'm the enemy, these days."

"She is a loyal--"

"Harry," Snape said again.

"She's doing her best!" snapped Draco. "She is, and until you know differently, Harry, you ought to give her the benefit of the doubt. That's what I'm doing regarding your werewolf friend, you'll notice. For all I know, he did something to drive my mother straight out of Britain, it was so awful!"

Harry shot to his feet. "Remus wouldn't do anything awful!"

Snape drew in a sharp breath, but remained in his chair. "He wouldn't do anything unwarranted, of that I have no doubt. Awful, however . . . well, that's a matter of interpretation, isn't it? It all depends on circumstance."

"Are you trying to say that he's touched my mother? That way, and that's why she left the country?" Draco bared his teeth. "To get away from his rabid paws?"

"Definitely not. You may rely on me in this regard, Draco; Lupin is not in any way attracted to your mother."

Draco's fists, Harry noticed, were still clenched. "How can you know? Legilimency?"

"Not as such. But I do know Lupin. Do you trust me, Draco?"

The boy hesitated, but then he nodded. Reluctantly, but he did do it. Then, he gathered up his presents. "Thank you, Harry. I think I'll turn in, now."

"Good night," said Harry and Snape both, in unison.

Once the bedroom door had shut behind Draco, Harry eyed his father carefully. "When you said awful, you were talking about what Remus did at the Ministry, weren't you?"

Snape moved into the living room, taking a seat in his favourite chair, releasing a slight sigh as he relaxed into it. "I was actually speaking in more general terms than even that. This is war, Harry. Sometimes, the greater good is something almost unthinkable in times of peace. And yet, it is the greater good. Or perhaps, the only viable choice at all."

Harry wasn't so sure about that. But as he sank down onto the couch, he remembered something that made his father's words snap into vivid focus. "Like holding me down on Samhain."

"Like that, yes. Unthinkable."

"And the greater good," finished Harry. "Yeah . . . it was. Is this the kind of thing you're going to teach in your ethics class?"

"I don't think ethics can be taught in quite the way you envision. But this is the sort of thing we'll
be discussing, yes. Your own experiences could provide apt illustrations, if you're willing to share them."

Harry winced. "People don't understand when I explain. They think it was all thrilling and exciting and . . . glamorous or something, and they refuse to believe me when I tell them it's not like that at all."

"You speak from experience?"

"D.A."

"Ah."

"Should probably start that up again, though," Harry realised. "Assuming that Defence this year is a joke, which is a pretty sure bet considering we're getting a shepherdess in to teach. Er . . . would you care to help us? That way, you know, you could teach Defence and still avoid the curse."

Snape slanted him a glance. "Forgetting something, aren't you?"

Harry puzzled over that for a moment. What could his father mean? Not the curse; Harry had mentioned that . . . "Er . . . no?"

"You're to play a part come September first," snapped Snape, clearly annoyed that Harry could overlook that. "As far as outsiders are concerned, you're a weak wizard. Keeping Voldemort convinced of that may well prove critical."

"Shite," groaned Harry. "Oh! Er, sorry, sir. Um, I mean Dad, that is."

Snape gave him a level look and didn't say anything at all. Somehow, that was more of a rebuke than words could be.

On the heels of that, an alarming thought occurred to him. Or two, actually. "Do you think I'd better pretend I can't Apparate well when I get tested? And, er, I have been Occluding pretty successfully, you know. For a long time, with just that one lapse. Don't you think Voldemort's probably already figured out that I'm not as weak as he's heard?"

Snape paused to consider that. "He tends to believe what his followers report. I should know," he added dryly. "From what I learned of him, I would expect him to harmonise all this information by assuming that your improvement in Occlumency is due to my shielding you."

"You . . . shielding me," Harry said, fairly goggling. "Any reason why you didn't just shield me, then, year before last when I was having such an awful time? Voldemort wouldn't have been able to trick me, then! Sirius would still be alive!"

Another level stare, but at least this one wasn't so silent. "It requires a certain level of intimacy. I know your mind well enough now to manage it, I would think. But then? I didn't know you, let alone the rather meandering pathways your mind tends to wander."

"Oh."

Snape's eyes darkened. "You must learn to forgive yourself, Harry. What happened to Black wasn't- -" "Yeah, yeah, wasn't my fault. Believe me, I know the lecture by heart--"
"Wasn't born of malice, I was going to say," interrupted Snape. "It was an error in judgement, and your failure to apply yourself to Occlumency two years ago was another, and my failure to make more of a genuine effort to teach you . . . that was an error in judgement of my own. One of many, I quite assure you."

Snape leaned forward, his hands clasped tightly together. "You must forgive yourself, Harry. You meant to do only good towards Black, but you are as capable of error as anyone else. It's all a part of being human."

*Then I don't want to be human,* Harry immediately thought, his own hands clenching. He didn't say it, though. From the distance of more than a year, he could see that yelling it at the headmaster had only made him seem every bit the child. And since he was an adult now . . . "But Hermione tried to tell me! She thought it was probably a trap," he said instead, every word painful. He wasn't sure he'd admitted the full truth to his father before, wasn't sure he'd told him how stupid, how absolutely *brainless* he'd been, how he'd ignored every bit of good advice he'd got--

"Yet even thinking that, she accompanied you to the Ministry," said Snape, very softly.

Harry smiled, the ache in his heart easing a little. "Yeah, Hermione wouldn't let me walk into a trap alone. And now you're thinking, I bet, *that figures, since she's an idiot Gryffindor.*"

"In fact, I was as that moment thinking: points to Gryffindor."

Harry's smile grew wider. "Really? You'll give us some points?"

"In my view, Minerva already awarded ample." A ghost of a smile briefly curled Snape's lips. "But for me to think of Gryffindor in that context is quite alarming. I do believe I must have forgiven Miss Granger for her rash letter-writing last year."

Harry chuckled. "I should have reminded you sooner that Hermione went to the Ministry with me."

Snape sat back, his hands no longer clenched together. Instead, he lightly drummed his fingertips together. "Quite possibly," he finally said. "Loving you as I do . . . it's difficult to hold a grudge against anyone who would risk their life for you."

"Remember that the next time you're annoyed with *me* then," called Draco, strolling back into the living room. He looked like he'd showered and washed his hair, but he'd obviously been eavesdropping for the last little bit. "I faced Lucius down for him, remember."

Harry turned to study his brother. Yes, Draco had faced Lucius down, but his way of doing it had been to pretend to crumple. Still, there was a time and place for stealth, Harry supposed.

*You are foolish to overlook any tactic that may win us this war,* he heard Snape say inside his mind, the words an echo from a long time before. They took on a new significance now. Draco understood about cunning, a lot better than Gryffindors did, anyway, and an awful lot of the students in the D.A. had been Gryffindors, hadn't they--

"That's it!" Harry suddenly exclaimed. "*Draco* can lead the D.A.! We'll say I'd be pants at teaching Defence since my magic's gone wonky, and I'm passing the baton to my brother!"

Draco looked up, his expression about as condescending as Harry had ever seen. "In the first place, I don't want your baton, whatever that is. And in the second, you're barking mad if you think that Dumbledore's Army is going to listen to a word I say. *Inquisitorial Squad, Harry?"*

"No, no, it's perfect," Harry went on, turning in his chair. "Look, Hermione trusts you these days,
and Ron knows you're on our side even if he doesn't like you so well, and oh, I guess Ginny might think you're all right, but--"

"Your point being?"

"Everybody else in Gryffindor still has their doubts about you. This'll show them, like nothing else could, that your change of allegiances is for keeps. I mean, think about it, Draco! You know scads about dark magic, but instead of using it against them, you're showing them how to defend? How to defeat Death Eaters? And won't it look great on your application to the Auror programme, that you can say you had a leadership position teaching students Defence?"

"Hmm . . ."

"That last gambit was your most effective yet," drawled Snape, clearly enjoying their bantering. "However, I know you can do better, Harry. You've tried to manipulate me a few times, as I recall."

"Tried, ha. Did," said Harry, grinning, ignoring Snape's glare. He could tell it was more mock than real. "About this, though . . . oh, I know. Draco?"

The other boy met his gaze, one eyebrow raised. "Think you have me, do you?"

"I know I have you."

"Do tell."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "You'll get to lord it over a bunch of Gryffindors who think they're better at magic than you are. You'll get to show them just how wrong they are. And what's more, you'll get to boss them about. I know you loved that part of being a prefect, so how can you resist?"

Draco glanced at their father. "Tell me I can take points, eh? All I like."

"No."

Draco made a face, but then he shrugged. "That's a blow, but regardless, you've almost persuaded me. I think all I truly need is an assurance that my excellent work and dedication will be rewarded with points for Slytherin at the leaving feast, and perhaps I shall gracefully accede to your request."

"Perhaps you can also talk normal English."

"One says words and talks with friends, but speaks a language, Harry."

Harry was just about to make a rude gesture when Snape spoke. "Albus' penchant for awarding last-minute points is his own prerogative, Draco. I'm not about to waste my breath petitioning him, though I've no doubt the attempt would amuse him greatly."

"Oh, very well. I'll do it anyway," said Draco. "And in the interests of amicable inter-house relations, I'll even dumb my vocabulary down to words that the average Gryffindor can understand. Two syllable limit, Severus? Or do you think I'd better reduce that to one?"

Harry did make that rude gesture, then. "You know what? You're a right arse."

Draco laughed. "One syllable it is, based on Harry's dominant speech pattern!"

After that, though, he quickly sobered. "I'll do my best for Dumbledore's Army, Harry, but persuading your little friends to let me teach them? That's another matter entirely."
"Oh, I'll be there," said Harry. "I'll Slytherin them into it."

"Watching that should be entertaining. And Severus? You'll be there as well? To help, as Harry was asking? You know, I rather fancy having you for an assistant."

Snape's answering smile was razor sharp. "Yes, I'd be pleased to duel you."

"Duel?" Draco's voice squeaked. "I didn't say duel, did I?"

"You're probably stuck with it. At least you won't have Dad and me and Hermione and Ron all firing curses at you at the same time!"

"Yes, my heart weeps for you. Those dark powers of yours are quite the trial. Now, perhaps you didn't notice, but Dad never did actually say that he'd come to these D.A. meetings."

Huh. Harry hadn't noticed that. "Well?"

"I've no particular desire to teach Defence at all," answered Snape. "But as this project is worthwhile, yes. I will help you."

"Thanks, Dad."

Snape gave Harry an annoyed look, but didn't remark on that. "Time for bed, both of you. Someone from the Department of Magical Transportation will be coming here tomorrow to examine your Apparition skills."

Harry bounced a little as he sat there. "Tomorrow, really?"

"Yes, but save your thanks for Albus."

"I'll do that," Harry promised, even as he remembered what they'd been talking about before. "Um . . . should I fake being kind of bad at it, you think? For appearances' sake?"

"Apparating well enough to be licensed is no great matter."

"That's right, Harry. It's not as though the examiner will ask us to Apparate to Outer Mongolia, though with your powers you just might make it there." Draco glanced from Harry to Snape and back. "Well then, thank you, both of you, for helping to make my birthday so wonderful. Good night, then."

As the bedroom door softly clicked behind Draco, Harry turned to his father. "Both of us? Did he mean the surprise party?"

"I suspect he meant that I let him have a bit of a lie-in this morning."

That's right . . . Snape had. And in doing that, he'd given Draco something familiar for his birthday. Something he'd have got from Narcissa, if he still lived with her. Snape had realised, all along, that Draco might be a little sensitive today. And he'd realised that Narcissa would probably ignore Draco's special day. "You really are a good dad," Harry said finally.

"I enjoy telling myself that I'm at least learning by experience," said Snape dryly. "You should likely go to bed as well, so you're at your best for the examiner tomorrow."

"In a minute. I was wondering about what Draco said, about Apparating all the way to Mongolia. My dark powers wouldn't help with that, would they? There's no incantation to cast in Parseltongue."
"I don't know," said Snape slowly. "You appear to break all the rules, Harry. And I don't mean school rules."

"I can break those too--"

"Yes, I am aware," drawled Snape, standing and stretching before pinning his dark gaze on Harry. "I would hope you've grown out of such nonsense."

"I only break them in a good cause--"

"Let's hope that you will have less cause now that you have an adult you can trust."

"Yeah, me," quipped Harry, but then his voice softened. "And you. Of course. I can't imagine life without you, and Draco, and . . . and this," he said, sweeping an arm in a half-circle to indicate his home. He didn't want to say thanks again, but he did want to get the point across. "Er . . . sometimes, I even think that never having it must have made me a little bit mental."

"Don't ever think that." Snape walked the short distance to where Harry was sitting and laid a hand on his shoulder. "You have issues, but so does everyone who's ever lived. I think that growing up the way you did merely makes you more aware of how rewarding it can be to have a real family." Snape gave him a long, guarded look. "In that, we are alike, you and I."

Harry smiled as he looked up at his father. It wasn't exactly an open discussion about Hostilian, but he thought it was a start. "Yeah. That we are, Severus. 'Night, then."

To Harry's surprise, Snape squeezed his shoulder again, and then actually bent to drop a kiss on the top of his head. "Good night, Harry."
Harry was on pins and needles all morning, wondering when the examiner from the Department of Magical Transportation would arrive. It wasn't until after lunch that the magical doorbell finally chimed inside his head, but when it did, the list he read on the door parchment wasn't what he'd been expecting at all.

*Albus Dumbledore, Rufus Scrimgeour.*

Draco fairly goggled. "The Minister himself is here?"

Harry worried his lower lip with his teeth. "Looks like it. Um, I hope he's not planning to watch us take our Apparition tests."

"If you aren't competent under pressure, then you aren't competent at all," said Snape. A moment later, he was calmly casting the spell to open the door. "Headmaster," he said, inclining his head slightly. "Minister."

"Professor Snape," said Scrimgeour, nodding in return.

Harry pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. Totally inappropriate, he knew, but he couldn't help it. He'd seen Scrimgeour's picture in the paper, but the image there hadn't even come close to capturing the reality of the man's appearance. His hair was so mane-like that he reminded Harry of an African lion, and he wore a fierce expression to match.

"These are my sons," Snape was saying, still in that same smooth voice. "Draco Snape and Harry Potter."

Scrimgeour ignored Draco completely and stared at Harry, his eyes so focussed they looked almost beady. "Interesting crest you've got there."

Oh. Harry and Draco had wanted to look their best for the examiner, so they were both wearing their school robes.

"Half-Slytherin then, are you?"

"No," said Harry. "I'm a full Slytherin. But I'm a full Gryffindor, too."

Scrimgeour cracked a smile. "Is that so?"

The smile, Harry felt sure, was supposed to be disarming, but somehow it was patronising instead. In fact, it really set his teeth on edge. Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Yeah, that's so."

"You were in Slytherin yourself, Minister?" asked Draco, a wholly pleasant smile on his face, though his eyes, when he glanced at Harry, seemed to be glittering in warning. Well, Harry
supposed that he had probably sounded a tad belligerent the moment before.

"Yes, yes, many a long year ago."

Dumbledore chuckled, though Harry couldn't hear in the noise any real appreciation of Scrimgeour's droll tone. It sounded more like the headmaster was trying to smooth things over so they could all move past Harry's comment.

Embarrassing, that. Even Snape was glaring a little, as if he thought that by now, Harry ought to know about decorum without being told. *Oops.*

"It's very good to meet you," said Harry, deliberately letting his arms fall to his sides as he tried to make up for his gaffe. He probably wouldn't have thought to change his posture, but he and Marsha had talked quite a bit about body language and the things it could communicate. "How is the rebuilding of the Ministry coming along?"

Scrimgeour's expression grew grim. All at once, he looked every bit the battle-hardened Auror he was reputed to be. "The physical rebuilding, fine. We've people enough who can handle that job, and thankfully, we've finally finished smoothing things over with the Muggles. The Prime Minister was not pleased, I can tell you that. Not pleased at all."

Snape had stopped glaring at Harry by then and was politely nodding, his expression perfectly schooled into one of interest and concern.

Draco, on the other hand, had gone more pale than usual. "The Muggle Minister knows? I mean, the truth? About our world, and magic, and what just happened, the war, all that?"

Scrimgeour cracked a lopsided smile, even as his gaze hardened. "Well, of course he does, young man! We've a good working relationship with the Muggle government. Have to, in times like these. Though I will say, as prime ministers go, there've been a fair few we'd rather have Obliviated. But that's neither here nor there. Are the two of you ready to take your license test?"

Draco's mouth dropped open, but he recovered quickly enough. "Yes, of course, Minister."

"Good, because I haven't got all day. Well? Come along with me, now."

Scrimgeour had already turned toward the door before Harry caught on. "Er... you're here to test us?"

"Well, I didn't come for tea," the man answered, his eyes narrowed again.

"Certainly not," chimed in Draco. "Harry, Minister Scrimgeour is a busy man with plenty to do. We oughtn't keep him waiting."

"Got it in one," growled Scrimgeour, nodding in approval. Draco practically preened, but not while the minister was watching, of course. "There's not a department in the Ministry that still has all its key personnel, and some divisions don't have a soul left after the attack."

Harry's stomach sank. "I didn't think there were that many killed. I mean, it was an awful lot of people. I saw the lists in the paper, and all those obituaries, but . . ."

Scrimgeour reached out a meaty hand and patted Harry on the shoulder. That was patronising, too, but Harry was too upset to mind, this time.

"Rats, all of 'em," the Minister said. "Rats leaving a sinking ship. Not that we're sinking, mind.
We'll beat You-Know-Who yet, we surely will. But yes, a considerable number of employees have decided not to return to work, and it's made a bad situation worse. That's why I'm here, in fact. Not a single worker in the Department of Magical Transportation has been there for longer than a week, and if you think I'm going to let any one of them oversee the Boy-Who-Lived's Apparition test, then you've got another think coming."

Harry held in a grimace at the way Scrimgeour had just referred to him. "But if you're so busy, why are you botherng to supervise license exams?"

At that, Scrimgeour actually laughed, a harsh sound that sounded contemptuous and impatient all at once. "I'm not supervising license exams. I'm just seeing to yours. Oh, and your brother's, since I'm here anyway."

Draco didn't preen at that, Harry noticed.

"Everybody else can damned well wait until the department is fully functional again. But you, after what happened to you last Samhain? No, sir. You're a target, Potter, and I won't have it said that you couldn't Apparate to safety because a Ministry glitch meant you hadn't got your license yet."

Harry couldn't help but stare. "But if I was in danger I'd Apparate whether I had my license or not, and anyway, even if I'd known how on Samhain, it wouldn't have helped any, since there were all sorts of wards about, and--"

"Harry," interrupted Dumbledore in a pleasant yet hard tone, "the Minister has taken time out of his busy schedule to make sure you won't be forced to break the law. You're more likely than the average young man to need to Apparate, after all."

Harry heard what hadn't been said out loud. A little gratitude wouldn't come amiss . . . And the worst part was, Dumbledore was right. Harry hated getting special treatment, but he was a target in a lot of ways, so it was only sensible to get him licensed, he supposed. Still, the rebuke stung.

Harry struggled to stop himself from blushing like a child, but since the room felt like it was getting warmer, he didn't think he'd succeeded so well. "Thank you, Minister."

"No thanks needed. Come along as I said, and we'll get you taken care of. Oh, and you as well, young Mr Snape."

Draco's whole posture stiffened, and no wonder. He wouldn't like being treated as an afterthought.  

Ha, thought Harry, who would find it refreshing if it ever happened to him.

Snape made a move as though to accompany them, but Scrimgeour held up a hand. "I believe I have the situation well in hand, Professor."

Harry was a bit shocked to see his father looking like he might insist on coming with them, even if it might mean offending the Minister.

Dumbledore beamed a beatific smile all around. "Just as well, Severus, just as well. I wanted to discuss the new curriculum with you, in any case."

"Potions?" rapped out Scrimgeour. "I'll have you know, Professor Snape, that I didn't approve of MLE asking you to change your courses, didn't approve at all. We may need more Aurors, but not requiring a N.E.W.T. in Potions just means that we'll have more to teach them when they apprentice to us. Damned stupid move on MLE's part, damned stupid from start to finish."
Harry blinked. "But . . . you were head Auror when those decisions were made. Couldn't you . . ."

Scrimgeour grimaced. "Welcome to decision-making by committee. Sure way to guarantee awful results. You need a man in charge who knows what he's doing. A man who's willing to take charge, by Merlin."

"Then why don't you?" blurted Harry, which was strange considering that he was sort of jealous of the students who'd been able to drop seventh-year Potions class from their programmes. Even stranger, though, was the idea that "take charge" Scrimgeour hadn't reversed MLE's decision once he'd had the power to do so.

"Full Slytherin, are you now?" Scrimgeour shook his head.

Harry didn't know what that meant, or not exactly, but since Snape was glaring a little bit again, and Draco was practically rolling his eyes, he figured they'd explain it to him later. Well, Draco would scoff, and Snape would most likely lecture.

"Abrire," said Snape then, waving his wand at the door. He nodded once, the gesture rather solemn. "Minister." And then, to Harry's complete embarrassment, "Be good, both of you."

Scrimgeour chuckled, the sound hearty as he led them out.

"I thought we'd have to leave the grounds," said Harry as he glanced around the Great Hall. "The wards, all that?"

Scrimgeour waved a hand. "Your headmaster has altered some of them for a time. Best we stay here."

"But I'm sure you could protect us," said Draco. "I've studied your career in detail, Minister Scrimgeour. I want to train as an Auror when I leave school, you see."

_and you want to put a good word in for yourself right now, Harry thought, almost amused. By flattering the Minister . . .

"Auror, eh?" Scrimgeour looked Draco up and down. "You think you're MLE material, do you?"

Draco, Harry saw, was too clever to fall into that trap. "I've a lot left to learn," he admitted. "But I have more motive than most to learn it well."

"There is that," said Scrimgeour, scratching at his chin a little, even as his eyes narrowed. "I know who you are. You weren't born a Snape, that much is sure."

It was a subtle slur against Draco's family, but then, Draco had insulted Lucius himself, plenty of times. The Minister's comment didn't seem to perturb him, at any rate. "Yes, I come from a line of dark wizards," he admitted, looking Scrimgeour in the eye. "I'm not one myself, however."

"No surprise you want to be an Auror, then, eh?" Scrimgeour leaned over a little, like he was trying to intimidate Draco. "You'd like to have an ear to the ground, as it were. Know when they're coming after you, be able to hold your own when you have to fight them off."
It was exactly what Draco himself had told Harry about wanting to be an Auror, but hearing it from Scrimgeour made the other boy bristle. "I meant," he said coolly, lifting his chin a notch, "that I'm determined to make sure my brother survives the war. I want the skills I'll need to watch his back, and there's no better place to learn them than at MLE."

Scrimgeour stepped back half a step. "Hmm. More to you than meets the eye. Maybe. But you can't tell me you aren't also in it for yourself."

"Of course," acknowledged Draco, shrugging.

A slight smile curled the Minister's lips. "By the way, I heard that Slytherin did well on account of you, this past year. Both an interesting Quidditch final, and a large number of points awarded at the Leaving Feast."

Harry couldn't help but snort, just slightly.

The other two both heard him, though. "Something to say?" asked Draco frostily. "I thought you didn't begrudge Slytherin the House Cup."

"I don't!" exclaimed Harry. "It's just that I didn't expect something like that to matter to someone who's been away from the school for . . ." Oh, God. He'd been about to say fifty years, but he'd stopped himself in time. For all he knew, it had only been thirty or forty, and Scrimgeour would have felt like Harry was saying he looked older than he was.

"Once a Slytherin, always a Slytherin," said Scrimgeour. "Some things never change."

"Harry was in Gryffindor alone for five years, and it left a mark," said Draco in a stage whisper. "That house is really very strange."

Scrimgeour smiled, the expression just a little bit vindictive. "As I said, some things never change. Now, if you would both move to the far end of the hall, and then Apparate back to join me here, we'll begin."

Almost an hour later, Harry was feeling winded and trying not to show it. He'd thought at first that Scrimgeour's Apparition test might be nothing but a formality, but instead, the man had put both Harry and Draco through a whole series of tasks, each one more difficult than the last.

Apparating across a large room. Then through a stone wall. Then through several. Then from the dungeons to the Owlery, Harry and Draco forced to follow Scrimgeour only a second after he'd left them behind. And on and on.

By the final test, Quidditch pitch to the Great Hall, Harry was starting to get queasy. He could Apparate perfectly well these days--Draco had seen to that--but the sensation of feeling himself melting still wasn't one he much enjoyed. And certainly not fifteen times in a row.

"I'm satisfied that the pair of you are competent beginners," Scrimgeour pronounced, withdrawing something from the pocket of his long, brown cloak.

Draco didn't look like he appreciated that last word, but he had enough sense not to complain about
it. After all, what was he going to say, that he'd been illegally Apparating himself for years, now?

"That last little trip was really all I needed to see," continued Scrimgeour.

Draco might be able to hold his tongue, but Harry couldn't. "Then why couldn't we just have started with that one?"

"And risk a splinching? No, I couldn't have that. It wouldn't look right."

A dark suspicion began churning in Harry's mind. "Wouldn't look right to who?"

"He means whom," said Draco.

Harry shot his brother an irritated glance, but soon returned his attention to Scrimgeour. The man wasn't beaming the way Dumbledore often did, but he did look pleased with himself. "Well, you surely must realise by now that your doings are of interest to the wizarding world, Potter. The press will want to know whether you've achieved a license or not."

"You told reporters you were coming here?" asked Harry, appalled.

"Lower your voice, Harry," said Draco easily. "Of course he did. If the Minister is going to take an hour out of his busy schedule to make sure you can be licensed, the least he deserves in return for his valuable time is a little publicity."

Harry wanted to cringe at the idea. Instead, he remembered that he was an adult now, and drew himself up to his full height. "You didn't come here to help make sure I'd be safe! You're just using me, the same as Fudge always would!"

"Minister Fudge, may he rest in peace, called you a liar whenever it suited him, Potter. This is hardly the same thing. It's just sensible, letting the public know that this time, the Ministry and you see eye to eye about the war."

"And me getting an Apparition license is going to say all that?" asked Harry scornfully.

"People will read between the lines, yes."

Harry tightened his fists. "And what if we don't?"

"Pardon?"

"What if we don't see eye to eye about the war, Minister?" As far as Harry was concerned, that was practically guaranteed. He had dark powers which not even the Order knew about yet, and he might have to use them. Might, hell. Wasn't that what the prophecy was all about? A power the Dark Lord knows not . . .

As long as Scrimgeour and the Ministry didn't know about the kind of magic Harry could wield, it wouldn't be possible for them to cooperate about the war. Not truly.

Scrimgeour laughed. "You may be a full Slytherin, Potter, but the length of time you've been one shows. Just since your adoption, wasn't it? I hope we will see eye to eye, given you're a public figure whether you like it or not. But if we don't . . ." He leaned a little bit closer, his eyes mirthful. "I likely won't mention it to the press, eh?"

"It's just strategy," Draco put in, as if Harry hadn't figured that much out on his own. "After what happened to the Ministry, they need some positive stories out there, don't you think? So people
think things are coming together, again."

"Minister Fudge, may he rest in peace," Scrimgeour continued, "is being critiqued now for not believing you earlier, Potter, and according you some proper respect. People are drawing a straight line from that mistake to the Tragedy of the Thirty-First."

The Tragedy of the Thirty-First.

Harry had seen the phrase in print a few times, but he hadn't realised it was really catching on as a way to refer to the destruction of the Ministry. Great. Just great. Now his birthday had a title, too.

"At any rate," continued Scrimgeour, "I'm going to make it clear that the present Ministry is not repeating the previous Minister's error. And if you don't like the way I'm doing it, Potter, I don't particularly care."

"Fine, fine," said Harry, trying not to be too grudging about it, since he didn't have much choice in the matter. It wasn't like he could stop Scrimgeour from talking to the press. And the man might have a point, anyway, about public confidence. Maybe . . .

"Good," said the Minister shortly. "Now, if you'll both just tap your wands to these, you'll be licensed." Leaning down, he set a pair of metal disks on the Hufflepuff table. They looked like coins except they were rather greenish and were imprinted with an image of a broomstick flying over a hearth.

Harry tapped first and saw the witch on the broomstick wink at him. He tried to notice if Draco's did the same, but he wasn't close enough to see properly.

"Thank you again for coming personally, Minister," said Draco. "I know you had your reasons, but I still do appreciate it."

"Yeah," echoed Harry, feeling like he was being given a rather large hint. "It's good to be licensed."

"Good to have such an upstanding, impressive young man on the Ministry's side," said Scrimgeour, which Harry thought was both pompous and rude, considering that the man had overlooked Draco once again. "Anything I can do for you, Potter, anything at all, you just let me know. You defeated You-Know-Who as a baby and with the way he's been after you ever since? I know I'm not alone in thinking there must be something to that. But you're not alone, not now, and I want that to be very clear. My Ministry's not about to make the sad mistakes of my predecessor."

Harry was about to say that if Scrimgeour wanted to do something useful, he could start by saying Voldemort instead of You-Know-Who. He figured, though, that the man would just ignore advice like that coming from a seventeen-year-old. "Thanks," he settled for saying.

"I mean it, young man. Anything I can do for you, you're to owl immediately."

Sure, so I can owe you. Thanks, but no thanks, thought Harry, but he remembered to be all pleasantries on the surface. No point in offending the Minister; Snape and Dumbledore had been right about that. "I'll keep that in mind, Minister."

"See that you do, see that you do," Scrimgeour held out his hand. "I'll make sure that your licenses are duly registered before night falls."

"Thank you, Minister," said Harry again, shaking the proffered hand.

When Scrimgeour chuckled lightly, and Draco actually snickered, Harry knew he must have
muffed that, somehow. His embarrassment only got worse when his brother placed his greenish

disk into the Minister's still-outstretched hand.

Blushing a bit, Harry copied Draco's action. Scrimgeour studied him for a moment, then gave a

brisk nod and spun on his heel, clearly headed for the Entrance Hall instead of the dungeons.

"He's not going back to tell Dumbledore he's leaving?" asked Harry when the man was far enough

away not to hear his whisper.

"No reason why he should," said Draco in an equally quiet voice. One thing living with Snape

taught you, Harry thought, was to be careful how loudly you spoke. "He wouldn't want to give the

impression that he needs the headmaster's permission to come and go at Hogwarts."

Huh. Probably not, but it still struck Harry as a little rude. "Well, thanks anyway," he said.

"Pardon?"

"For not saying something insufferable when I shook his hand. Something about the Muggle-raised

not knowing their socks from their shoes."

"Well, I'd hardly want to look biased against Muggles in front of the Minister. I'm on the side of

the Light and that sort of attitude isn't politically correct."

"You're supposed to say that you're not biased, not that it wouldn't look right to be seen that way."

"You're supposed to think on more than one level at a time, you so-called full Slytherin. I am in

fact not as biased as I used to be, but in this sort of situation, appearances count for a lot more than

reality."

Harry knew that was true, but he found it rather depressing, all the same.

"Let's see if we can still Apparate around the castle!" said Draco, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"That's a real treat, it is!"

"Aren't you exhausted?" Harry'd had enough Apparition for one day.

"Oh, the longer you've been Apparating, the less tired it makes you. And I've been competent for

years. Unlike the Muggle-raised among us." Draco stuck out his tongue.

Harry couldn't help but laugh as he clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I'm walking home. You
do whatever you like, but don't blame me if the headmaster raises the wards in the middle your fun,
and you end up splinched nine ways to Sunday."

Draco shuddered. "One splinching was enough. Some days, my hand still doesn't feel quite right.
I'll walk, I suppose."

He made it sound like a terrible imposition, but that was just . . . Draco. Harry smiled and changed
the subject to Quidditch as they made their way back.

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"I hate mirrors," Harry muttered, several days later.
"How many times do I have to tell you, your scar is not hideous and disfiguring--"

Harry threw a pillow at Draco. It was either that, or throw the mirror he'd been wrestling with for hours that afternoon. The stupid thing simply wouldn't listen to him. No matter what Harry said or did, it just sat in his left palm, inert, reflecting nothing more interesting than his own face.

Which he was sick and tired of staring at.

"The library's got nothing. Hermione's translations have something, but I can't seem to make it work for me. Well, maybe I could if I stopped Occluding, but I'm not about to do that again any time soon." Harry shuddered, remembering the awful sound of Voldemort inside his own mind, taunting him. "Not even that wizarding research centre at Edinburgh had anything relevant--"

"Perhaps the Ministry does," said Draco calmly as he turned a page in the Muggle Studies book he'd been reading all week.

"The Ministry?"

"The Minister." Draco set the book down, marking his page with a spell, and gave Harry his full attention. "Anything you need, remember? Why don't you just take him up on it?"

"It's better not to be obligated."

"You won't be. He won't even think you are, Harry. You're still in school, for Merlin's sake, and it's not as though you're signing a magically binding contract."

"But Scrimgeour'll think--"

"He'll think that you're keeping your options open, and that your options include cooperation with the Ministry." Draco arched an eyebrow. "Do you know what he'll think if you keep up your radio silence, after an offer like the one he made?"

"Radio silence!"

"Muggles have the most fascinating terminology." Draco showed Harry the spine of his book.

"His-story and Her-story: Muggles from the Age of Reason to the Cold War," Harry read out loud in disbelief. "Yeah, that's some . . . terminology, all right."

"I'm still trying to figure out why they called it the Cold War," mused Draco. "My best guess at the moment has something to do with Siberia. But enough of that. Do try to focus, Harry. Scrimgeour. The man extended you a clear hand of friendship. If you do nothing whatsoever to take it, he'll think you've decided not to work with the Ministry. So write him, already. Ask him about mirrors!"

"Why would he know anything about them?"

"Maybe the Department of Mysteries can help you out. Who knows? The point is, Scrimgeour is a resource, in more ways than one. Don't just waste that."

"All right, fine," muttered Harry. The thought of asking Scrimgeour for anything gave him the heebie-jeebies, and for a moment, he thought about listening to his instincts. But then again, he might just be reacting to the fact that Fudge had been Minister for Magic for so long. No wonder Harry was leery.

"Albus just sent our post through the Floo," said Snape as he came into the boys' bedroom.
"Package from Miss Granger for Draco Snape. Imagine that."

"Package from Rhiannon," whooped Draco, leaping up from his bed. "Out, everybody out! I need privacy! I need to read in peace! I need--"

"You need a calming draught," said Snape dryly.

"Oh, hush. Out, out! Harry wants help writing a letter, anyway. You two go and work in the living room. Out!"

Once the bedroom door was closed, Snape raised an eyebrow.

"To Scrimgeour," muttered Harry. "He said I could ask him for anything I needed, and I thought . . . ha, Draco thought that I ought to ask him about mirrors."

Snape took a moment to consider that, his dark eyes gleaming as he calculated schemes and plots and plans. Then, he asked an unexpected question. A stupid question. Probably a first for him, Harry figured.

"How much do you want this?"

"More than . . ." Harry swallowed. He shouldn't feel this way, not now that he had a proper family, but he couldn't seem to stop it. "More than anything."

Snape laid a hand on his shoulder. "Then write to the Minister."

"He won't use it against me, later?"

"It's not impossible. But on balance . . . I think not."

Harry breathed a sigh of relief. At least the decision was made. Of course, Scrimgeour might not be able to help . . . but neither would he be able, later on, to claim that Harry had rejected his offer of friendship.

"Would you like assistance, as Draco suggested?"

"With your vocabulary? It needs to sound like a seventeen-year-old wrote it. Maybe you can read my draft when I'm done."

Snape merely inclined his head and left Harry to it.

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Draco had been close to insufferable ever since he got that package from Rhiannon. Insufferable in a good way, though. Apparently, she'd used the word love in her closing. Harry didn't think that "Love, Rhiannon," was proof of anything much, but Draco obviously felt like he'd ended up in heaven without dying first.

Of course, maybe that had something to do with the sweets she'd sent along. Too much sugar in the blood, Harry thought. That was why Draco was acting like such a giddy fool.

"These are unbelievable," he said, for about the fifth time. "They're amazing. No magical
"They're just peanut butter cups," said Harry wearily.

"Well, I've never had them before--" Draco narrowed his eyes. "I'd think you could understand, Mr Dudley-always-got-all-the-biscuits-and-left-me-none."

"Yeah, well I didn't eat ten pounds of shortbread in twenty-four hours, trying to make up!"

"Of course not." Draco grinned. "Because shortbread has got nothing on these!"

"You're going to make yourself sick."

At that, Draco's face fell. 'I'm already sick. I have a 'boom box,' and I still can't listen to the CD Rhiannon sent me! And you wonder that I console myself with food?'

Harry was tired of that complaint too, but he could sympathise with it. It must be frustrating as hell for Draco to get a cast recording of Rhiannon's new opera, the one he'd never got a chance to go and see. Rhiannon obviously hadn't understood Draco's explanations about school so well, since she'd written for him to listen to it as soon as possible. She was dying to hear what he thought, she'd said.

And Draco couldn't get it to play unless they left Hogwarts.

Draco had suggested they spend a few hours at "his house," which ought to be safe enough, considering _Fidelius_ and all the rest, but Snape had said that Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place was actually quite busy at the moment.

"And I don't want anyone else, not anyone, to know that Rhiannon is important to me," Draco had agreed, clearly glum.

Harry had wrinkled his brow. "Well, just because you're listening to an opera doesn't mean people will assume you're in love with the lead singer--"

"It's a risk, and I won't put her at risk."

Harry had thought then that the subject was closed--apart from Draco's moaning over it, of course--but now, his brother's eyebrows were drawing together as if he'd just had a brilliant idea.

"Severus."

The Potions Master glanced up from the lesson plans he was preparing.

"The other teachers are starting to arrive by now, aren't they, to get ready for the new term? Is Professor Flitwick in residence, yet?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Fuck." Draco flopped down onto the couch.

"I had no idea you were so fond of Filius, Draco."

That got the man a scowl. "I just thought he might help me with some complex charms. You know, ones that would temporarily block out the magical aura around here so electronics would work."

"Interesting project." Snape tapped the feathery end of his quill against his chin. "Perhaps Professor
Burbage could be of assistance."

Draco blinked. "Do you really think so?"

Snape's lips curled. "Never having taken Muggle Studies myself, I can't say for certain. However, it seems logical that if anyone would know the answer to your problem, it would be she. One would hope she's able to demonstrate Muggle machines and such during her class sessions."

Draco stood up, nodding. "I should introduce myself, at any rate, since I'll be joining her classes. Oh . . . you're pretty strict about which students you admit to your N.E.W.T. level sections, Severus. I don't know if Professor Burbage is the same, but if she gives me any trouble, will you put in a good word for me?"

"She won't give you any trouble."

"But what if--"

Harry chuckled. "My money says he's already put in a good word for you."

Draco beamed. "Oh, excellent."

"Just do not thank me," muttered Snape, turning his attention back to the books and parchments he had scattered across the dining table.

"Wouldn't dream of it," said Draco airily, but before he left, the Beatles CD and his boom box in hand, he laid a peanut butter cup alongside Snape's left hand.

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A reply from the Minister came while Draco was out, though it didn't say much.

      Dear Mr Potter,

      Mirrors are not a common topic of study in Britain, as you have already realised. To my knowledge, the Ministry has no research programme concerning them, though I will say for the record that I can't confirm or deny any of the activities that may or may not occur in the Department of Mysteries.

      That said, I am heartened that you would think to come to me with your research project. Nothing is certain, but I may be able to assist you. As it turns out, early on during my Auror career, I spent several months investigating a mirror-smuggling ring on the Continent. I may still have some contacts that could prove useful to you.

      I will be in touch when I know anything more definite.

      Sincerely yours,

              Rufus Scrimgeour
              Minister for Magic

"He ought to sign himself Acting Minister," was Snape's comment when Harry sat down at the table and showed him the letter.
"You didn't call him that when he popped around."

Snape snorted, actually *snorted*. "What possible good could have come from my reminding the man that his position of power is, in fact, temporary? My use of the full title was a courtesy, nothing more. But *he* would be better served to show a modicum of modesty rather than appear as though he is hungry for even more power than he has already been given."

Harry shrugged. "I guess."

Snape shot him a critical glance. "You don't think like a Slytherin."

Harry ignored that. "Do you think he really investigated mirror smugglers? Seems awfully coincidental. I think maybe he's going to make some new contacts for me, but he wants to impress me with how well-connected he already is."

"Perhaps you do sometimes think like a Slytherin."

"Gee, thanks, Dad."

"What did I say?" asked Snape in tones of innocence.

"Only that you'd rather I be more Slytherin than Gryffindor!"

"I did not say that."

"Might as well have--"

Snape's lips curled into a wry smile. "Harry... I do believe you were never quite this cheeky before you came of age."

Harry thought it was something else. "No, it's just that I'm comfortable with you, now. Really comfortable. Enough to say, you know, any stupid thing I like."

"Ah. Well that is good, I suppose." Snape's eyebrows drew together. "I've actually been thinking quite a bit about the problem of your houses."

"Problem!" Harry almost gritted his teeth. "You *would* rather I--"

"That line of thought serves no purpose," interrupted Snape. "You are what you are, Harry, and I love you as you are. Which is not to say that you are perfect. You are, however, a good example to others in many ways."

Harry wondered if his father was thinking of Draco when he said that.

"And that, I suppose, is my greatest concern."

That didn't make sense. "You're worried that I'm a good example?"

"Yes, because you are seen by your peers as a Gryffindor alone."

Harry bristled. "I've never, *never* tried to pretend I was that, not since you adopted me. I wear this crest you designed proudly. Did I ever complain about the two-house thing?"

"No. You have made me very proud indeed," said Snape softly.

"All right, then." Harry was still feeling miffed, but he tried to let that go.
"The issue, however, remains."

"What issue?"

Snape wove his fingers together, his eyes dark with thought. "In many quarters, Slytherin is seen as the personification of evil, and even the revelation that I have served the Light for many years did not do much to dispel that reputation. Students who are sorted into Slytherin often come to believe that they themselves must be dark. This alone can influence them onto paths best avoided."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. He could see how that might happen, especially with impressionable eleven-year-olds. "I'm not sure what this has to do with me, Dad."

Snape met his eyes. "You recently proclaimed yourself a full Slytherin, but I fear that very few of your school-mates regard you that way. Any virtue they see in you is attributed to Gryffindor."

"Oh. Like the good parts of me couldn't possibly have to do with Slytherin. I get it."

Snape nodded, his features growing even more grim. "And like it or not, Harry, your own decisions have tended to feed the perception that to you, Slytherin is merely something reflected from your position as my son, not something inherent to your character."

"My own decisions." Harry grimaced. "Oh, God. You're thinking I'd better play on the Slytherin team, aren't you?"

"No. You are a Seeker, after all. I would not do that to Draco."

So it was only because of Draco that their father wasn't demanding Harry switch teams! Harry blew out his breath, thoroughly irritated by then. "Well, what do you want me to do? I visited Slytherin a lot last year, trying to show I was one of them. I stood with them during your duel with Aran. But I can't go and . . . live with them, Severus. That would be mad. Somebody would try to kill me in my sleep!"

"The fact remains that you live in Gryffindor, and fly for Gryffindor, and most often eat with Gryffindor. And too, last year you followed the course programme of the Gryffindors."

"All I did was go back into the classes I'd been in before I lost my magic!"

"Harry," said Snape slowly, "I am not blaming you for the situation; I'm merely discussing it with you. Your placement in two houses is an opportunity to help the other students, and the Slytherins themselves, to see that there are thoroughly good elements in Slytherin. I fear the message is being lost en route, which I count a true shame."

Oh. Harry got it, then. Snape didn't think it was Harry's fault, but the problem bothered him and he wanted to talk it out. Actually, he was talking to Harry like an adult . . . sharing his concerns and worries, instead of pretending he didn't have any, since he was the father and Harry was the son.

When Harry thought about it like that, he didn't mind the conversation so much, even though it was uncomfortable. How could it not be? He was a little bit to blame, after all. He'd bragged to Scrimgeour that he was a full Slytherin, but most of the time when he thought about the houses, he considered himself a Gryffindor. Habit, really. Five plus years of it.

None of which was much help now, Harry glumly supposed.

"Maybe, er . . ." Harry gulped. "Draco'll probably kill me himself, but maybe he and I can trade off being Seeker? I . . . I could play for Slytherin half the time, and--"
"That wouldn't be fair to Slytherin."

"To Slytherin?" gasped Harry, almost laughing with nervous tension. Not that he expected Snape to care a whit about fairness to Gryffindor, but still--

"Yes. A Quidditch team performs best when it has a consistent roster."

All right. Harry could see that. "And it wouldn't be fair to Draco. Or me, damn it. I've been looking forward to flying against him again. You know, a friendly competition, this time."

"I know that you and Draco get on very well, but you'd best not underestimate his fervour on the pitch. It won't be a friendly competition by any definition of the term," Snape stated baldly. "Your brother has things to prove."

"To me, or to Slytherin?"

"Primarily to himself. Or have you never noticed that he is jealous of your magical abilities?"

Well, that was putting it bluntly. Harry was glad that Draco wasn't in their quarters at the moment. But then, if he had been, Snape wouldn't be saying these things. A chill passed over Harry, because of course his next thought was to wonder what Snape said about him when he wasn't around.

"Well, everybody has issues," Harry said lightly, trying to pass it off. He couldn't help it if some of Draco's revolved around Parseltongue and the like. "The real question is what we're going to do about Slytherin."

"We are going to do nothing. I am the Head of Slytherin and I will handle the matter."

"How?" Which reminded Harry. "Do you set my course schedule for the coming term, or does McGonagall?"

"Are you, by chance, trying to avoid taking Transfoogriffination?"

"Avoid what?"

Snape cracked a smile. "You called it that once, while talking to me."

"I did not!"

"You were heavily sedated and nattering on like I was all three of your best friends combined."

"Three?"

"Weasley, Granger, and Lupin."

"Oh." Harry glared. "And you looked like Remus, right. I remember now. That's not very nice, making fun of the way I was babbling, or whatever."

"And I try so very hard to be nice," mocked Snape. Then his voice grew more serious. "It's a fond memory, because I learned much about you that I would otherwise never have known. Don't begrudge me the small amusement. Now, as for your course programme, I will set it, as I am not merely your Head of House, but your father. If Minerva attempts to gainsay me, she will well regret it."
"Shouldn't I really set it myself, seeing as I'm all grown up?"

"All grown up, are you?" Snape chuckled. "Be that as it may, you're under the auspices of Hogwarts for purposes of schooling, which means that your Head of House holds sway."


Snape rolled his eyes. "Yes, Harry, you are in two houses. I do believe we just covered that. And for the record, you are taking Transfiguration."

Harry sat up straight. "I never said I was trying to get out of it!"

"Good."

"Though I'm not looking forward to it." Harry sighed. "It's not my best subject. I need it to be an Auror, though."

"I would think that the seventh-year course would prove rather fascinating for you, considering your father's talent."

For once, Harry had no urge to shoot back, "you're my father." That was a wonderful feeling, knowing that he could have them both . . . then, Snape's words penetrated.

"You mean . . . animagus training?"

"The topic is featured in the final year, though relatively few students turn out to have the talent for it."

"Ha," said Harry. "I think a lot more animagi exist than the Ministry knows. I mean, if three students in my dad's year managed it, the talent can't be as rare as all that."

"Perhaps not." Snape shrugged. "In any case, you may have an advantage over your classmates. Animagus tendencies can travel in bloodlines."

Harry almost whooped. What if he turned out to be an animagus? That would be great . . . oh, shite. It would also be one more thing for Draco to be jealous of, assuming he wasn't one as well. And maybe even worse . . . "What if I turn out to be a stag?"

"And there my greatest worry was a lion."

"You mean you wouldn't mind?"

"No, Harry, I would not mind. I told you, the old wounds have healed. And if . . ."

"If what?"

Snape unlaced his fingers and laid his hands flat upon the table, leaning forward, his eyes an intense black as he gazed at Harry. "If by chance you should get the Mirror of All Souls working, and you see your parents there, I will not fight with James, whatever he may say."

"That's . . . quite a promise," murmured Harry, more than a little startled. "I can't really say I ever much knew him, but from the things I've heard . . . and uh, seen, he might want to fight with you."

"I did know him," said Snape. "And it is as I told you: he would want you to have what you need."

"Even if what I need is you? And a Malfoy for a brother?"
"A Snape for a brother, I will thank you to remember. But, yes. When James died, he was no longer that immature boy you saw in my Pensieve. Your godfather, on the other hand . . ."

"He'll take it worse."

"I would say so. Your father and I learned to work together in the Order, but Black and I could never be in the same room without things going from bad to worse."

"Yeah, I noticed that," said Harry morosely.

"Though of course there is no guarantee that the mirror can be repaired at all, and certainly none that it can reach those who have fallen behind the Veil." Snape sighed. "I don't know whether it's wrong to get your hopes up, though in case your efforts bear fruit, it's best to be prepared."

Harry slumped in his chair. "I don't think it's possible to be prepared for a thing like this. Maybe . . . maybe that stupid mirror stopped working for a reason. Maybe it's a bad idea to try to talk to the dead. Though if that's true, I guess I should stop chatting with Nearly Headless Nick."

"Whatever happens, or doesn't happen, we will make our way through it," said Snape softly.

"Yeah." Harry nodded, wishing his head didn't feel so . . . heavy. Five stone, at least. "Yeah."

"No dice," said Draco glumly when he came back that evening. "We worked for hours. We slaved."

"No dice?" asked Snape.

"Muggle slang. Professor Burbage said it's not in the books, but she does a unit on it every year, so as we tried to charm this . . . this contraption--" Draco gave the boom box on the table a bit of a shove. "She decided that she'd do her best to catch me up. And the best way to acquire vocabulary," he mimicked in a girlish voice, "is to make it your own."

"What on earth does that mean?" asked Harry.

"Oh, only that every time she came out with some bizarre phrase, I had to work into whatever we were discussing. Three times," grumbled Draco.

Harry snickered.

"And it had to sound natural!" Draco started laughing too, just a bit. "Wait. It gets worse."

"Do tell," said Snape, one eyebrow raised.

Draco started laughing so hard that it took him a minute to tell the story. "Well, when we couldn't get the boom box to do anything, I was bitterly disappointed. Of course I was. But she didn't know it was Rhiannon I wanted to hear--she thought I was upset that I wouldn't get to listen to the B-B-Beatles--"

"So?"
Draco sucked in a huge draught of air, obviously trying to get his laughter under control. "She felt sorry for me, I guess. So she started singing their songs herself! One after another after another while I tried to figure out how to get the hell out of there, politely--"

"Oh, God." Harry slapped a hand over his mouth, but giggles still oozed out.

"And she's a horrible singer. Off-key, screechy, and then she dragged out this banged up guitar that she can't play right!" Draco gulped, sounding like he had the hiccoughs for a second.

"Not exactly opera, in other words," drawled Snape.

"I haven't got to the worst part yet!" Draco paused, then blurted, "She made me sing along with her!"

Harry grinned, thinking this should be good. "What song? Sing it!"

"You wish."

"Come on, sing it!"

"I'll just say it was this total rubbish about some nutter named Lucy. And she wouldn't let me leave until I sang it all the way through!"

"Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds!" Harry screamed with laughter. Only when he had calmed was he able to ask, "Are you still going to take her class?"

Draco shrugged out of his robes and hung them neatly by the door. "Oh, sure. Say what you like about her dreadful taste in music. She meant well."

"Very mature, Draco," Snape strode to the Floo, but then paused as if considering. "Would you like to set the menu?"

"You can do it." Draco yawned as he dropped into a chair and moved his boom box to the floor beside his chair. "She did say that she uses an old wind-up Victrola to play Muggle music for her classes, and that I ought to be able to find the Beatles on LP, whatever that is. Do you think Rhiannon's cast recording would be available that way?"

Harry chewed his lip. "Um, I dunno. But there's probably some company or other that could convert it over for you."

"I can see that I'm about to ask Hermione for another favour," said Draco dryly.

"It might be expensive--"

"Well, that's no matter. How many Galleons do you think I should send along?"

"You might insult her if you send money!"

"Oh. What do you suggest, then?"

Harry sighed. "Fine, I'll owl her--"

"No, you won't. She's my friend, too," said Draco, his chin raised. "I will owl her, thank you very much."

"No need to thank me," quipped Harry as their father sat down with them and plates of some fancy
lobster dish appeared on the table.

A few days later, Harry was a little bit startled to get a formal-looking letter through the Floo. It was written on what looked like double-thick parchment, tied with a bright orange ribbon and sealed with wax. When Harry looked closely, he saw that the wax bore the impression of the Hogwarts crest.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing of all, however, was that Draco had received what appeared to be an identical scroll.

Snape's lectures on caution in mind, Harry cast a few spells looking for jinxes and hexes and such. Draco did the same, and not just because of the things their father had said. It was also just . . . very strange, getting a letter from Hogwarts when they were there already.

"Maybe we should wait for Dad," said Harry. "This is a bit creepy, don't you think?"

"He might not be back for hours. You know how long his talks with the headmaster can be."

"Then maybe we should wait for hours--"

"Oh, don't be such a prat. I've tested the scrolls; they're safe enough." With no more warning than that, Draco whipped the ribbon off his and broke the seal.

Harry flinched, almost expecting an explosion, but nothing happened.

Nothing except Draco whistling, long and low between his teeth. "Well, would you look at that. Apparently I'm being invited up to the headmaster's office for a private chat."

"Not that private," muttered Harry. "Dad's there right now."

"You're probably invited, too." Draco made an impatient gesture. "Go on!"

Harry opened his scroll then, to read:

*Dear Harry,*

*Please join me in my office at once as your father and I would like to discuss an important matter with you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*

*Headmaster,*

*Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*

When he glanced over at Draco's, he saw that the letters were identical except for the name at the top. "Weird." Harry's throat suddenly started feeling tight. "Do you think we're in some sort of trouble?"

"We haven't done anything wrong! Not lately, at any rate."
Harry still had a bad feeling, but he shrugged it off. "At once, it says. I suppose that means we'd better floo."

One whirling trip later, and Harry was exiting the hearth in Dumbledore's office, tripping a bit over his own feet. At least he didn't outright fall over, but he still felt clumsy, especially when Draco emerged from the Floo a moment later, his step brisk, elegant, and self-assured.

"You wished to see us, Headmaster?"

"We wanted to see you, Draco. You and Harry both," answered Snape as he stood up. Harry hadn't seen him; one of the perils of those high-backed chairs the Slytherins seemed to favour. Not that the headmaster was a Slytherin, of course.

Although, Harry reflected, he didn't know that for certain, did he . . .

"What can we do for you?" asked Draco in a tone that suggested he was having a private audience with the Minister himself. Harry saw through that, though. Those perfect manners of Draco's often came out when he was uncertain of himself, and under stress.

Which meant that Harry wasn't the only one wondering what on earth was going on.

"Have a seat, my boys." Dumbledore beamed, gesturing for Severus to sit down again. As soon as everyone was seated, the headmaster clapped his hands three times in quick succession. A vaguely Chinese-looking house elf appeared. "Ah, Yozzi. Thank you for coming so quickly. We'd like some light refreshment, if you would. A cup of tea for me, I think, and a plate of gherkins to share. Oh, and chocolate-dipped biscuits, and . . . a wee splash of Galliano for you, Severus?"

Snape rolled his eyes, but assented with a curt nod of his head.

"Draco?"

"A glass of Butterbeer would be lovely, thank you," said Draco to the headmaster. He didn't even glance at the elf.

"Lemonade, please," said Harry, talking to Yozzi.

"Anything else, my boys?"

When Draco and Harry both shook their heads, the elf vanished with a slight popping noise.

"Boys," said Draco then. "We are of age. I know you're aware of that."

Snape chuckled lightly. "I think you're fated to lose that argument, since he still calls me his boy."

"But you're--" Draco cut off whatever he'd been about to say, though it didn't take a lot of imagination to guess the word that would have come next. Ancient, probably, Harry thought, holding back a laugh.

Snape scowled, but instead of replying, began to sip at his Galliano, which had just arrived.

"Severus," said the headmaster, laying aside his tea after he'd drained half the cup, "if you would be so good as to do the honours?"

Honours?

Snape nodded stiffly, leaned forward to set his tiny glass on Dumbledore's desk, and fished in his
cloak pocket for a moment. When he pulled his hand out, he was holding two shiny silver badges emblazoned with a snake twined around the letter P.

"It is my privilege as Head of Slytherin to extend to each of you the position of seventh-year prefect," he said, moving to stand. He went toward Draco's chair first. "Will you accept?"

Draco nodded, his features composed, if a little pale. Not from fright, though. Harry thought this was just an emotional moment for him. Well, of course it was. His prefect status had been stripped from him the year before, and when he'd been readmitted to classes, he hadn't got it back.

"Thank you, Severus," said Draco quietly as Snape pinned the badge to his robes.

Harry's turn, then.

"Will you accept?" asked Snape, dark eyes glimmering as he stood before Harry.

"Uh . . ." Harry swallowed. His first thought was to say that a girl should really get the post, since that was the tradition, wasn't it? One boy and one girl? When he thought of the seventh-year Slytherin girls, though . . . well, that answered that question. "Yes."

He almost said Thank you, as Draco had, but managed to keep the words inside, even though Snape hadn't rebuked his brother for them.

Dumbledore poured himself another cup of tea and raised it, as if in tribute. "To two fine boys . . . excuse me, Draco. To two fine young men. And to an excellent year."

Draco's smile was razor-sharp. "It will be. If Zabini crosses me again with that Malshite business, I can take points."

"This isn't the Inquisitorial Squad, Draco."

"Seventh-year prefects can take points!"

"You, however, will not take points from Slytherin," said Snape sternly.

"Why not? You did."

"Not for something as inconsequential as name-calling."

"Ha. You took points just because I called him Potter, which actually is his name!"

"That had a deeper purpose, and you know it."

"True, true." Draco smoothed down his robes, admiring his badge with definite pride in his eyes. Huh . . . he'd never complained about it much, so Harry hadn't known that losing his prefect's badge had meant so much to him.

"I doubt that Mr Zabini will be so foolish as to cross you again, however," said Snape, resuming his seat. "The Leaving Feast last year left no doubt as to your value to Slytherin, and that badge will convince even the most obstinate students that you have been fully restored to your former standing."

"And that's why you did it?" asked Draco, one eyebrow raised.

"Among other reasons."
Draco chuckled and sank back into his chair. "How much time did you spend considering whether Crabbe or Goyle should take my spot?"

"Now, now," said the headmaster mildly. "Gloating hardly becomes you."

"Yes, sir."

Harry traced a finger over his badge, hardly able to believe his eyes. A prefect, him! He raised his gaze to meet his father's, unable to stop the word from tumbling out. "Thanks, Dad. I . . . you know, I'd got used to the idea that I'd never get one of these."

Snape gave him a considering look. "Perhaps that explains why I was so singularly unsuccessful guiding that conversation about the houses a few days ago."

_Guiding that conversation_ . . . Harry felt like a light bulb had gone on inside his head. "You were talking all along about making me a prefect? Why didn't you just say so?"

"I would rather the idea had come from you."

"Like I'm going to demand to be made a prefect!"

Dumbledore cleared his throat, which made Harry colour. "Oh. Well, I guess I did demand it once, but I was pretty upset at the time . . ." He turned to the headmaster. "You don't still think I have too much on my plate?"

"Well, you have a father now," said Dumbledore, very softly. "I fancy he knows you better than I do, and he thought you would make a splendid prefect indeed."

"Yeah, because I'll set such a good example," said Harry wryly, but not bitterly. Snape's idea was actually a pretty good one. "Nobody'll forget I'm a Slytherin, not now."

"If you feel I am using you--"

_Crap. _"No, I didn't mean it like that," said Harry earnestly. "I am honoured, Severus. Honestly."

"He's honestly honoured," said Draco, snickering.

"I am," said Harry, glaring briefly at his brother. "It's all right with me that the badge serves more than one purpose at once. After all, that's what Slytherin is all about, isn't it? Seeing things on more than one level?"

"Well said, Harry, well said." Dumbledore beamed, and picked up both the small trays that had appeared on his desk a few moments earlier. "Gherkin? Biscuit?"

To Harry's surprise, Snape took one of the tiny pickles. He didn't bite into it, but merely held it between a thumb and forefinger. "Far more than one level. For example, your application to the Auror Apprentice Programme can only be enhanced by your having held a leadership position at school."

"Excuse me," said Draco, "you mean _our_ applications, don't you?"

"Yours as well, of course."

Draco's eyes began to gleam. "Hmm. That brings up a good question. What about Head Boy? If I'm fully restored to my former standing, then I'm in line for that, surely?"
"Don't press your luck," said Harry.

"You were expelled unjustly, Draco," said the headmaster, "but you did in fact attack a fellow student last year. Not to mention a certain incident involving pastries, hmm?"

Draco slumped a little. "I don't even deserve to be a prefect; that's what you mean."

Dumbledore stroked a hand down his beard, his fingers twisting in the wiry strands. "Indeed, that is not what I mean. I am very happy to welcome you back into the small community of prefects. You made some terrible mistakes last year, but then, you had far more terrible background to overcome than most wizards could comprehend. And in the end, you distinguished yourself quite impressively, as I believe I made clear?"

"Yes, you did," said Draco, sitting up straighter, the kind words clearly warming him.

"So, as that's settled--"

"All hail the Head Boy," interrupted Draco, sounding just a little bit put out as he turned to Harry and gave a dramatic wave.

"Oh, sure, since I have all that prefect experience. Five whole minutes of it--"

"Indeed, the Head Boy and Girl shall be chosen from the ranks of those who have diligently performed their prefect duties from fifth year onwards," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Ron and Hermione," said Harry eagerly, nabbing a biscuit and munching into it. "Right? Oh, come on! You can tell me! I won't breathe a word!"

Dumbledore peered over the top of his spectacles. "The selection, in fact, has yet to be made."

Harry's face fell. "All right. Well, thanks for this little celebration, then. Though I suppose it is a bit of a special occasion, appointing seventh-year prefects instead of just having them continue on from the previous year."

"Did your have lemonade include a dash of Babbling Beverage?" asked Draco.

"What?" Harry glanced around to see that both his father and brother were looking bemused. Only Dumbledore seemed to understand what he'd been trying to say.

"Ah. I believe Harry's thinking of the custom in Gryffindor. Professor McGonagall sends out letters to inform students that they have been appointed prefects."

"Letters?" Draco sounded appalled. "No personal touch at all? No ceremony, for such an important moment? What about their badges?"

"I believe she owls those with the letters."

"How perfectly barbaric." Draco shuddered. "But then, what can you expect from Gryffindor?"

Harry knew that McGonagall had a different way of running her House--very different from Snape--but that didn't mean he was going to stand for much more of this. "There's nothing wrong with Gryffindor!"

"Did I say there was?"

"Yes, to Scrimgeour!"
"Minister Scrimgeour, Harry," chided Dumbledore.

Harry snorted. He'd thought everybody was past all that, unless he was actually in class. "You told him that Gryffindor was a very odd House!"

"Well, you lot are. Owling badges about!"

Harry's anger abruptly lost its edge. "I'm a Slytherin too, Draco," he said quietly.

Draco crossed his arms. "I forget that sometimes."

If even his own brother did that, it was no wonder the rest of the students did the same. "Well, that stops now," said Harry, adjusting his badge a little. He almost wished it were bigger, just so it could make a point. "I'm going to make it a point this year, to show everybody that I'm just as much a Slytherin as a Gryffindor. Slytherin prefect is a good start."

"Seventh-year Slytherin prefect," added Snape. "Which is to say . . . the two of you will be second only to myself and Albus in terms of authority over the House."

"Right," said Harry, nodding. "A lot more time in Slytherin. Helping the first-years settle in, all that. House meetings."

It came to Harry then, like a ray of light from above, that he'd actually been reluctant before, to really embrace Slytherin the way he should. He'd told himself that he was only being sensible, but there were things he could have done . . . he hadn't wanted to do them, that was all.

Now, he did.

"I need a spot for me in Slytherin, Dad. In, you know, the seventh-years' dormitory. Which shouldn't be a problem, really. I mean, now that Nott's not around."

For once, Draco didn't make fun of his phrasing. "You're moving in? Really?"

Harry shook his head. "I'll live in both. Trade off nights as the mood strikes, I guess. But, you know, just having a bed with my name on it will send a message. Namely, that I really am a Slytherin. It's not just something I'm stuck with. It's a part of me."

Snape finished his Galliano and set the glass aside. "You aren't still afraid of being murdered in your bed at night?"

"Zabini," spat Draco. "We can put all the strongest locking charms we like on our door, Harry, but he'll still be in the room with us."

"He might prank me, but he's not going to kill me," said Harry, though his laugh emerged a little bit nervously. "Look, when I said they might kill me in my sleep, I was thinking more of nasty pieces of work like Marcus Flint. Who's long gone, of course. I don't know . . . it hadn't really sunk in that we're the seventh-years now."

Draco considered that, and after a moment, nodded. Then, he grinned. "Larissa's going to be after you all the time, you know. I want to see Sals. I want you to tell Sals something for me. I want to feed Sals!"

"She won't want to feed her for long. It's gross, watching Sals eat." Harry reached over and gave his brother a light shove. "Maybe she'll get interested in your ferret, instead."
"No dice. I can't converse with Loki."

"Harry," said Snape, his hands folded in his lap, "I do hope you haven't felt pressured into this decision. Your change of mind is . . . rather abrupt."

"Paradigm shift." Harry shrugged. "I don't know. It just suddenly struck me that I'm both, but I really have been leaning hard in one direction. It's time to find a better balance. So, yeah. Inscribe my name on Nott's old bed. Except . . . er, can I have a different bed moved in? I don't really want to sleep on his mattress, eww."

"Brand-new beds for all the seventh-year boys!" declared Draco. "My treat! Er . . . do you think I can forget about Zabini, though? And maybe Crabbe; he wasn't so nice to me last year, was he?"

"What are your perfect manners telling you?" asked Snape, eyes narrowed in challenge.

"New beds all around. Oh, well. This'll be good practice for redecorating my house, I suppose."

Dumbledore, Harry noticed, hadn't said a thing about the new living arrangements. He'd just sat and listened, steadily eating gherkin after gherkin, his old eyes . . . well, not exactly calculating, but he was definitely thinking the matter through. "Sir? It's all right with you, isn't it, if I have a bed in Slytherin, too?"

The headmaster's head jerked, as if he were coming out of a trance. To Harry, though, the motion looked a little too deliberate. "What? Oh . . . well, it's a bit unusual, as rooming arrangements go, but . . ." He glanced briefly at Snape. "I have the greatest of faith in your father's judgment, Harry. If he thinks the idea a sound one, I cannot disagree."

Harry took that to mean that Dumbledore wasn't in love with the idea, but wasn't willing to alienate Snape--and Harry--over the matter. Still, no point in letting on that he'd read between the lines. "Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Harry," said Snape, his voice so low as to be almost inaudible. That alone told Harry how moved the man was. He didn't want Dumbledore to know, and really, Harry couldn't blame him.

Harry didn't want Dumbledore to know how pleased he was that he'd got it right. Snape had been hinting before, for Harry to come up with some way to get himself seen as a Slytherin, and Harry had completely missed the point.

But this time, he'd got it right.

"The prefects' password for the year, sir?" asked Draco. For a moment, Harry was irritated by the question. Couldn't it have waited?

But then, he decided that Snape probably needed a change of subject, and Draco had picked up on that.

"Mollycoddles," said Dumbledore with a wave of his wand.

"Mollycoddles?"

"Harry understands me. Don't you, my boy?"

Harry nodded. Dumbledore wanted him to know that he was loved by Gryffindors, too. Dumbledore was worried that Harry was leaning too far toward Slytherin . . .
"Well, come on, Harry," said Draco, tugging on his hand. "You've never seen any of the prefects' baths! You'll be glad you learned to swim; the tubs are absolutely massive--"

Harry decided not to ruin Draco's glee by mentioning that he already knew all that. "We'll see you later, Dad. I guess Draco and I have things to do."

"Things to do, places to see, beds to order! Oh, this is going to be the best year ever!" Draco was still nattering on as the spiral staircase wound them down and around. "I think we'll have to stick with silver-and-green for a colour scheme, but we can do whatever we like with all the rest. Do you like dark woods, Harry? Or maybe we should have the beds made out of maple, to celebrate my new wand. That'll stick in Zabini's craw, all right--"

Laughing, Harry let himself be pulled down the corridor . . . and into Draco's own peculiar brand of madness.
Harry had been convinced for years that August was the longest month of the year. Even before he’d started at Hogwarts, August had meant that school was right around the corner. After a summer with the Dursleys, Harry couldn't wait for a chance to get away from them for several hours a day. Once he’d started at Hogwarts, going to school had been even more brilliant. Months at a time without Dudley's bullying, Uncle Vernon's bellowing, and Aunt Petunia's high, shrill voice.

No matter his other problems, Hogwarts had been a haven for him.

But of course, that had only made the summers seem even longer than before, and August was always the worst.

Harry hadn't been expecting this August to crawl along so slowly, but then, he'd never counted on just how annoying Draco's whinging could be.

Fifty times a day, Harry heard the same words, the same complaints, repeated in dozens of different ways. They always boiled down to the same exact thing, though.

*I miss Rhiannon. I want Rhiannon. I can't stand to be apart from Rhiannon.*

It got to the point where Harry actually told Draco to shut up, already. That didn't go over so well. Draco had lifted his chin in the way he had, and glared with eyes like chips of ice. That was bad enough, but what he said was far worse.

"I'm not surprised you can't understand. You've never been in love. Not completely, hopelessly, rest-of-your-life, head-over-heels in love," Draco announced in a smarmy tone. "You don't know what it's like to miss somebody with your whole heart--"

Harry couldn’t stand it. If he stayed there, he was going to hex Draco. Or deck him. Or maybe both.

So Harry left, slamming the door on his way out, and headed without thinking to the one place that would prove Draco wrong. Harry did understand what it was like to miss someone, he *did*. The moment he was in front of the Mirror of All Souls, he sat down cross-legged, and tried to get himself under control. Sometimes, he could hardly stand Draco. The other boy believed he was always right, for one thing. He thought just because Harry hadn't been "in love," that Harry didn't know what it was like to miss someone!

Well, Draco didn't know what he was talking about, that was all. Harry's grief over Sirius was at least a hundred times worse than Draco's longing for Rhiannon, because at least she was alive. Draco could contact her any time he liked. So what if he was restricted to letters for the moment? At least he had a way to talk with her!

Harry ground his teeth together until they hurt, but it didn't help at all. He still wanted to stomp back home and pound some sense into Draco.

Instead, he forced himself to look up at the mirror, proof positive that there was more than one kind of love in the world. Proof that he *did* know what it was like to miss people and want them near.

Standing up, Harry started walking around the mirror, circling it over and over like a shark closing
in on prey. He had to be able to solve it, he just had to. He'd go mad if he didn't. Here was a chance
to talk to his parents, to really converse with them for the first time ever. He'd been too shocked in
the graveyard to do anything but listen to their frantic instructions. Besides, there had hardly been
time for anything more. But with the mirror, he could have a chance to really get to know them, so
there wouldn't be this awful, aching, gaping hole in his heart.

It shouldn't be there; Harry knew it shouldn't. He had Snape now. He loved Snape, and he could
hardly ask for a better father, or one who understood him more thoroughly.

But still, when Harry thought about the mirror, the hole in his heart seemed to grow in size.

Probably because there was room in the hole to fit more than just his parents. Harry missed Sirius,
too, missed him with an intensity that was actually frightening, sometimes.

Ha, in comparison, Draco's whinging on about Rhiannon struck Harry as stupid and shallow. So
what if Draco hadn't seen her for two whole weeks? Harry hadn't seen Sirius in over a year, and if
he couldn't get the mirror working, he'd never see him.

Oh, but Harry didn't know a thing about missing a loved one!

He was still circling the mirror and fuming about the unfairness of life when the door to the room
creaked open and his father stepped inside, his robes fluttering around his heels. "I thought we had
an agreement," Snape said, his voice stern. "You're not to wander the castle alone."

Harry's temper snapped. "It makes a lot of sense that you made me a prefect then, doesn't it? What
are people going to think when I need a bloody bodyguard? Are they going to respect Slytherin
then, eh?"

Snape ignored the questions completely, stepping closer. "What's wrong, Harry?"

Two could play at that game, Harry thought viciously as he ignored that question. "I'm not
supposed to wander the castle alone because we're keeping up appearances," he snarled. "Not
because I actually am weak and frail and helpless! And it's summer now, with no students about
except for Draco and me, so what's the big deal if I come here on my own?"

Snape frowned. "The state of mind you appear to be in, I'd be concerned what you might do."

Harry bared his teeth. "And here I thought that Draco was the only one in this family who liked to
throw needles in my face!"

Harry wasn't sure what happened, then. All he knew was that one minute, he was screaming his
head off like some kind of nutter, and the next, he was bursting into tears. Literally, hot blobs of
tears flooding down his cheeks as he gasped, trying to catch his breath.

He whirled away, flinging up an arm to hide his face, and wished he could just vanish on the spot.
God, how embarrassing, weeping like this, like Sirius had died just last week instead of months
and months ago. Crying like a little baby when he was an adult now. Crying like a girl.

And yet none of those thoughts were enough to make him stop, even though he could hardly
breathe by then. His chest felt like a troll was sitting on it--

But then from behind, two strong hands grasped his shoulders and turned him around. Without a
word, Snape pulled him close and hugged him tight, holding him and letting him cry until Harry
had no more tears inside him.
By the time Harry was through, his father's robes were damp with tears, and Harry felt like he'd just run a marathon. All he wanted was to collapse into bed and sleep for days.

Snape seemed to sense his exhaustion. Still holding onto Harry with one arm--supporting him, really--he summoned some bits of broken junk in the room, and effortlessly transfigured them into two padded chairs.

Harry stared at them, wondering if a padded room wouldn’t be more to the point. God, could he get much more mental? Snape deserved better than a son who burst into tears at the drop of a hat. Or one that could win a contest for World's Biggest Whinger.

"Come, sit," urged Snape, coaxing him over to a chair.

Harry didn't want to, but he gave in with bad grace. "How did you find me, anyway? Did you use my dad's map?"

Snape's eyes gleamed as he nodded. "Very useful bit of parchment, that map."

Harry suddenly had a bad feeling. "You aren't going to use it to get students in trouble, are you? For wandering after curfew?"

"Instead of walking the halls to find them? I must admit, the idea has crossed my mind."

"Well, you can't use it for that," said Harry, crossing his arms as he sat there.

"I can't?"

"Of course not!" Bloody hell, he should have remembered that his father was a Slytherin. "That's it, then. I want the map back, right now."

Snape withdrew an old, weathered parchment from a fold in his robes, but he made no effort to hold it out. "I need your solemn promise that no matter how much you are tempted, you absolutely will not use this map to see who is coming so that you may find secluded places in which to stick yourself."

"Of course I won't--"

"Think about it," Snape urged, his voice about as serious as Harry had ever heard it. "Think carefully before you promise. If I give you this map back, and you end up hurting yourself, I will have failed you as a father."

"It wouldn't be your fault that I start back with the needles--"

"So you do feel it is a possibility," said Snape grimly.

"Not a possibility," hedged Harry, but by then, he knew he was fooling only himself. And not even that well. "Shite. I guess if things got really bad, I might want to use the map for that."

"You're to come to me immediately if you feel any inclination to use a needle," said Snape sternly. "We have a standing agreement. Are you saying that having the map might convince you to ignore it?"

"Look, I'm not Trelawney." Harry sighed. "Oh, fine. Keep the stupid thing."

"It's a magnificent creation, worthy of your father's magical talents."
Harry smiled. He couldn't help it; he liked the fact that these days, Snape could so easily say something complimentary about James Potter. That alone made a huge difference to his mood. He could hardly believe he'd cried so hard just a few minutes earlier. "You have to promise not to use it to track students. Except, you know, if there's a true emergency or something like that. You can't use it just to get Gryffindors in trouble."

"I had it at the end of the previous term," Snape reminded him. "I don't recall using it that way, then."

"Well, you were slightly busy, weren't you?" Harry snorted. "And that wasn't a promise, Dad. So let's have one."

"Or?"

"Or I'll demand the map back, simple as that. And I'm an adult and it's my property, so you have no right to keep it if I say to give it back."

"Harry . . ." Snape gave him what Harry could only think of as an indulgent look. "Don't you know how much a child it makes you sound, to demand things on the basis of how you are such an adult?"

"Dad," said Harry, trying to match that look, "don't you know how transparent you sound right now? I've had almost a year in Slytherin. If you never make that promise I asked for, I'm going to notice."

Snape unfolded the map, which was still showing the rooms and corridors of Hogwarts, and said with a slight quirk to his lips. "Done being Slytherin, then. Though in this case, I'd hardly call it mischief managed."

The parchment wiped itself clean on the last two words.

"And?" asked Harry, trying not to make the question come out too demanding.

"And you are far, far more important to me than any opportunity to catch Gryffindors about after hours, you idiot child. I'm surprised you would need to be told a thing like that--"

"You still aren't promising."

Snape rolled his eyes, the gesture so dramatic that Harry knew his father was being sarcastic on purpose. His words weren't sarcastic at all, though. "I promise not to use your map to catch Gryffindors sneaking about after curfew."

Harry smiled, about to say, Now that wasn't so hard, was it . . . until something occurred to him. "Or Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws," he quickly added. "Yeah, forgot to mention them, didn't you?"

"So I'm allowed to terrorize my own house?" asked Snape mildly.

"Well, the clear presumption there is that you have no motive to take points from Slytherin," Harry pointed out, feeling cheeky. "But to be fair all around, just say 'students,' then."

"I promise not to use your map to catch students sneaking about after curfew. However, I retain the right to cancel all such promises if any sort of emergency arises."

Harry had assumed he would. And he was pretty sure that his father was using "emergency" in the broadest possible sense, but . . . "All right. That'll do."
"I do hope you realise that I could have kept the map without that nonsensical promise," said Snape. "You are of age and it is your property, but Heads of House still have every right to confiscate magical items that, in their opinion, do not belong at Hogwarts."

"Oh," said Harry, feeling very stupid, by then.

"And your only recourse at that juncture would have been to threaten to withdraw from school."

"Which you know I wouldn't do." Harry tilted his head to one side. "Why'd you promise, then? You must have known that you had me."

"Because you are giving up something important," Snape said simply. "You will feel better about it if you believe that I am doing the same."

"It's Slytherins who feel that things have to be even--"

"And you are a Slytherin, are you not?"

Harry thought of his prefect's badge, pinned to one of his school robes. It was in his wardrobe at the moment, since there was no reason to dress like a student until term began. "Slytherin for everyone to see, this year," he said.

Snape tucked the map away in a pocket. "Indeed. Now, as for the concerns you expressed before, about how your prefect status will interact with the perception that you are a weak wizard..." Snape shrugged. "It's unfortunate that we must maintain that pretence, Harry. However, my interest that you be seen as a Slytherin was never rooted in the belief that my house needs to see Slytherins being powerful. What many of them fail to realise is that it is possible for a Slytherin to, as the headmaster would term it, 'choose what is right instead of what it easy.' Or expedient. Or advantageous."

"People will still think it's strange that a prefect needs an escort."

"Oh, yes." Snape smiled, the expression razor-thin. "But that won't pose a serious problem. In the immediate future, people will simply assume that I appointed you out of pure nepotism. When the full truth is known later, however...?"

"What?"

"Think like a Slytherin. I know you can do that, when you put your mind to it."

Harry would once have thought that an insult, but it sounded more like a compliment, these days. Probably because he understood Slytherin, and Snape, a lot better. "Hmm. Well... later on, people will know I was never actually weak, right? They'll know that I was just pretending. Pretending for a long time... oh." Harry grinned. "That's just... devious, Dad. After the fact, they'll know that not only was I in Slytherin and wearing a badge to prove it, but they'll understand that I actually am Slytherin, through and through. To have fooled them all, like that, for so long!"

"More importantly, to have fooled them in pursuit of a tactical goal. This isn't a mere prank. It's strategy." 

"Yeah, well I think they'll all know it was your idea, not mine--"

"But you are the one who will carry it off. And in the doing, you will prove yourself a consummate Slytherin."
"And the prefect's badge?"

Snape shrugged. "The point might be lost without that. You might merely be seen as a rather
devious Gryffindor, but the badge will ensure that people draw the conclusion I wish."

"We wish," Harry corrected. "Draco said it, you know, that Goyle was just the first. We're going to
make a lot more Slytherins see that Voldemort isn't any sort of answer. Not that Goyle has really
seen that. He just wasn't willing to stop being friends with Draco over it."

"We shall use whatever means we must. However, speaking of your brother . . . before I came in
search of you, he told me what happened this afternoon."

Oh, Draco had told him what had happened. Harry could hardly wait to hear his brother's version
of events. "All right, what did he say?"

Snape gave him a knowing look. That alone told Harry that he wasn't going to like the answer. "He
announced that you'd stormed off in a fit of pique because you can't manage to get a girlfriend of
your own."

"Draco's a complete arsehole." Harry didn't care how blunt that was, or even how rude Snape
thought he was. It was just the truth. The simple truth. And if Snape wanted to punish him for
saying so, Harry thought darkly, but Harry wasn't taking it back, no matter what
the man decided to do about it, and--

"He's being an arsehole, I agree," said Snape calmly, cutting across Harry's thoughts. Frenzied
thoughts, Harry suddenly realised. Had he really been about to tell his father that if Snape didn't
like what Harry said, he could shove it straight up his big, fat, nose?

Ouch.

Snape didn't speak again until Harry looked at him, which took a while because Harry was pretty
embarrassed by then, and not just over earlier. Honestly, crying and blubbering like a little kid was
bad enough, but being tempted to yell insults about Snape's appearance?

Finally, though, he got his emotions under control and looked up. Occluding helped. Somewhere in
between storming away from home and crying all over Snape, he'd lost his grip on his Occlumency
without even realising.

Hmm, and Voldemort hadn't immediately pounced. Maybe that meant that Harry could risk
dropping his shields once in a while. To work on the mirror, for instance. Maybe he'd only latched
onto Harry so quickly at the party because he'd just destroyed the Ministry and he was feeling in
the mood to gloat . . .

"Harry?"

Snape's voice came to him sounding like it was being wafted along by a wave of concern. Harry
had the feeling that he'd been staring into space for a while by then, as he got his Occlumency back
under control and then under the fire, thought about Voldemort. Actually, he had the feeling that
Snape had said his name more than once.

Harry met his father's eyes. "Yeah. I'm all right, really. Just got lost in thought for a minute there.
Um, you were saying? Something about how you agree with me that Draco's an arse?"

A thin hint of a smile barely lifted the man's lips. "I agreed that he was being an arse. That's quite a
difference from believing that he actually is one."
Harry's thoughts rapidly flew back over the past year, over all the things Draco had said and done. Little, ordinary things like joking about with Harry, as well as momentous ones like getting over his fear of snakes enough to keep his wits about him in France. Yeah, after all that, Draco deserved more than to be called an arsehole. He wasn't one. Or at least, not any longer. Harry wasn't going to go so far as to think that Draco was only being an arse during his first five years at Hogwarts. "All right then, I get it," he said abruptly. "But if you want the truth--"

"Now when have I ever not wanted that?" Snape murmured, one eyebrow lifted.

Harry almost chuckled. "Well, you wanted it, so here it is. Draco's being a royal pain in the neck over missing his girlfriend, and I couldn't stand to listen to his whinging any longer, so I left."

Snape shifted in his chair. Strange . . . it didn't look like he leaned forward, exactly, but somehow he ended up closer to Harry. "And came here."

"Yeah." Harry swallowed, vaguely aware that he was feeling "defensive," as Marsha would put it. God, after the mental way he'd acted today, Snape would probably insist that Harry have daily sessions from now on. "Because I miss people too!"

"Of course you do." Snape paused for a moment, moving to lean his elbows on the arms of his chair, positioning his hands so that he could steeple his fingers together. "You never got to say good-bye, which makes things much harder than otherwise. I will urge you to understand, however, that losing someone is never easy under any circumstances."

Harry nodded, blinking rapidly because he was getting that stepped-on feeling once more. And damn it, he didn't want to burst into tears again. He'd already made a fool of himself too many times for one day.

"Your brother didn't get to say good-bye to Rhiannon."

Well, that helped Harry forget about crying. It made him glare daggers at his father, instead. "That's not the same thing. She's alive, for one. And for another, he did say good-bye to her. He just didn't get to do it in person."

"True." Snape tapped his fingers together, a sign that he was thinking. "He feels that he will never see her again, though, and at his age, letters hardly suffice. I fear his behaviour may grow increasingly erratic if his mental outlook does not improve, and with the war on? And this is his N.E.W.T year, as well. Hmm . . ."

"Dad?"

Harry felt like a total prat, but he also felt like he had to say it. "Could we stop talking about Draco? Please?"

Snape nodded, the motion abrupt. "Of course. I do wish I'd been able to find a solution for you, Harry." He gestured toward the mirror, which was shining like a newly-minted coin. It should be; Harry came here almost every day and cleaned it, hoping that some bright idea would occur to him and he'd be able to get it working.

Draco usually came with him, bringing along his Muggle Studies books so he'd have something to do while Harry puttered. Remembering that made Harry feel kind of bad that he'd been calling the other boy names. But he didn't want to think about Draco.

"Maybe I should just banish the mirror," said Harry, frowning. "Do you think I'm getting too obsessed with it?"
"It's not yours to banish, and as for the other . . ." Snape tapped his fingers together again, one after another. "I think you need some sort of final good-bye. Closure, if you will."

"You've been talking to Marsha about this, haven't you?" Harry didn't wait for an answer. "When do you do that, though?"

Marsha had come to the castle once since the Ministry attack, to see how Harry and Draco were "holding up," as she put it. Harry wasn't sure why she hadn't been more direct about the whole thing and called it a regular therapy session.

She was supposed to come back at least once more before term started, and after that, they would have sessions with her on an as-needed basis. Ha, maybe Draco was the one who needed daily sessions, since if you asked Harry, he was obsessive-compulsive over his girlfriend.

In any case, though, Harry did wonder when Snape had found time to consult with their therapist. The one time she'd come, she'd taken the train--apparently squibs had some way-or-other to get through the barrier at the station--and had walked to the castle from Hogsmeade. Snape had offered in an owl-post to Side-Along Apparate her, but she'd written back that she would enjoy a day on the train and a brisk walk. He had taken her back to Surrey, the two of them sharing a Portkey that Dumbledore had prepared for her alone. That didn't work out so well; Marsha had taken one look at it and had shaken her head. She didn't explain, but from the look on her face, Harry would guess that she'd had at least one bad experience with a Portkey. Maybe that kind of transport was even more violent for squibs than it was for wizards. Hard to imagine, really. But then, Harry loathed Portkeys.

Hmm, most likely because of his own bad experience with one.

Well, at least Marsha had been willing to Portkey home when Snape said he'd go with her to "absorb the brunt of the magic." Bit gallant of him, really. Draco had thought so too. The minute the two of them had left, he'd started in with the match-making talk that their father found so tiresome. Draco actually began to calculate how long Snape would have to be gone in order to sneak in a quick kiss--as if the man had any intention whatever of kissing Marsha Goode.

As if Marsha would put up with that kind of thing from the father of two boys she was counselling!

Draco had actually looked disappointed when Snape returned through the Floo just a minute later. One minute . . . not enough time for much kissing, let alone conversation.

"Marsha has a Floo?" Harry had asked, blinking.

Snape had looked down his long nose at him. "Of course not. You've been in her office enough times. Did you see one there?"

"Oh, we thought you perhaps had escorted her to her flat, like a proper gentleman caller," Draco had chimed in.

Snape shot him a look that effectively silenced any comments like that. Then he returned his attention to Harry. "I Apparated from her office to your house--"

"My house," corrected Draco, who obviously hadn't been silenced for long.

"And I flooed from there," Snape had continued, ignoring Draco that time.

So between arriving by Portkey, Apparating out, and then flooing back to Hogwarts, Snape
definitely hadn't had much time to talk to Marsha about Harry and the mirror, or Harry's need for "closure." So when had the topic come up?

"When you leave Draco and me alone in your quarters," asked Harry, returning to the point, "are you heading out to Surrey to talk with our therapist?"

"Occasionally," Snape admitted. "It's a simple matter to floo out to Grimmauld Place and then Apparate to her place of work."

Simple matter? "She might be with somebody, and you can't just solve that with an Obliviate. Marsha would have kittens if someone who already has . . . er, issues, ended up with amnesia too."

Snape tensed the tiniest bit, like he was suddenly uncomfortable. "Ah. We had to arrange something in regards to that. I proposed that she should keep her office free of outsiders at a certain time each day, in case I wished to speak with her--"

"Let me guess. She told you exactly what she thought of that idea."

"Quite," said Snape, shifting in his seat again. "The good doctor insisted that she could not guarantee to be alone, not when one of her patients might need her."

Harry wasn't so sure he liked being called a "patient," but since he was one, objecting would be pretty brainless. And anyway, Snape was still speaking.

"I tried to persuade her that you and Draco have needs that are paramount, and that she should tell her other . . . clients she was unavailable at that hour, but she refused to see matters that way."

So his father had noticed that Harry didn't like being referred to as a patient. Which went to prove, he supposed, that Marsha was right about body language expressing an awful lot. "Yeah, I imagine she would object to that. So what do you do, Apparate into her closet and listen to see if she's with anybody?"

Snape huffed slightly. "And breach client-therapist confidentiality, a subject I assure you I have heard far too much about in the space of a single summer? The woman would have a fit of apoplexy at the mere mention of my lurking in her office closet."

Harry grinned. "So I guess she meant the bit about not repeating what Draco and I say."

"She is disgustingly ethical on the matter."

"Even though you pump her for information every chance you get," said Harry with glee. "Ha!"

Snape gave him a piercing look, but didn’t pry into what Harry might discuss with his therapist. "As for how I contact her, I ring her from Grimmauld Place using a mobile phone obtained for just that purpose. Once we are speaking, she can inform me as to whether I am welcome to Apparate to her office so that we can converse in private."

"Well, don’t tell Draco you've got hold of another mobile. He'll be after you to let him go to Grimmauld Place so he can call Rhiannon."

"No, he wouldn't. He's far too concerned over her safety, and as I said, the house has been in use since shortly after the attack on the Ministry. Draco is not interested in his own comfort, not when it means doing anything that might divulge his petite amie's existence to outsiders."

Hmm, by that standard, Ron and Hermione counted as insiders, which was a nice thought. More
than a thought, really; they did know all about the scheme to pretend he was a weak wizard. "So you won't tell Draco about the phone because it would be like taunting him." Harry sighed. "The way this effing mirror taunts me."

"I would do anything in my power to spare you that."

"I know," said Harry, a little sadly. "But you told me once that potions can't cure everything. I guess . . . neither can fathers, no matter how much they'd like to."

"Potions can't cure everything?" asked Snape in a tone of mock horror. "Are you certain?"

"Yeah, pretty sure, but my dad makes me learn them anyway."

"Wants me to earn a N.E.W.T. in the subject, even though it's not even required any longer! Can you believe that?"

Snape's smile reached his eyes. "I do believe I can." A moment later, all humour dropped away from his expression. "Harry. Perhaps we should discuss what Draco said about your not having a girlfriend."

Harry stiffened. So he was bad with girls, so what? It wasn't like it mattered very much. "Look, I don't even want one. You can trust me on that."

"I do trust you on that. In fact, I have been meaning to broach the matter with you."

"I'd rather not talk about it. At all," said Harry in a low voice. Didn't his father understand that Harry would rather be like everybody else, would rather not be singled out like this? The only thing worse than it being true was dwelling on it. "I can't change anything, so what's the point?"

When Harry glanced up, it looked to him like his father was choosing his words with even more care than usual. "The point, perhaps, is that it is neither healthy nor wise to continue on as you have been doing."

Harry shook his head. For once, his father was wrong. Dead wrong. It was both healthy and wise for Harry to go it alone. So healthy and wise, in fact, that he didn't even care that he rarely thought about romance. Why would he want to give Voldemort another target? It was bad enough that Voldemort would set his sights on Draco and Snape, and if Harry had been thinking straight . . . well, no, the adoption and everything that had followed weren't things he could regret, but he wasn't about to drag anybody else into the war zone that surrounded him.

Harry sighed. "Dad . . . I can't control much in this mess, but at least I can control that one thing, all right? I can choose to say no. I won't do it. I just won't, and no offence, but talking isn't going to help at all, so let's just stop now."

Snape looked . . . well, not exactly horrified, but disturbed, at any rate. "Harry . . . denying yourself what you want romantically is only going to cause bigger problems in the long run."

"No, it's not. It's going to avoid problems." Harry was a little surprised that Snape couldn't see that, but then, he thought that Rhiannon was really good for Draco, war or no war. So maybe he thought that Harry ought to relax and let himself be a normal teenager. One who went on dates and thought about snogging all the time. "And anyway, I've decided not to want romance, you see? I can't afford to let myself want a . . . a thing like that."

"A thing like that," repeated Snape, shaking his head. "You speak as if your desires aren't normal, but let me assure you, they are. There is nothing wrong with--"
"I don't have desires," insisted Harry, his hands clenching. "Not that kind. I can't. I won't. It's my choice not to have them, and nothing you say is going to argue me into them. I'm fine doing without. Really, I am."

Snape sat back, almost like he felt defeated. "Just tell me that you'll talk to someone, Harry. The good doctor, perhaps."

"Her?" Harry almost scoffed. "She can't possibly understand what this is like." And then, because his father was looking so distressed, Harry started over. "Well, we have touched on it, actually. But . . . there's no point in discussing it further, don't you understand? No point."

"All right, Harry," said Snape in a heavy voice as he slowly rose to his feet. "Why don't you come home? It's long past time for lunch."

Harry wasn't hungry, but he nodded and followed his father out the door.

Harry had pretty much given up on Scrimgeour ever helping him with the mirror. Not that he'd really expected anything from the man. Harry had thought all along that the Minister's story of having contacts in a mirror-smuggling ring rang false, and when the middle of August came and went without any further word, Harry figured that Scrimgeour had more important things to do than try to get information about a mirror that had been broken for almost a hundred years.

Then, late one afternoon, another letter from the Minister for Magic came whooshing out the Floo. Harry wasn't too excited about it, actually. It probably wasn't anything but another empty promise to "look into it." Yeah, that sounded like Scrimgeour. He wanted a good relationship with Harry--a good relationship on his own terms, that was--so it was only expected that he would eventually write to assure Harry that he was continuing his efforts to help.

*Slytherin,* thought Harry. *He's just being a Slytherin. If you can't help, pretend you can!*

Snape insisted on checking the letter over for hexes and curses, because even with the Minister's seal on it, you couldn't be too cautious. Harry didn't care. It wasn't like he was anxious to be strung along.

The letter, though, wasn't at all what Harry had been expecting.

_Dear Mr Potter,_

My contacts on the Continent were reluctant to divulge what they consider to be "trade secrets," but I eventually prevailed by assuring them in no uncertain terms that you have no interest in competing with them professionally.

Common wisdom about mirrors holds that broken ones are almost impossible to repair save by those few individuals who are able to master the intricate art of learning to dominate mirrors in general. My contacts, however, have finally informed me that this
is, in fact, not true. There is a trick that can provide a "shortcut," if you will, enabling one to skip over the laborious process of mastering a mirror and then attempting to transfer that mastery to mirrors originally spelled by other wizards.

I do not know of what use this trick will be for you, since it has very specific requirements, but in the interests of assisting you in any possible way, I will explain what I have learned.

Apparently, mirrors operate on principles somewhat similar to those that guide the behaviour of potions. You have no doubt learned from your esteemed father that in the field of potion-making, "like enhances like." Ingredients with similar magical properties can bind themselves together in a synergistic relationship in which the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. You will likely have learned to apply this principle when, for example, brewing explosive potions.

I bring up the parallel with potions in an effort to help you understand the principle as it applies to mirrors. This is quite counter-intuitive, but it appears that when it comes to mirrors, "broken enhances broken." One broken mirror can repair another, in other words. Of course, magic is never as simple as that sounds. The two mirrors must be broken in different ways, to begin with. The wizard who attempts the repair must have personally broken one of the mirrors to be used, but this can be problematic, since mirrors do not respond to wizards who abuse them as part of a deliberate bid toward repairs. Lastly, in order to accomplish the repair itself, one must engage in the risky business of combining magical artefacts. I have prevailed upon my contacts to provide information about the exact nature and method they employ in order to combine mirrors together, but unfortunately, that secret is guarded so zealously that it is passed on only by means of an Unbreakable Vow.

If I did not respect you as a sensible young man who has very sound guidance at home, I would not have disclosed this information at all, for attempting to combine magically imbued items can be a hazardous enterprise. I trust that you will avail yourself of the excellent advice available to you on this topic from not only your adoptive father, but also Headmaster Dumbledore. You will not, I am sure, attempt anything foolhardy on your own, because as we both know, your untimely death would be a terrible blow not only to those who love you, but also to the world in general at this time.

I hope that this information, limited as it is, proves of use in your quest. Do not hesitate to owl me if there are other ways in which I can be of assistance, Mr Potter. I look forward to continuing to build a close and amicable working relationship with you.

Sincerely,

Rufus Scrimgeour
Minister for Magic

Harry laughed out loud when he'd finished reading. "That's it! He's done it. I don't think he knows he's done it, and I'm not so sure I'll want to tell him, but he's done it!"
"He's gone mad," said Draco, cocking an eyebrow as he talked to Snape.

"Read it for yourself," sang Harry, flicking his fingers to waft the letter over to his brother.

"Harry, we've talked about this," said Snape. "You're getting into the habit of openly using your wandless magic. You need to conceal it. Draw your wand every time, even when among those who already know your secret."

"Right," said Harry, a little chastened. Not much, though. Nothing could wreck his mood, not after the news he'd got in that letter. Nothing, not even Draco's drawled commentary.

"Look, Harry, the solution is comparable to the use of potions. Potions, eh? So apparently the discipline does come in handy! I can tell already, it's going to be your favourite subject from now on!"

Harry laughed and made a face at his brother. "Well at least it doesn't say that I have to brew a potion--"

Draco suddenly made a derisive noise. "Oh, and isn't that sweet. Harry's not to die because it'll be such a blow to the world in general."

"Well, Scrimgeour did say it would be a loss for my loved ones as well--"

"What's this about Harry dying?" asked Snape, his long fingers reaching out to snatch the parchment from Draco's hands.

Harry almost laughed at the outraged look on his brother's face.

"Combining magical artefacts," muttered Snape when he'd finished reading. He didn't sound pleased.

"Yeah, but it'll be all right," Harry insisted, biting his lip because he would go mad if Snape refused him permission to try it. "I mean, Scrimgeour couldn't know this, but I already do have a broken mirror, one that fits all the . . . uh . . . .--"

"Criteria," snapped Snape. "And I don't care how tailor-made you think that square mirror might be for this situation. If you think I'm about to let you apply untested wand magic and get yourself killed or sucked alive into the afterlife, then--"

"But it's not untested, it's not!" shouted Harry, grabbing the letter back. "I've done it before. And yes, that was stupid of me, I admit it! Completely, totally stupid. But it worked! I know it's safe now!"

Snape gritted his teeth, his eyes flashing with fury. "It worked once, Harry!"

Harry gnashed his teeth. "The point is, it worked! It was fine!"

Snape drew in a deep breath, his expression calming by what looked like sheer will. "Harry, your broken mirror has worked in a single context, and even that was not an unqualified success."

"It was perfectly safe."

"So safe that you broke Draco's picture frame in the process."

"Well, maybe that just goes back to the principle of 'like enhances like,'" said Harry. "Maybe that was a natural consequence of using a broken mirror on a working picture frame, since I didn't know
"That is entirely my point. You don't know what you're doing," said Snape, sighing.

Harry abruptly sat down on the couch, trying not to fume. Throwing a fit wasn't going to get him what he wanted. "Why don't you sit down too?" he asked, trying to sound grown-up. "Let's talk about it."

Draco hadn't said anything since the letter had been snatched out of his hands, but he sat down as soon as Snape did and crossed his legs at the ankles, clearly settling in. Which was good, Harry figured. The whole family should be in on this sort of discussion.

"All right," said Harry, nodding at both of them. "Combining magical artefacts can be very dangerous. We all know that. But I already promised you that I wouldn't do anything on my own. You don't have to worry about that."

"Of course not," said Snape, rather snidely. "Because I have your mirror in my possession."

And he could insist on keeping it, Harry knew from their discussion about the map. Harry's only recourse would be to withdraw from school to get his property back, and there wasn't much point in that, since the Mirror of All Souls was here at Hogwarts.

Which meant that his father really had the upper hand.

"It's still leaking magic, by the way," said Snape, speaking in a much calmer voice.

"Well, that's fine," said Harry as mildly as he could. Reasoned argument . . . that was the right way to handle this. "I think I'd like it as broken as possible, if solving this is a case of broken enhancing broken."

"It's also missing a piece."

Harry nodded. "The shard I used before got sucked into the picture frame and didn't dissolve back out when I undid the spell."

"The broken part I can understand," said Draco. "But if the mirror is missing pieces, that could mean it won't combine properly with the Mirror of All Souls. I got the feeling the Minister was talking about mirrors that were at least intact."

"He never said that," argued Harry. "It might be that being extra broken will give us an advantage. What do you think, Dad?"

"Dad," repeated Snape, both his eyebrows lifting. "Are you starting that as well?"

When Harry just stared, Draco spoke. "He means calling him 'Dad' when you want something from him."

Harry's mouth dropped open for a second. "I do not! I call you Dad most of the time, and you know it."

"But you're attempting to manipulate me now. I also know that."

"Well, you usually approve of that," mumbled Harry. "You like seeing my Slytherin side come out."

"Not when it can get you killed, I don't!"
"Fine," said Harry shortly. "What do you think, Severus?"

The Potions Master crossed his arms. "I think that theoretical discussions of advanced wizardry are fascinating, and that this one needs to stay theoretical."

"You said you'd help me!"

"Not to commit suicide-by-magic, I didn't."

Harry crossed his own arms and sat back, disgusted. "So that's it, then? We're not even going to try? We're just going to give up because it might be a little bit dangerous?"

Snape abruptly rose to his feet and swept down the corridor towards his private office, his robes billowing behind him. Harry used expression alone to ask Draco what that was all about, and Draco shrugged.

In a moment more, Snape was back, a scroll of parchment in his hand. He unfurled it with a flourish as he took his seat, and handed it to Harry, who saw that it was his own essay from last year, the one on combining magical artefacts.

"Read."

"I don't need to read it. I remember what it said."

"Do you? And yet you just claimed that the endeavour, and I quote, 'might be a little bit dangerous.' Tell me, Harry, what happened to the wizard who combined a magic floater with a broom?"

"He . . . uh, he was swept out to sea."

Draco chortled, only to cut it out when Snape turned a fearsome glare on him, though he did murmur, "It's a good pun, Severus."

"A gruesome death is not a joke," rebuked Snape, which Harry thought the height of hypocrisy considering the macabre things Snape sometimes found amusing. But of course, this topic concerned his son, so he wasn't likely to see any humour in it. "And what happened to the witch who tried to merge wizarding books with a Pensieve so that she could live the books instead of bothering to read them through?"

"She got turned into a memory," whispered Harry, shuddering. That story had been particularly awful. The witch had ended up stuck in the Pensieve, nothing left of her but liquid goo. Worse than being a ghost . . . at least they could float around to visit different places. All this witch could do was stare at stone walls for eternity, since nobody dared retrieve the memory into their own heads.

"And what happened to--"

Harry flung the scroll onto the low table in front of the couch. "You don’t have to go through every paragraph. I do remember. But those people are beside the point, Severus. They're examples of people who rushed in without taking proper precautions. Well, I'll take them. And you'll be right there to see me take them, and to help me if the slightest thing goes wrong."

Snape sighed. "I would much rather be the one to take the risks myself, Harry."

Well, that was a pretty Gryffindor thing to say, wasn't it? Harry didn't want to get sidetracked, though, so he didn't mention that. Besides, Snape had some Gryffindor traits; he was certainly
brave enough. He just tended to be strategic about putting his courage to use.

"Well, I wouldn't," said Harry, "because I love you and I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

"So you understand precisely how I feel."

"Yeah. I do, I really do. But you can't take the risks for me, anyway. Only I can do the Parseltongue magic that made this work before."

Snape inclined his head as if to acknowledge that. Harry decided that was progress.

He counted to five, assembling his thoughts, before he went on. "You know what else I learned from the essay you set me? All the witches and wizards I used as examples, every single one, broke the very first law of magical experimentation: they went into it alone. They didn't have anybody on hand to help if things went wrong. In most cases, they didn't even tell anybody what they had planned. In a lot of these cases, it took investigators years to puzzle out just what could have caused these tragic accidents." Harry counted again, this time to ten, trying to decide how to word the final bit of his argument. "If you ask me, working alone . . . that's the mistake they made. Not combining artefacts. A lot of wizards have experimented on various magical items, and they're usually safe while they tinker, because they follow that first rule and make sure they have help available."

Snape closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "This kind of discussion was easier when you didn't know how to conduct yourself as an adult."

All right, more than progress. Harry waited until his father looked at him again. "I'll work out a plan and write it down, so we can all go over it together. You'll know exactly what I intend to do and just how I expect the magic to behave at every stage, Severus. And we'll cast stasis spells all around to contain anything dangerous that may develop, though I really don't think anything will. Because honestly, I do already know how to work with Sirius' mirror. Maybe it'll be a little different combining it with the Mirror of All Souls, but we'll have every possible safeguard in place."

Snape stared at him, his dark eyes almost without expression. Damn . . . Harry wished he could tell what the man was thinking.

"When we 'all' go over your plan, whom do you intend to include?"

"Um . . . you, me, Draco, and . . ." Harry tried not to wince. "The headmaster."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You were expecting an objection?"

"Well, no, but . . . er, I don't mean to suggest that his magic is stronger than yours, or--"

"His magic is stronger than mine, Harry. So is yours, for that matter." Snape shrugged. "I can't deny that wizards do sometimes evaluate themselves and one another on that basis, but to shield you from harm, I would invite Merlin himself to supervise."

"Thanks," said Harry, smiling. "Wish we could include him."

A rustling noise had Harry glancing to the side, where Draco sat. The other boy's hands were shoved deep into his pockets, though until he spoke, Harry didn't know what had him so upset.

"I'll help with the spells, or just watching for anomalies, or anything else you think could be of use," he said quietly. "But . . . but . . ." Draco cleared his throat. Several times. "Once that mirror
is working, I don't want to stand anywhere in the . . . the area that's being reflected. I . . . I can't."

Snape rose to his feet and crossed the room to Draco's chair, crouching down to look his son in the 
eyes. "Draco," he said, very softly. "No-one will make you do anything of the kind."

Draco gulped. "I know. I'm just afraid I might accidentally end up in . . . in the wrong place. And . .
. and I'll see him."

Harry knew better than to reassure Draco that it couldn't happen. The mirror was only supposed to 
show you people you'd loved when they were alive, which meant that Lucius Malfoy might appear 
in it. Draco had definitely loved him once, and whatever he felt for the man now was complicated, 
to say the least.

Harry could empathise. Well, a little. Thank God, James Potter hadn't been a horrible person who'd 
ordered his own son's death, but Harry did know what it was like to feel ashamed of him. He was 
still ashamed of the way he'd tormented Snape for sport that time. Snape seemed to have got past 
that, but Harry couldn't, not completely.

Not until he saw his father in the mirror and asked him how he could have been such a complete 
and utter berk.

"I'm only worried on account of Harry," said Draco quickly, raising his chin a notch as he stared 
into Snape's dark eyes. "I don't care, otherwise."

"Sure you don't, thought Harry.

"In fact," Draco went on, sounding defiant, "I think I'd like to see Lucius again. Wind him up a bit. 
You know, tell him that I'm going to marry a Muggle."

"Taunting Lucius Malfoy does not sound wise at all."

Draco curled a lip. "He's dead, and good riddance to him. What's he going to do?"

"He's managed to do enough damage as a portrait," said Snape sharply.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway." Draco slouched down into his chair, scowling. "Lucius Malfoy 
isn't in my heart, so there's not one chance I'll see him."

Which explained why Draco wanted to steer well-clear of the reflected area, thought Harry 
sarcastically. Not that he'd say anything like that. His brother was obviously distraught over the 
whole thing. He'd have to be, to admit--sort of--that he might see Lucius if he looked in the mirror.

In contrast, Harry suddenly realised, Snape had never said a thing about which people he 
might see. Hostilian, maybe? Or his mother, whose name Harry didn't know, not even after all this time? 
For that matter, was Snape's mother even dead? Harry didn't know, not for certain. He shivered a 
little, wanting to ask, but knowing that he'd better not.

"Are you all right, Harry?"

Harry wondered what his face must look like, for his father to say that. "Oh, yeah," he said, 
um, we are going to try, aren't we?"

Snape rose to his feet. "I suppose you have persuaded me, but the final decision will rest with the 
headmaster. He is responsible for the castle, after all."
"We're not going to damage the castle--"

"Because your dark powers have never done such a thing?"

Harry winced, thinking of the damaged he'd caused to this very room. "Well, that wanded \textit{Lumos} was just the once, you know--"

"Hospital wing windows," said Draco, his voice completely matter of fact. "And then you did something during my expulsion hearing. It felt like the foundations almost buckled."

"Well, I was out of control all those times," admitted Harry grudgingly. "I won't let that happen again."

"See that you do not." Snape tucked the letter from Scrimgeour into his robes. "I will go and discuss the matter with Albus."

Before he flooed off, however, he went into his office for a few moments. To fetch the broken mirror, no doubt.

Harry almost asked to see it, but decided that he'd get it back soon enough.

Dragging parchment and quill out of a drawer, he set to work writing up a detailed description of how the broken mirror had turned Draco's picture frame into a viewing plane, and how he planned to make it turn the Mirror of All Souls into something similar.

"Do you mind if I read that when you're done?" asked Draco from across the room, his voice a bit diffident.

Harry turned to stare at him. "I think everybody involved had better read it, so we all understand exactly how I plan to proceed."

Draco's forehead wrinkled. "Aren't you writing a thank-you note to the Minister?"

"Oh." Harry felt himself colouring a bit. "No. Hadn't thought of that. You really think it's necessary? I don't want to him to believe he's got me in his pocket and I'll agree with anything he wants."

"That's why I asked to read it. I can let you know if you're implying anything you'd rather not."

"I also don't know what to say." Harry scowled. "It's none of his business what sort of mirror I want to get working or who I want to talk with."

"You don't need to go into much detail." Draco paused. "Would you like me to write it so you can concentrate on the plan? I'll do my best to make it sound like you wrote it."

Harry thought that was quite a nice offer, though he had to say, "All right, but let's see what Dad thinks of it before we send it out." He suddenly grinned. "In fact, let's not tell him that you wrote it for me. I'll copy it over so it's in my handwriting. Do you think he'll be able to tell it's not really my work?"

Draco leaned his chin on his palm. "Hmm, I don't know . . ."

Snape, of course, knew at once that the letter sounded off. "Your brother wrote this for you?" he asked after scanning the parchment that Harry had handed him.

Harry sighed. "I knew I should have hid my smirk better."
"Either that, or Draco should learn to write in a less stilted manner. Harry would never use the word *receipt* in this context." His gaze swept over both his sons. "But I imagine that Minister Scrimgeour won't realise as much. It's a beautifully crafted letter, Draco. It makes all the right noises without saying anything at all."

Draco executed a sweeping bow, obviously delighted to hear such praise.

Only Slytherins, thought Harry, would be so proud of writing a letter that didn't say anything. But that was all right. Harry understood that, now. Scrimgeour had to know that Harry wasn't promising him anything. Not anything at all.

But for all that, Harry was hopeful that he'd be able to get on with the man a lot better than he'd got along with Fudge.

One week later, Harry stood in front of the Mirror of All Souls, holding his breath as Dumbledore finished casting the last of the spells that would magically seal Snape's quarters off from the rest of the castle for the duration of the experiment. Other spells had been cast earlier. Wards. Protection charms. Stabilisation barriers, and a whole host of advanced magic he couldn't even classify.

The lot of it was probably unnecessary, since Harry didn't think anything was going to go wrong. And weren't his instincts usually good? Besides, Snape had already arranged for the most potent protection of all: the blood wards.

As long as those remained in effect, nothing that intended harm toward Harry could enter Snape's rooms. With that in mind, Snape had moved the Mirror of All Souls into his living room. *And* he'd shown Harry the condition of the wards, that green glowing strong and true, just the same as the last time he'd let Harry look at the spell coating the walls, ceiling, and floor. Harry had been a little surprised, in a way. He was of age, now. Didn't that mean that the spells would start to weaken?

"Mutual repudiation of the adoption is the only thing that can dissolve the spell," Snape had assured him. "As long as you are my son, you have a right to live here, and the wards will remain in full force. They're based on your mother's sacrifice, after all, and her love. A mother's love doesn't lessen when a child grows up."

Well, if that wasn't Slytherin code for *I'll always love you*, Harry didn't know what was.

"Can you think of any other precautions we might need, Severus?" asked Dumbledore as he walked around the room.

Snape flicked his wand a few times, his eyes narrowed in deep contemplation as he studied the spells already cast. "None, Headmaster."

"Then I suppose we should proceed."

Harry suddenly felt like he couldn't breathe. This was it. After years of wondering and wishing, and months of Truthful Dreams showing him his early childhood, he was going to get to meet his
parents. Really meet them, and talk to them face to face, and ask them . . . well, everything!

"One moment," said Snape smoothly.

Huh, the man was right in front of him instead of across the room where he'd been before. Harry hadn't noticed him move.

"Sir?"

"Don't be so nervous."

"Says the man who's predicted my death a million and a half times during this past week."

"Nonsense. I only mentioned the matter on seventeen occasions." A bare glimmer of a smile touched Snape's lips. "And that is not why you are nervous, in any case."

"No," admitted Harry in a low voice. "What am I going to say to them? I mean . . . Draco's had it right, all along. I don't know them!"

"I knew them. Everything will be all right."

A sick churning roiled through Harry's belly. What was wrong with him? Now that the moment was at hand, he should be excited, shouldn't he? "You're just saying that."

"Do I strike you as a man given to meaningless platitudes?"

"No," admitted Harry.

"Then everything will be all right. Albus has a done a fine job on the protection spells--"

"With your help, my boy. With your help."

"--and all that remains is for you to call James and Lily to you," continued Snape without acknowledging the interruption.

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "Yeah. Let's do it."

"One moment," Snape said again. "Remove your school robe, Harry."

"No." Harry put a hand over his prefect's badge, pinned opposite his dual-house crest. "I'm not hiding the fact that I'm in Slytherin. That I'm a prefect for Slytherin. I'm not lying to them."

"I'm not asking you to lie, you idiot child--"

"Good, because I won't. And I won't act like I'm ashamed, because I'm not." Harry glared. "How can you think I would be?"

"It's not a matter of shame," said Snape, a bit of a glare about him as well, Harry noticed. "It's common courtesy toward your parents. They will have enough to absorb in the first few moments. Being pulled toward the realm of the living may well be a considerable shock, Harry. If you want to tell them all our news this evening, I'll make no attempt to stop you, but I don't believe it's necessary to throw your Slytherin status in their faces from the very first instant they see you. Give them a little while to become accustomed to seeing you at all."

Probably very good advice, Harry realised. "I just didn't want you to think I was choosing them over you," he mumbled as he shrugged off his robe. Draco came without a word and took it from
him, disappearing into the bedroom for a moment.

Strange how . . . naked Harry suddenly felt. He usually went without robes when he was home, but now, wearing only jeans and a jumper, he felt almost defenceless.

He realised then that he'd been wearing the robes as some kind of armour. Though he shouldn't need that, should he? Against his own parents?

Harry firmed his jaw and stood up straighter. "All right, then. Let's get started."

Walking over to the dining room table, he stared down at the broken mirror that was going to make all this possible. A single shard was what he'd used when he'd made the magic picture frame convey sound as well as sight, so now, Harry reached out to select another shard, one that would make the Mirror of All Souls work again.

His hand hovered over the mirror, Harry dithering as he tried to decide which shard would be the best. The largest one, so he'd have as big a chance as possible to make the artefacts combine?

*Broken enhances broken*, Harry suddenly thought. Magic often followed rules that didn't seem to make much sense. This was one such case, wasn't it? He needed the piece that was the most broken . . . which meant, he supposed, one that was as far removed as possible from an intact, working mirror.

Harry's instincts led his fingers to pluck out the smallest shard in the mirror, one that was no wider than his pinky finger, and only half again as long.

And then, because he actually might die, unlikely as it seemed, Harry walked back to his father and looked up into his eyes. Normally he wouldn't want to say a thing like this with the headmaster present, because it was a private kind of thing to say, wasn't it? Somehow, though, that didn't matter in the least. Not now. "I love you, Severus."

"Harry, James is not going to separate us, no matter what he says--"

"I know," Harry said quietly. "It's not that."

He went to Draco next. "I love you."

Draco laughed, the sound a bit strained. "And I love you, but could you stop being so maudlin? You're the one who insisted this was going to be perfectly safe."

Harry shrugged. "It will be. But I have to say what I have to say."

Draco made a face, probably at Harry's phrasing.

Harry had one more thing to say. He walked until he was standing before Dumbledore, not even seeing the pink and blue robes that had made him swallow a chuckle, earlier that evening. "Sir . . . we haven't always seen eye to eye about everything, but . . . but . . ."

The headmaster laid a hand on his shoulder, patting him the way one would touch a much younger child. "It's all right, Harry. I understand."

Harry smiled with relief.

"Go on, now," said Dumbledore, gesturing towards the mirror. "Your parents are waiting. And Sirius, no doubt."
"Yeah," said Harry again, his voice just as thick as before. "I guess it's time."

He turned to face the Mirror of All Souls, registering with his peripheral vision that Snape, Dumbledore, and Draco had taken up their positions, wands at the ready as they waited for Harry to begin.

With his left hand, Harry pressed the shard of the mirror against the silver, reflective surface of the mirror of all souls, willing them to combine together even before he angled his wand with his right hand, holding it so that his power would flow through it instead of around it.

Then, he glanced at the snake etched into the corner of his glasses, and said the incantation he'd worked out in advance. Show me Draco had been the key last time, but Harry had decided that his phrasing for this spell had better be something that worked with the magic already bonded to the Mirror of All Souls. It wouldn't respond to a demand to see a particular individual; it was designed to show you the people in your heart, after all.

"Show me what you will," he simply said, looking through that snake to see the mirror beyond.

A blast of power surged through his wand, so fiercely that Harry was glad he had one hand braced against the mirror.

The shard beneath his hand dissolved completely, and the surface of the Mirror of All Souls turned liquid to absorb it.

Harry was ready, though. He'd been expecting something like this. He stumbled, but yanked himself back from the mirror before he could fall forward.

For a long moment, the Mirror of All Souls seemed to be nothing but a frame surrounding a bank of fog. Held in a plane by invisible forces, the fog swirled and moved, twisting itself into eddies and rivers until Harry could swear it was alive.

Then, without any warning at all, the fog snapped taut and became a solid surface that looked like highly polished silver. Harry could see his reflection, but not clearly. He looked fuzzy. Out of focus a bit, the way he would appear if he took off his glasses before he stared into a mirror.

And that was all Harry saw in the mirror, which now looked to be broken beyond repair. Just himself. Just Harry, standing there and waiting for people who weren't going to arrive.

The thing wasn't even a mirror any longer, Harry thought with disgust. Not a proper one.

"It didn't work," he said, his voice catching. He had to struggle not to cry. Damn it, he'd been so sure, so absolutely positive--

And then there was another image in the mirror, a black blur moving behind him.

Harry stared, desperately hoping, longing for it to be someone coming forth from the netherworld.

The blur came closer, until Harry could see a pale face emerge from the blob of black. He knew, even before he felt the hands settle onto his shoulders, that it was Snape, coming to comfort him.

Or not, because Snape wasn't telling him that it would be all right, or turning him around so that Harry could hide his face as he tried to make his way through his frustration and disappointment.

The hands on his shoulders tightened. "Think," Snape whispered in his ear, his voice urgent.

"Think with all your might about the people whom you wish to see. You must prove to the mirror..."
that you love them, that they are truly in your heart."

So Harry closed his eyes, clenching them shut, and thought, as hard as he could. Images from his Truthful Dreams streamed into his mind, and he tried to pour into them all the love he'd ever felt for his parents. All the desperate, aching love for people he'd always wanted with him, no matter how hopeless and pointless it had been to want things he couldn't have. He saw himself as a child of no more than one, riding upon a toy broom while his father laughed and clapped his hands. He saw his mother, holding him close and rocking him as he sucked his thumb and listened to the soft lullaby she was singing.

And Sirius . . . Harry's memories of him were stronger still, based on reality rather than dreams. The Grim, coming to watch his Quidditch match. Saving Sirius from the Dementors, and then watching in sorrow as he had to leave Harry to go into hiding. Visiting Sirius, in any way he could. The cave, the firechats.

The Veil.

Harry whimpered a little, but the sound of his own grief was swallowed as just behind him, Snape made a noise rather like a gasp, his fingers suddenly clenching Harry's shoulders so tightly that they hurt.

As Harry's eyes snapped open, the pressure on his shoulders vanished completely, and Harry dimly registered that Snape had stepped away from him, moving back and to the side.

And no wonder, for when Harry looked into the mirror once more, he saw a new reflection.

Or not a reflection, since the man in the mirror wasn't actually in the room with them at all. But his spirit was there, because Harry had called him.

Harry's legs buckled, and he fell straight down onto the stone floor. The impact rocked through his knees, but he felt scarcely any pain. Not in his legs, at least. His heart was another matter; it was beating so hard that it felt like it would pound straight through his chest.

He stared into the mirror, whose surface was shining bright once more, almost like it was lit from within. The image there was perfectly in focus, sharp and bright, and so close that Harry could almost touch the man in the mirror, if he just reached out.

His eyes filled with tears, because he was afraid to do it, afraid to hope, afraid that the man in the mirror would vanish, or that he couldn't see Harry, or--

But he could see Harry.

The man sank to his knees as well and leaned forward, a smile breaking out across his familiar, beloved features.

Harry couldn't speak; his throat was too tight. He reached out his hand, laying it flat against the still surface of the mirror, his fingers splayed outwards.

From behind him, he heard another gasp, but nobody moved to stop him from touching the mirror.

The man in the mirror splayed his hand on his side, and pressed it flat against Harry's, though of course Harry still only felt the cool, hard surface of the mirror itself.

But that was all right, because by then, Harry believed. He forced one word out from between his lips, just a single word, but one that felt like it contained the whole world inside it. A whole world
of love, and hope, and possibility.

A word that lived and breathed, even though the man in the mirror did neither.

"Sirius!"

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other:*
Chapter Four: "Sirius"

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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I've lifted a line of dialogue verbatim from the OotP movie. As lines go, it was too perfect to pass up.

Just one word, that was all Sirius said at first. Harry smiled more broadly, tucking his wand into his pocket so he could splay his other hand out onto the mirror as well. It was the closest he could come to trying to hug the man before him.

Sirius matched him motion for motion. His slightly wrinkled face -- aged before his time because of the hard years in Azkaban -- broke into a grin that seemed impossibly wide. How could a single expression hold such a huge amount of happiness?

"I've missed you," said Harry, leaning his forehead against the glass, breathing lightly so as not to fog the mirror. He didn't want to miss one glimpse of Sirius. "How . . . how are you?"

Even before he asked, Harry knew at least part of the answer. Sirius' hair was short now; he tended to let it grow long when he was depressed. Though . . . would hair even grow in the afterlife? Harry kind of doubted that. But when Sirius had fallen through the Veil, he'd had long hair, so if it was short now, that could only mean . . . well, that he wasn't upset to be dead, Harry supposed. Maybe his appearance now was like . . . a reflection of his inner state, or the state of his soul.

"I'm dead, Harry," Sirius whispered, very softly, like he thought maybe Harry didn't know that. "I fell through the Veil."

"I . . . I saw." Harry had to lean back then; he was breathing so fast and hard trying to hold back tears, that he'd ended up fogging the mirror after all. "I'm sorry, Sirius! I'm really, really sorry! I never wanted you to die!"

Oh God, he was crying despite his best efforts to hold back, and Sirius was leaning forward until it looked like his forehead was pressed against the glass, and his grey eyes were full of love and concern, and . . . and . . . Harry could hardly bear it.

"I know you didn't want that," said Sirius. "Wipe your eyes, Harry. It's all right."

In the circumstances, that was worse than a meaningless platitude. "How can it be all right? You're dead! And it's my fault!"

"Harry James Potter," said Sirius sternly, "I don't want to hear you say such a thing again. Ever again. I mean it. It's not your fault."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Harry, wiping at his eyes. He wished he had a hanky, because his nose was clogged up by then. "Bellatrix is the one who shot that hex that tripped you. But you wouldn't have been there at all if it weren't for me!"

God, now he was sniffling like a little kid. And the worst part was, he couldn't seem to stop it. He felt like he would throw up if he so much as tried. "I'm sorry!"
"Hasn't Albus talked to you about any of this?"

Oh, yeah, sure he had. Harry was hardly going to repeat that conversation. What was he going to say, that Dumbledore had claimed that it was Sirius' own fault he'd got killed, since Sirius had mistreated Kreacher?

"Yeah, some," said Harry sullenly. He hadn't liked that explanation then, and he liked it even less now.

"Then you should know the truth," said Sirius softly.

Harry shook his head wildly. He wasn't going to accept that. Not from Dumbledore, and not from Sirius. It wasn't Sirius' fault, it wasn't.

"Look at me, Harry."

Harry bit his lip and did as Sirius wanted.

"It was my time, Harry," Sirius explained, his fingers moving restlessly against the surface of the mirror. "Didn't Albus tell you that?"

Harry swallowed hard. "Um . . . no. That's not . . . um, that's not quite how he put it."

Sirius chuckled. "That surprises me, since Albus has always seemed so very wise, but I suppose that being dead does give one a unique perspective."

The smile faded from Sirius' face and was replaced by an expression of utter gravity. "Harry, I can say this as one who knows. It was my time. If I hadn't gone to the Ministry that day, I would have slipped in my own bathtub, or something equally humiliating. Instead, I died doing what I loved best. I was in the thick of it. I was fighting again, alongside people I love. Harry . . . I'd rather not have left you, but I wasn't going to get a choice about that bit. But dying as I did? It was a good death."

Harry sniffled. "You didn't look like you thought so when you were falling backwards."

"Give a man a few moments to recover from the shock," said Sirius with a smile. "But Harry, you must believe me. It was my time."

Harry didn't understand how he could be so calm and philosophical about it, but then, Harry had never been dead, so what would he know? Huh . . . maybe the phrase rest in peace was more apt than he'd ever believed. Sirius certainly did seem to be at peace.

"I want you to say it," said Sirius.

"It was your time," Harry mumbled, looking down at the stone floor.

"You can do better than that."

Harry looked up, into Sirius' clear grey eyes, so full of peace and love. "It was your time."

"Better," said Sirius. "Work on believing it, Harry. Because death . . . it's not so bad." He smiled. "James and Lily were waiting for me. They came to meet me. They asked me how you were."

Harry gulped, sliding off his knees to sit cross-legged. By then, he was hardly surprised that Sirius copied his every move. He didn't think his motions were controlling the other man; it was more as though Sirius wanted to be close to him, and with the mirror between them, separating the living
from the dead, that was the only way. "My mum, my dad . . . how are they? Um . . . at peace, I guess?"

"Yes, very much so, though of course they've always missed you." Sirius smiled. "That's all right; they know that they'll see you again. They'll be here to meet you when it's your time, just as their own parents were here to meet them."

"But . . . but . . ." Harry laced his fingers together and squeezed as hard as he could. He wasn't going to cry again, no matter what it took. "You're here because I called you. I found a special sort of mirror to let me do that . . . but anyway, I called them, too. As hard as I possibly could. I called and called, and . . ." Harry gulped again, wondering if his memories of them just hadn't been strong enough. They were memories of his dreams, not his life . . . "Do you think they couldn't hear me?"

Sirius shook his head. "No, they heard. We were having tea together when you called. We all heard you."

Harry was startled enough to exclaim, "You can drink tea where you are?"

"It's not real." Sirius shrugged. "But it's as real as we are. I can't explain, Harry. But not to worry; you don't need to understand all that until you're here. And though we do miss you, we don't want you to arrive until it's your own proper time to join us. We want you to have as full and happy a life as you possibly can."

Harry nodded and went back to his original train of thought. He wasn't even sure what was wrong with him, asking after tea, of all things.

"But if my parents heard me calling, why didn't they come?"

Sirius leaned forward again, like he was trying to hug Harry. "They couldn't. I don't know why, Harry. I could walk toward your call without restraint, but when they tried, they couldn't move an inch."

Harry clenched his hands again, trying to accept that. What right did he have to complain? Talking to Sirius again was more than he'd ever expected to have.

"But why can't they come?" he suddenly wailed.

So much for not complaining.

"I don't know," Sirius repeated.

"Maybe I know," said Harry slowly. "Oh, God. It's the mirror, it's the stupid fucking mirror!"

"You have grown up a bit," said Sirius dryly. "This mirror you speak of . . . it only lets the more recently departed come through, perhaps?"

"No, not that mirror." Harry took a breath and tried his best to explain. "I found the Mirror of All Souls in Hogwarts. Um, it's summer, but I'm living in the castle--"

"Why aren't you with the Dursleys?"

"Oh. Um, long story, but they're dead." Harry narrowed his eyes. "You haven't seen them about?"

Draco made a horrible noise, rather like a cross between a groan and a gasp, and Harry remembered that he was worried about Muggles and wizards going to different places when they
died. Huh . . . until that moment, Harry had pretty much forgotten that he wasn't alone with Sirius.

"No, but now that I know they might be around, I'll have to look for them," said Sirius grimly. "But that can wait. Tell me about the mirror you found. James and Lily will want to know."

Harry nodded. "Well, it's supposed to show you anybody you love that's er . . . passed on. But when I found it, it was broken. I've been trying to repair it for months, but nothing worked. And then, um . . . well, it's a little complicated, but I found a way to combine it with that little mirror you gave me. You know, the Christmas present? And that was enough to make the Mirror of All Souls wake up again. And that's probably why, that's all. Why my parents can't come, I mean."

Sirius was frowning. "I don't follow."

"Oh. Well, it's just that the mirror you gave me is maybe, you know, linked to you somehow, right? Since I was supposed to use it to talk to you." Harry swallowed again, proud of himself that he'd got all that out without getting too emotional. He had to be careful, though. If he thought about his parents being locked away from him, even though he did have the stupid mirror working now, he'd bawl for sure.

"That can't be it," said Sirius quietly. "Harry, I don't know why James and Lily had trouble following me toward your call, but I'm certain it's not what you're thinking. The two-way mirrors would work between any two wizards who spoke into them. They weren't keyed into my magic, or James', for that matter."

"Then why?"

"I don't know." Sirius had said that several times by then, Harry knew, but he didn't sound impatient about repeating himself. Perhaps that was part of the wisdom that came from being dead, or maybe it was just that Sirius knew that Harry was still in shock over seeing him at all. "I'll try to find out, though. I will, Harry. We'll find out and we'll do something about it. All right?"

"Yeah, all right." Harry gave a tremulous smile, and told himself to be grateful for the chance to talk with Sirius. At least he had that much. "So . . . how are you?"

He'd asked that before, too, but Sirius didn't remark on it. "Things here are very different," he said, still sitting cross-legged but moving to lean on his arms, which he'd stretched out behind him. "There's no sense of time passing. I'm not certain whether time even exists here."

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "How could time not exist?"

"You'll know, someday." Sirius smiled. "Enough of me, Harry. Tell me about yourself. You look older, but I can't say by how much. You're still in school?"

Right, the timeless thing. Sirius didn't know how long had passed since he'd died.

"I just turned seventeen," said Harry. "Well, a few weeks ago. I'm starting seventh year in a couple more weeks."

"So you're all grown up," said Sirius softly. "How I'd have liked to see that."

"Well . . . you are seeing it, really." Harry gestured at himself.

"Yes, so I am. Still planning to become an Auror, then? Or have you changed your mind?"

"I wouldn't change my mind!"
"Well, you don't need to feel you're locked in," said Sirius in a grave tone. "You might find something else that suits you better."

"No, I won't," insisted Harry.

Sirius gave an amused smile which might have annoyed Harry if it had come from anyone else.

"No more trouble with the Wizengamot? Or Fudge?"

Harry blinked. "Um, Fudge died. Don't you know? There was an attack on the Ministry."

Sirius nodded. "Mmm, we've heard something about that. You have to understand, things here seem very distant from where you are. That's partly because we can't know anything directly."

Another smile touched his lips. "That is, not usually. I suppose this talk will count as an exception. But normally, we only get news when someone we loved in life has passed on. That means that news can be delayed for years. Or decades, though it's hard for us to think that way because once you're here for a bit, you start forgetting about the flow of time."

"Uh-huh," said Harry, not really following all of that, though he did remember that the Latin inscription on the Mirror had said that the afterlife was timeless.

Sirius reached out his hand again, like he wanted to touch Harry, then let it fall to rest on his own knee. "It seems like it was recently that a large number of people arrived here all at once. The general impression we got was that they'd all died very suddenly, all of them at the Ministry, but none of them knew quite what had happened. Eventually people began to conclude that it had been some sort of attack, but to my knowledge, nobody's seen Fudge wandering about."

Oh, well that made perfect sense. "The wireless said he'd shown up as a ghost, actually. Nearly Headless Nick made it sound like ghosts can't move on to where you are."

"I've certainly never seen one here," said Sirius, smiling. "I don't think ghosts have much urge to haunt the dead. They're more tied to life than we are. You didn't answer my question, though."

"Oh, about the Wizengamot? No, they haven't tried to expel me again or anything. Fudge finally decided that Voldemort had come back like I kept saying. And the new bloke in charge, Scrimgeour, seems like a decent lot. More intelligent than Fudge, anyway--"

Harry abruptly stopped talking. Why was he wasting time comparing the two ministers?

"Starting seventh year, you said . . . so, a little over a year since I died, then?" asked Sirius, his forehead wrinkling. Clearly, sorting out a timeline was very difficult for him. Perhaps living -- or existing, anyway -- without time would do that to you. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Uh . . . well I told you that the Dursleys died," said Harry, wondering how to approach the rest of it. "I felt bad that I couldn't feel worse about it. Well, I did feel a bit bad about Aunt Petunia, since she looked just horrible near the end. Um, leukaemia. I gave her some of my bone marrow to try and help, but she had a bad reaction to it and died."

Sirius' fingers clenched, his hands curling into claws. "You gave her some of your bone marrow? Where was Albus when this was happening? Didn't anybody tell you, wasn't anybody there with you to stop you from doing such an impulsive thing?"

Harry swallowed. "Well, Snape was there."

"And he didn't stop you?" Sirius bared his teeth. "I'm going to kill him! I don't care if I'm dead
already, I'm going to kill that greasy-haired son-of-a-bitch! What was he trying to do, get you killed? Loyal member of the Order, bollocks!"

"No, no, no," shouted Harry. "He tried to stop me--"

Sirius actually *growled*.

And then, in the flash of an instant, he transformed into Padfoot, who began pacing maniacally back and forth, his jaws open to show all his teeth, his mouth salivating like he was contemplating a good meal.

A meal of Snape served raw, no doubt.

Padfoot's growling filled the whole room.

Harry swallowed and leaned closer. "Listen, would you? Snape *is* a loyal member of the Order, and he did try to stop me, and it all turned out all right in the end. I got my magic back -- I'd lost it for a while -- and . . . Padfoot? Padfoot! Sirius!"

The image of the black dog began fading away, becoming transparent even as Harry screamed for him to come back.

A few seconds more and Padfoot was gone.

The mirror abruptly snapped back into its original state, looking just the way it had when Harry had first seen it, only cleaner.

Sighing, Harry took off his glasses and rubbed at his eyes.

"Accio headache draught," said Snape, pressing the vial into Harry's hand.

Harry downed it gratefully before slipping his glasses back onto his nose. "That didn't go so well."

"On the contrary, on the contrary," said Dumbledore, coming forward to look at Harry in that fatherly way he had. "For a first attempt, it was remarkable. You not only called him to you, but he was able to stay in this realm for quite some time."

"Not long enough," said Harry, sighing again. "He didn't let me explain."

"Well I should think, my boy, that that had something to do with his transformation. Sirius wasn't able to stay here long, not as Padfoot. You hadn't called Padfoot, after all."

"Next time I'll call them both. If I can," said Harry doubtfully. Would the mirror understand him if he thought of Sirius as two beings in one? It hadn't understood today that Sirius and Padfoot were one and the same, after all. Hell, it hadn't even understood that he really, really wanted to see his mum and dad!

"I wonder what he's telling my parents right now," said Harry, shivering.

"Oh, probably nothing yet," said Dumbledore breezily. "I expect he'll need to calm down before he can transform back."

"I think Sirius has better control over his Animagus form than that," murmured Harry.

"Mmm, he did in life, but you never know what may be true in death. It is, after all, the next great adventure."
Snape moved toward the mirror and looked it up and down before he turned to Harry to speak. "Black spent years at a time in his Animagus form when he was in Azkaban. It wouldn't surprise me if the forces that control the spirit realm tend to somewhat misread his soul."

"You mean they think he's Padfoot as much as he's Sirius? Well, he is, but . . . yeah, I see what you mean." Harry sighed. "My parents must be going mad, wondering why they couldn't come, and if Sirius is still pacing back and forth, too angry to be able to transform back . . . yeah. I can't even imagine how they must feel."

"Perhaps next time James and Lily will be able to answer your call," said Dumbledore, softly patting Harry on the shoulder.

They weren't, though. In fact, the next day, when Harry tried again, nobody came in answer to his call. Nobody at all.

"I don't understand what's wrong," said Harry, staring blankly at the mirror. It looked made of metal again, just the way it had before Sirius had come forth. Harry took that to mean that it was in a receptive sort of state, waiting for the souls who'd been called to come forward. This time, though, it didn't seem to matter how long and hard he thought about his parents and Sirius. Not even calling for Padfoot did him any good. The mirror remained empty of anyone save the four people in the room. Or three, rather; Draco was making sure to stay well away from the area being reflected.

"I don't understand either, my boy," said the headmaster softly. "Ah . . . Harry. If you don't mind, I should like to try to call a friend or two."

"Albus," said Snape in a critical tone, "I don't believe this is the time or place for your trip down memory lane--"

"It's all right, Dad," said Harry, sighing. "We should see if it'll work for other people, or if I've managed to break the thing."

"You haven't broken it," said Draco. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Well, I did break your picture frame--"

"Only because you forced it to do something it wasn't designed to do. This is different."

Harry nodded, not that he was convinced either way. Really, he was too depressed to know what he thought. "Go ahead, Professor Dumbledore."

"Ah, how do I . . ."

That had Harry smiling. It wasn't often that he got to teach magic to somebody like the headmaster. "Come and stand right next to me. Now, when I move away, you start thinking, as hard as you can, about the person you want to call. Um . . . I was going over memories, mostly. Trying to prove to the mirror that I really do love them. All right?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I can see why you were such a fine teacher, Harry. Severus tells me you're going to continue with your club?"

"Mmm, but Draco's going to be in charge this time, since I have to look like I can barely manage magic." Harry waved toward the mirror. "Ready, sir?"

When the headmaster nodded again, Harry stepped to the side so the mirror would be reflecting
Dumbledore alone.

It abruptly went back to its usual state, looking like a normal mirror again, instead of one made of polished metal.

Harry stared, a deep well of disappointment yawning inside him. Not that he cared much about who Dumbledore might call, but he did want to know that the mirror could work for other people. He wanted to find a way to persuade his father to use it, not that he was expecting such a discussion to be pleasant.

But if it wouldn't work for Dumbledore . . .

Harry sighed. "The state it's in now means it's switched off, I think. And now I've lost another shard of Sirius' mirror, and for nothing! I can only talk to him as many times as I have shards left, since one gets used up every time."

Dumbledore merely nodded.

"I wish I could break my mirror into smaller pieces," said Harry glumly. "I'd grind it into a powder if I could, so I'd never have to give Sirius up. But Scrimgeour said that mirrors don't like that. If I break it on purpose, it'll probably stop working at all."

Dumbledore stroked a hand down his long beard as he spoke in what was perhaps the gentlest tone Harry had ever heard him use. "Perhaps that's as it should be, my boy."

"Should be?" Harry scowled. "Oh. You're thinking of the Mirror of Erised, aren't you? You're worried that if I had unlimited shards, I'd waste away sitting here and talking with Sirius."

"Worried, no." Dumbledore's lips curled in the barest hint of a smile. "Your father would never allow a thing like that. But it's better for the two of you not to have to argue over it, hmm?"

Harry didn't answer that. He couldn't.

Dumbledore studied the Mirror of All Souls for a moment longer, and then gave a philosophical shrug. "I don't know why it doesn't care to work for me, but then, you're just learning about this form of magic. It wouldn't surprise me if it took a little while for you to master it."

Draco had sat down at some point, but at that, he jumped to his feet and strode toward Harry. "Mastery, that's the whole point. I understand what's going on now. Of course the headmaster couldn't call anyone. I won't be able to, either. You're the only one here who's mastered a mirror, Harry."

Harry frowned. "But I didn't ever master a mirror, Draco. I couldn't manage it, and I gave up and used Parseltongue magic as a shortcut."

Draco pointed at the table where the small square mirror sat, its broken shards laid out carefully inside its frame. "No, you used Parseltongue magic to master it. That was the shortcut. Last year when you first used Parseltongue to make that mirror do what you wanted, it recognised you as its master. But because you didn't go through all those steps in the books and do things in the standard way, you ended up with . . ." Draco waved his hands. "I don't know, sort of a personalised version of control. The mirror listens to you and you alone, and that's still true when it's merged with another mirror, like this one."

"Great," said Harry, about as sarcastically as he could. He'd wanted his father to use the mirror, damn it. "It'll only work for me, and now it's not even doing that. That's just wonderful. No
offence, but I hope for once that your 'great intuitive grasp' of magic is barking up the wrong tree."

Draco blinked. "Who says I have a great intuitive grasp of magic?"

"Severus." Harry glanced to the side, to see their father looking a trifle grim. But it was too late now to call the words back. "Didn't you know he thought that?"

A wide smile broke out over Draco's face. "Why, no. And that's a lovely thing to hear." He swivelled to face their father. "Of course, it would have been even more lovely to hear it from you."

"Your confidence when it comes to magic is already too high," said Snape. "You don't know everything, Draco."

"Of course not." Draco was still smiling. "Nobody does, not even Merlin himself. But I do know this." He turned his attention back to Harry. "You've mastered that mirror so thoroughly that you won't need to use snake language to make it obey you, not any longer. The small mirror will do as you say purely because you're the one saying it. You're its master, and nobody else, not even someone who does know Parseltongue, will be able to make it do a thing."

"You can't know that."

"Well, when you called for your godfather yesterday, were you thinking in Parseltongue?"

Harry made a face. "I wouldn't know, would I? It all sounds like English to me."

"Were you looking at a snake?"

"No, my eyes were closed," admitted Harry. "I wasn't even thinking about a snake. I was only thinking about my mum and dad and Sirius."

"So you called to them without any Parseltongue, then. And in the case of your godfather, it worked." Draco shrugged. "I might be wrong, but I don't think so. Next time, try merging the mirrors only using English."

"And risk wasting another shard? I don't think so."

"Well, it won't vanish if you can't make them merge, will it?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Why is it so important to you to believe that I've gained some kind of peculiar, Harry-only mastery over that mirror?"

Draco shoved his hands into his pockets.

Oh. Harry got it, then. On some level, Draco was tempted by that mirror. But he didn't want to be, because he was in two minds about ever seeing Lucius again. Harry could understand that, since he could see both sides of the coin on that issue. A conversation between Draco and the soul of Lucius Malfoy sounded like a dreadful idea, but on the other hand, if Draco needed... well, some kind of closure, Harry supposed he could understand that.

"I'll think about trying English," said Harry, sighing. "But not today."

"Yes, tomorrow is another day," said Snape. "You can try again then."

"And waste another shard?" Harry felt tears pricking at his eyelids. "I'm afraid ever to try again, in case it fails over and over and all I end up doing is using up the entire mirror for nothing."
"But if you don't use it at all, then you are surely using it for nothing." Snape laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "You need something to take your mind off this for a few hours. Come into the lab with me. I could use your help."

"I don't really feel like brewing--"

"When do you ever?" murmured Snape. "Harry, that wasn't a request. I can feel the low edge of a burn just beginning to curl around the edges of my mark. I'd like your assistance with the stasis potion."

Harry gulped. "Oh, God. He's summoning his Death Eaters. What do you think it means?"

Snape grimaced, but only slightly. "For that answer, we will have to depend on the spy in the fold. No longer myself, unfortunately."

"Fortunately," whispered Harry. "I hate the thought of you being in that kind of danger. But then, I don't like to think about what it must be like for Remus, either."

"This is war, and each one of us does what he must," said Snape crisply. "For me, at the moment, that means dealing with the pain before it completely incapacitates me."

"Yeah, of course."

"I'll be in my office if you should need anything, Severus," said the headmaster. "Go, yes. See if you have had any communications from Lupin."

As Dumbledore let himself out, Harry and Draco followed Snape into the lab. Draco, who had done this several more times than Harry, began fetching ingredients out of cabinets while Harry started low fires under a pair of cauldrons. They worked without speaking much, as by then the process was a routine that all three of them understood well.

When the twin cauldrons both needed to simmer, though, and there was nothing else to do for a bit, Harry turned to his father, who was sitting on a stool in the corner, cradling his arm in his right hand. "You should have said something sooner, Severus. Do you really think I'd have wanted to spend time on the mirror today, if I'd known you were in this kind of pain?"

"I know . . ." Snape gritted his teeth, his features tense. With agony, Harry knew, from the times he'd seen this before. "I know that you love the people you're trying to call. I'm not foolish enough to make you choose between us."

"So you'll just suffer pain instead?" Harry shook his head. "Marsha calls that being a martyr. You're . . . for such an intelligent man, you can be really stupid, you know that? I'd choose you, Severus. You're here for me and they're not, whatever the mirror can arrange."

"Thank you, Harry," said Snape in a low voice, leaning his head back on the stone wall. "Go and help your brother."

Harry nodded, and from then on, concentrated on the potion so that they could ease their father's pain as soon as possible.
It was a few days before Harry felt up to trying the mirror again. Snape had been a fair amount of pain, and though he'd tried to deny it, claiming that the numbing agent in the Lotion Potion was enough to deaden all sensation, the lines of stress around his eyes told another story.

Maybe the Lotion Potion had been enough once, but Snape had used it for so long that he had probably become accustomed to it.

And while his father was in pain, Harry wasn't going to add a visit with Sirius to the mix. Snape didn't need that. So yes, Harry was choosing between them. He was choosing his father.

By the third day after Snape's mark had burned, though, he seemed to be feeling much better, so Harry decided to try once more to contact Sirius. He might have waited longer, but term was starting in just a few days, and after that, he'd have much less free time. Besides, the Mirror of All Souls was still sitting in their living room, reminding him that he really should try again.

Harry just hoped that he didn't end up wasting another precious shard.

"Do you think we need to bring the headmaster down again?" he asked over breakfast that morning.

Snape shook his head. "He's still in Dover."

Harry nodded, and tried not to worry about Remus. Hard not to, though. Remus was apparently Voldemort's right-hand man, these days, and while part of Harry was impressed that Remus was doing so well at mimicking Lucius Malfoy, another part of him couldn't forget that on the night of the Ministry attack, Remus had done something to anger Voldemort. Something to anger him so much, in fact, that Remus had been terribly punished.

Well, at least the meeting that Voldemort had called, this last time, hadn't involved any torture. No, no torture; just mayhem. Voldemort had sent his Death Eaters across Britain to attack a number of landmarks all at once.

He was sending another message, it seemed. On the last day of July, he'd proven that he could act with impunity against the Ministry of Magic. Now, he was staking his claim to Britain itself, showing that it was his to do with as he pleased.

Death Eaters had toppled Hadrian's Wall. They'd shoved Blackpool Tower into the sea and had flooded both the stadium at Cardiff Arms Park and the tower at Glasgow University. They'd killed the ravens living at the Tower of London. They hadn't harmed Windsor Castle, but they'd turned the royal standard flying over it into a flag bearing the image of the Dark Mark.

And most dramatic of all, perhaps, they'd transfigured the White Cliffs of Dover into some kind of hard, green stone.

Everything else had been put back to rights, the Tower of London even boasting new ravens. Aurors and Obliviators who'd survived the destruction of the Ministry were working twenty hours a day to erase all sign of the attacks. But the White Cliffs of Dover had resisted every attempt to transfigure them back to their natural state. They were under a glamour to fool passing ships, but beneath that, they remained a witness to Voldemort's determination to control Britain.

Harry had been surprised, actually, that Stonehenge hadn't been targeted, but Draco and Snape had both shaken their heads at that idea. Voldemort knew better than to mock the ancient magic present at the site, it seemed.
Harry finished his orange juice and glanced over at the mirror standing in the living room. "Should we wait until the headmaster finishes in Dover then, you think?"

"No need. He's confident, as am I, that the mirror poses you no danger. In fact, if you would rather speak with your loved ones alone . . .?"

Snape left the question hanging in the air.

"Maybe later on, after I've told them about the adoption," said Harry. "Until then, I want my whole family there with me. I really did mean to tell Sirius, you know, that first day. I was trying to work up to it so he'd understand how it happened."

"You needn't concern yourself with my feelings," said Snape, shrugging. "You can tell anyone or not as you choose. That's always been true."

"And I'm proud to claim you as my father; that's always been true, too," retorted Harry. "Besides, you don't know me very well if you think I want to lie to my parents." Harry flushed, remembering a time or two when he'd been less than honest with Snape. "About major things," he added.

Draco chortled, but cut it out when Harry glared at him.

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This time, to Harry's great relief, Sirius came at once.

Still no sign of his parents, but Harry pushed that thought aside. At least the mirror was working again.

"Harry," said Sirius warmly. "I was hoping you would call me again. I didn't mean to leave you last time."

"I don't think you can stay if you turn into Padfoot. So don't turn into him, all right?" Harry stepped closer to the mirror. "Does anger always affect you like that, these days?"

"It seems so," said Sirius ruefully. "Any sort of rage and I find myself on all fours whether I like it or not."

"Well, you have to try harder not to get angry while we're talking." Harry swallowed. "I can only call you a certain number of times."

"How many?"

Harry hadn't counted the shards. He was afraid to. "A couple of dozen, something like that. But . . . but when the little mirror I'm using is all used up, we'll have to say good-bye, Sirius. For . . . forever."

"No, not forever. Just until it's your time to join us here."

That reminded Harry. "I tried to call my parents again. Actually, a couple of days ago I called and called for all of you, but nobody came. I . . . I don't understand. Couldn't you hear me?"
Sirius sighed and sank down to sit cross-legged, gesturing for Harry to do the same. "This will take a little while to explain, Harry."

Harry settled in, leaning closer. "I've got all day."

Sirius trailed a hand along the lower edge of the mirror, his fingers somehow communicating an intense depth of sadness.

"What is it?"

"I have something terrible to tell you. I don't want to say it."

"Then don't."

"No, that would be even worse." Sirius shook his head, his hair brushing his shoulders. It was long again, Harry suddenly realised. He hadn't noticed earlier, but it was just as long as it had been during that awful year when Sirius had been forced to stay in his family home, listening to Kreacher's evil mutterings and his mother's portrait screeching about blood purity.

"You're sad," said Harry, fingering a lock of his own hair.

Sirius caught the reference at once and glanced at the ends of his hair, hanging lankly to his shoulders. "Yes. The afterlife seems to pick up on my moods quite readily. The hair, Padfoot . . . other things as well. It's not like that for the others here. I think I'm different because of the way I arrived. But enough of that. You said that you were calling for me? I didn't hear you, Harry. James and Lily and I had gone away on . . . a little voyage, I suppose you would say, though that's not really an accurate description."

Harry laced his fingers together in his lap. "You . . . you went off travelling? When you knew I might be calling?"

"We went off to find an answer to your question," said Sirius softly. "You wanted to know why James and Lily couldn't follow me towards your call."

"Oh. Yeah . . ." Harry was afraid to ask, because in some ways, he knew the answer already. Sirius had said he had terrible news, after all. "Did you find out about that?"

"Yes." Sirius paused. "You aren't going to like it."

"They can't come," said Harry, something inside him dying. "That's what you found out."

"I'm truly sorry," whispered Sirius. "Harry, I would die again if it would help. I'd step aside . . . I'd do anything it took. But . . . there's nothing I can do."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, swallowing back the impulse to cry. He'd done enough of that last time. And really, he asked himself, what had he lost? Only something he'd never had to begin with. Only something he'd wanted with his whole heart.

"Why can't they come?" Harry finally asked, when he thought he could speak without blubbing. "Do you remember the Tri-Wizard Tournament?"

Harry almost hit the mirror with his fist, he was so frustrated. "Who cares about the stupid tournament? Tell me why my parents can't come to talk with me!"

"Echoes of them, anyway. That's how Dumbledore explained it. They came out of Voldemort's wand. Priori Incantatem."

"I don't know if echoes is the best word." Sirius laid a hand on the mirror, his fingers splayed outward. It meant that he wanted to be touching Harry when he said the rest, Harry thought, matching the motion. They weren't touching, of course, but it was all they had.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, because they told me what to do, helped me escape. How could they do that if they were only echoes?"

"Your parents remember being there in the graveyard with you, but they were here at the same time. Echoes . . . I don't know. At any rate, James and Lily told me that some time after they'd seen you there, they felt an odd sensation. A spell, Harry, coursing through them and then wrapping itself completely around them. They didn't know what it was. It came and went, and seemed to do them no harm, and after a while, they stopped wondering about it."

Harry shivered. "Go . . . go on."

Sirius smiled, very sadly. "When I got back from seeing you last time, when I calmed down enough to speak again, that is, I told James and Lily everything we'd spoken about. They were frantic to hear news of you, of course. Once we'd exhausted that topic, we began trying to determine why they couldn't follow me, and that was when Lily remembered the spell that she and James had once felt course through them. She said it had felt like a binding, and that when she tried to move toward your call, it seemed to her that same binding was upon her again, holding her back."

"A binding?" Harry cleared his throat, moving his fingers restlessly against the image of his godfather's. "I don't understand, Sirius."

"We didn't either, but the circumstances suggested that it might have something to do with Voldemort; Lily and James definitely felt that spell after they'd already seen you in that graveyard. With that in mind, all three of us went in search of Death Eaters."

A sudden noise behind him had Harry glancing back. He saw his father, off to the side, leaning on a wall like it was all that was keeping him standing. The noise had been him staggering, perhaps.

Harry raised a questioning eyebrow and gestured toward his left sleeve, trying to ask if Snape's mark was flaring again.

Snape shook his head and waved for Harry to turn around, but his eyes looked haunted. Like . . . like he'd seen a ghost, and not the benign kind that tended to inhabit Hogwarts.

"Just a minute, Sirius," said Harry. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

By the time he reached Snape, Draco was at his side as well. "Are you all right, Severus?"

"Yes." Snape's voice was rough. "Continue with your conversation, Harry. I was merely startled for a moment."

Harry and Draco glanced at one another, green eyes and grey reflecting the same concern until Harry repeated the question Draco had already asked. "You're sure you're all right, Dad? Maybe you should sit down."

"Maybe I should, at that," muttered Snape. He sank into the nearest chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Go back, Harry. Before you lose another shard."
Damn, that was a good point. Since Snape seemed to be better, Harry rushed back to the mirror. Thankfully, Sirius was still in it, leaning left and right, looking like he was trying to peer around corners. "What's the matter? I can only see a small part of the room you're in."

"Uh . . . could you hear me talking, a minute ago?" Or hear anyone else?

"No, things went blank and silent the moment you stepped out of view."

Harry was a little ashamed of himself to be relieved at that. He should be annoyed that the Mirror of All Souls needed him in sight for any communication to go through. That meant that it was responding to him in particular, like Draco had said. But since Harry wasn't ready to explain about his adoption quite yet, it was a relief that Sirius hadn't heard him talking with Snape.

First he wanted to find out about his parents and this binding, and then he'd tell Sirius the rest. "So you went looking for Death Eaters, you said? Did you find any?"

"They're not in the immediate vicinity," said Sirius. "This place has . . . it's difficult to explain. A large number of rooms and corridors, organised very oddly. But yes, eventually we found one. Pitiful creature. A loyal follower of Voldemort, but he'd been tortured to death for his years of dedicated service. He was only too happy to turn on his master now, and tell us what we wanted to know."

Harry gulped. This was it, then. "And?"

Sirius moved forward until both his knees were touching the mirror. "Voldemort was enraged after the Third Task, Harry. Your parents had foiled him, helping you escape. He was certain that if he'd just had a few more moments, he could have broken his wand free of the stream joining it to yours, and killed you."

Harry shivered. "Yeah. Probably so."

"He wanted to make sure that your parents would never, ever be able to do such a thing again," said Sirius in a low tone. "He dredged up the very darkest of the Dark Arts and cast a horrible curse upon their spirits, binding them to never again come into the presence of your living body. He would probably have excluded them from your presence for both time and eternity, if he could have. That, thank Merlin, was beyond him."

The last bit of that was lost on Harry; he was too focussed on the first part. "So I'll never see them," he said dully. "I'll never see them again."

"No, no," said Sirius urgently. "That's not true, Harry. You'll see them when it's your time. Voldemort's nasty spell doesn't keep your soul away from them, only your living body."

"I hate him," said Harry flatly. "I hate his fucking guts."

"You should have seen James and Lily when we learned the truth," said Sirius. "James whipped out his wand and destroyed an entire wing of the building."

Harry didn't remember starting to cry, but his cheeks were damp when he swiped them with a furious hand. "I didn't think you could still do magic, there?"

"It's like the tea. Real and not real, all at the same time. Harry . . . are you all right?"

"No," said Harry shortly. "I wanted to see them, damn it. I really, really wanted to see them!"
"You will. I promise, Harry. You will see them again."

"Yeah, but not until I'm dead," spat Harry. "That's not fair! I wanted to see them now."

Sirius chuckled, very softly.

"Oh, what the hell's so funny?"

"Nothing," said Sirius, shaking his head. "I know you've very disappointed, Harry. Anyone would be. But I was just thinking that in a strange sort of way, you've finally got your wish. You're normal."

"Normal!"

"It's not fair, but almost everyone else in the world has to wait until death to see their loved ones. Well, in most cases; ghosts and portraits are exceptions, but they're also rare. Your average wizard has no choice but to wait. Isn't that what you've always wanted, to be like everyone else?"

Harry scowled. "I wouldn't mind being different just this once."

"I know," said Sirius kindly. "I wish that Voldemort hadn't bound your parents, of course I do. But the fact that he has . . . it makes you just like everyone else."

Harry sniffled. "It still ronsks."

"Yes. It does."

"Well, tell them that I love them and I think about them every day," said Harry, trying to get over it. "Make sure you tell my dad that I'm going to be an Auror, and that DADA is my favourite subject . . . and . . ."

"I'll tell them everything," promised Sirius. "Your parents gave me some messages for you, once they understood that they wouldn't be able to speak with you in person. Lily said that . . . and James wanted you to know that . . ."

"What?" asked Harry, cupping a hand to his ear. "Your voice is fading out during all the good bits!"

Sirius raised his voice. "Lily said that . . . and James wanted you to know that . . . there, was that better?"

"I can see your lips moving but I can't hear the part about what they said!"

Sirius started to shout, so loudly that the surface of the mirror began to waver. "Lily said that . . . and James wanted you to--"

"Stop!" said Harry, shouting himself. He was afraid the magic might stop working if Sirius made the mirror vibrate too much. "It's no use. No matter how loudly you scream, those same words still go silent."

"It must be part of the binding."

"You think?" asked Harry sarcastically, then immediately felt bad. "Sorry, Sirius. I'm just frustrated. Git won't even let them get a message through to me. Could he be more of a prick?"

"I don't think he could," said Sirius with a terrible look on his face.
"What?"

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

"If it's about my parents and why I can't talk to them, then I need to know!"

"You don't need to know about the atrocities Voldemort committed in order to create such a dark binding."

Harry thought of Wormtail slicing off his own hand, and shuddered. "Yeah, all right."

"I can tell you this, though," said Sirius. "Specific messages may be under a taboo, but general statements shouldn't be. Your parents love you very much, Harry, and always have. They always want to know more about you and what you're doing with your life. I told you that we can get news, after a fashion. It's usually long delayed, but things like that don't matter where we are."

Harry nodded. "Or sometimes not. Like you knew about the attack on the Ministry."

"That would have been hard to miss. So many arriving at once."

And all of them in possession of Harry's news, since Harry getting adopted had made the papers. It was hard to believe, though, that Sirius could already know that Harry was Snape's son. Wouldn't he have said something about that? Or more likely, yelled something?

"Um . . . so if you've been talking to all the recent arrivals, you must have heard that I'd lost my magic, then?"

Sirius tensed, his voice emerging as a harsh whisper. "You lost your magic?"

Hmm, then no, he probably hadn't heard Harry's personal story from any of the people killed in the Ministry. And he obviously hadn't heard Harry mention it last time, but he'd already been furious then.

"Yeah, but it's back now," Harry said quickly, so Sirius wouldn't get upset and transform. "But when I lost it . . . well, it was pretty big news. Nobody there mentioned it?"

"Perhaps someone will seek James and Lily out eventually," murmured Sirius. "You must understand, Harry, that people here usually spend time with their family first. How much time . . . well, you know about that. We can't measure it."

Harry closed his eyes. "Was your Mum awful to you?"

When he looked again, Sirius was smiling. "Oh, Harry. Don't you know yet? I haven't seen her. You and James and Lily are my family."

A warm feeling coursed through Harry, hearing those words, and not just because it was nice to be loved. He was also thinking that if Sirius understood the idea of family as well as that . . . well, maybe he'd also understand that Harry's family could include people who weren't blood relatives or godfathers. "Um . . . okay. Well, I have a lot of news to tell you, Sirius. Good news. Great news."

"I can't wait." Sirius bounced a little as he sat there.
"You have to try not to get angry, though," warned Harry. "If you turn into Padfoot I think I'll lose you again. Um, and you have to try your best to . . . um, break it gently when you tell my mum and dad. Especially my dad."

"I thought you said this was going to be good news."

"It is good news. It's great news." Harry glanced to the side to smile at Snape, only to see that the man was holding himself stiffly, arms crossed over his chest like he was expecting the worst.

Well, nothing for it now but to tell Sirius and hope he understood. "You know how I told you that the Dursleys had died?"

"And good riddance," said Sirius fiercely. "Harry, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I must tell you this before you go on. Lily never intended to leave you with her horrible sister, and until I came here, she didn't even know that such a thing had happened. She thought you were living with me all that while. You were supposed to, if anything happened. I've never seen her so incensed. When Lily found out that I'd lost my temper and ended up in Azkaban, and you'd been packed off to live with her magic-hating sister, she wouldn't speak to me for . . . I don't know how long."

Harry gulped, the past coming alive for him in a way that it never had before. He'd blamed Dumbledore for a long time, for deciding to give him to the Dursleys when he was little, but the fact that Harry had ended up there . . . it was Sirius' fault, too. If he hadn't duelled with Wormtail in public like that, he'd have had a chance to explain that it had been Wormtail and not himself who had betrayed James and Lily Potter.

He might still have ended up in Azkaban, but then again, he might not have.

"She asked me how you'd been treated in that house, and I felt I owed her the truth," Sirius went on. "Which explains why she didn't know that her sister had died, Harry. Lily was so furious that she couldn't sense it when her sister arrived. That's how we know to go and meet people."

"Um, but wouldn't my Evans grandparents have known to meet Aunt Petunia, and they'd have come and told my mum that her sister had arrived?"

"Eventually, that may happen. Nobody here is in much of a rush. And too . . ." Sirius smiled. "Lily's mum and dad would know that Lily needs to heal before she can bear to see her sister. The mere fact that Lily didn't sense Petunia's arrival would tell them that much."

"But you can mix with Muggles, then," said Harry, a little loudly. He couldn't see Draco from where he was, but he was positive that Draco would perk up, hearing that.

Sirius stared at him. "Of course. Who told you that we can't? Harry . . . Muggles are every bit as human as we are. I was absolutely certain that you knew that."

He sounded concerned that Harry might have been mixing with the wrong crowd, picking up bad attitudes. That could be a problem, considering what Harry had to tell him. "Oh, I do know that," Harry assured his godfather. "No question about it. It's just that Nearly Headless Nick thinks that only wizards can become ghosts, that's all. So I wondered how it all worked."

"I don't know if it takes magic to become a ghost, but I know it doesn't take any to die," said Sirius. "There are pets here, too."

"Besides Snuffles?" Harry smiled to show he was joking.

"Yes, besides me," said Sirius dryly. "But what was the news you were trying to tell me? I don't
know how long we'll have before the magic you've created begins to fail."

"I think we have until you turn into Padfoot, so don't," said Harry sternly. He sucked in a huge breath, and tried not to look like he was bracing himself, even though he was. He'd thought and thought about just how to phrase everything; during the past few days, he'd even written out several different versions, trying to decide the best way to break it to Sirius.

But now that the moment was upon him, he couldn't remember a single thing he'd practised. "Um . . . well, all right, here it is. I was kind of in a bad way for a long time last year. I mean, the Dursleys dying was the least of it. Lucius Malfoy kidnapped me for Voldemort--" Ooops. He'd meant to leave Lucius out of the initial telling. Well, too late now. "--and um, well I don't want to be melodramatic, but he did torture me."

Sirius reached out a hand toward the mirror. "Oh, Harry."

"Eh, well it's all right now. I mean, obviously." Harry gestured at himself. "But at the time it was pretty awful. I was blind for a while, and even after that it took a long time for my vision to be healed completely. But it's perfect now. I have Snape to thank for that."

Sirius snapped his teeth together. "Then he did something right, thank Merlin. But he also let you mess about with your bone marrow, you said! Where on earth was Albus when all this was going on?"

"He didn't let me mess about with my bone marrow. That was my decision. It's my marrow, Sirius! Anyway, Snape told me not to do it, but I insisted. I was Aunt Petunia's only hope. I couldn't just let her die."

Harry almost expected Sirius to say that of course Harry could have, but Sirius knew him too well to say a thing like that. "You couldn't live with yourself," he said, sighing. "Right. Go on."

By then, Harry hardly knew how. It felt like he was telling the story completely out of order. "All right. Well, after the bone marrow transplant I lost my magic and we were trying to keep it a secret, so I couldn't come back to school. I stayed at Grimmauld Place for a while. With Remus helping me. But then I got kidnapped and ended up blind, and um . . . well, by then everybody knew I'd lost my magic anyway. Death Eaters blabbed it all. So I got to come home to Hogwarts, but I had to stay in the hospital wing because I was in pretty bad shape. I got better, though, mostly because Snape was brewing special potions 'round the clock for me."

"Snape," said Sirius, very grudgingly.

"Yes, Snape."

Harry waited a moment to see if Sirius would say something horrible, but he didn't. Well, Snape helping Harry heal wasn't really anything to complain about. And neither was the next bit.

"All right, so then I needed a safe place to stay, and the wards on the Dursley house were gone. Actually, the house was gone by then. Death Eaters destroyed it, and they were trying to get the Slytherins here to kill me. Because I'd escaped, which made Voldemort look bad. Which reminds me, and I really should have mentioned this part sooner, but I didn't really escape. I mean, I couldn't. I didn't even have any magic, and there were dozens of them surrounding me, watching me be tortured. I only got out alive because Snape rescued me."

"Snape rescued you."

"He was the only one who could," said Harry, leaning forward. "The headmaster and the Aurors
were trying to break through to help me, but Voldemort's wards were too strong. But Snape, he was on the inside."

"Watching you be tortured, pretending to be one of them," spat Sirius. "Why the hell did you end up blinded if he was there, Harry? He should have saved you sooner!"

"He couldn't," cried Harry, frustrated. Though why he'd expected Sirius to understand straight away was a good question. The whole thing was very complicated. "He had a Portkey, but--"

"Aha! A Portkey he didn't use until you'd already been tortured and blinded! Sounds like Snivellus, all right--"

"If you don't shut up and listen I'm going to walk away and not come back!" shouted Harry. That horrible name was the final straw. "I mean it!"

Sirius pressed his lips together and clenched his fists, motioning for Harry to go on.

"He had a Portkey he couldn't use because Voldemort's wards were too strong, got it? He wanted to save me sooner!" Harry decided right then that there was no way he was going to mention that Snape had held him down to be blinded. "But he couldn't, and if he'd have tried, Voldemort would have killed him and then I would have had no way out. So all right, he waited. I've never blamed him for that and I never will. And then, even though I didn't have any magic really, I finally did some wild magic that blasted through Voldemort's wards. The second he could, Snape Portkeyed me out to safety."

Sirius gave a stiff nod. "Then I'm grateful to him, though he should have found a way--"

"There was no other way." Harry shook his head, trying to pick up the thread of the story. "All right, so then I was back at Hogwarts, in the hospital wing, but there were these rumours of pending attacks. Dumbledore was worried the hospital wing might be a target, and, you know, none of the Slytherins would dare attack Snape's quarters, so he . . . uh, took me in. I lived with him for most of last year and also this summer--"

"I may vomit."

"Sirius, don't," said Harry urgently. "Don't be like this. Snape's been really good to me."

The man in the mirror ignored that completely. "Why didn't Albus take you in?"

"I . . . uh, well I was pretty angry with him at the time. He'd kept secrets from me all through fifth year and I thought you wouldn't have got killed if I'd known more. Which means, I didn't trust him. I did trust Snape."

"You trusted Snape more than the headmaster?" Sirius was looking at him like he wanted ask if Harry was mental.

Harry could think of a hundred ways to reply to that, but he didn't want to justify himself. He shouldn't have to.

"Yes. I still do, if that's your next question."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "What's happened to you?"

"I told you. I lost my magic and I was tortured and blinded, and--"
"No, I meant, what's happened to you up here?" Sirius tapped his temple. "You sound very confused, Harry. You can't trust Snape more than the headmaster. He's the head of the Order of the Phoenix, and Snape's a bad-tempered ex-Death Eater, for pity's sake!"


"How can you believe that? Snape hates you, always has! You know that, Harry! You're James Potter's son!"

This was it, then. Harry couldn't think of a single reason to delay; he'd explained enough. "Yeah, I am. But the thing is . . ." He tried not to wince, though he really didn't enjoy the thought of hurting Sirius. 'I'm his son too, Sirius. Snape's, I mean. He adopted me last December."

Sirius bared his teeth.

"Don't!" shouted Harry. "Don't turn into Padfoot again. Control yourself."

A low growl rumbled through the room, but Sirius managed to stay human. "Adopted you, did he? You're going to have to explain that one to me, Harry, because I don't think I understand."

Harry nodded, wishing then that he'd built up to it a little more. Though really, it felt like he'd been explaining for hours. "He took me in. I told you that. We started getting along, Sirius. I don't know how else to explain it. And then, well, the adoption was actually kind of necessary because of some special warding we were doing, another long story, but he really did want to adopt me by then."

"Of course," said Sirius, his lips twisting. "He's as Slytherin as they come. He's using you, Harry. Using your name. He'd have done it sooner if he'd seen a way, but he had to wait until you were vulnerable and in his clutches. He saw his chance and took it."

"It's not like that," said Harry, sighing. "Sirius . . . you know how much I've always wanted to be part of a family. And now, I am. Snape loves me. I mean, he even gave me swimming lessons."

"Swimming lessons!" Sirius bared his teeth again.

"Yes, and an allowance."

"Harry, you've got mountains of Galleons from James, and now you have all my things as well. Didn't Albus tell you? And you're of age, you said. You don't need an allowance!"

"It's what parents do," said Harry. "And Snape loves me, and--"

"He doesn't love you!"

Harry was fed up with arguing. "Well, it doesn't matter if he does or not, Sirius, because I love him."

"Just because he adopted you?"

"No, because he's my father!" shouted Harry. "Don't you get it? He's my dad, and yes, I love him, and nothing you can say is going to change my mind!"

Sirius threw his head back and made a horrible noise, something between a scream and a howl. "No!" shouted Harry. "Don't transform! We have to talk about it until you understand, we have to--"
But it was too late. By then, what the mirror showed was a large black dog sitting on his haunches, his head flung back as he howled his fury to the skies.

Or to anyone who would listen.

"Sirius," said Harry, leaning closer. "Don't do this. Calm down and come back to me."

Growling, Padfoot jumped up and began turning around and around, like he was chasing his tail. And then, he vanished, leaving Harry alone.

Except, he wasn't alone at all. He was with his family, and Snape was already coming forward to enclose him in a warm, tight hug.

"Sirius is an arsehole," said Harry mournfully, resting his cheek against the soft feel of his father's robes.

"I do hope you aren't expecting an argument," said Snape, his voice so droll that despite himself, Harry almost laughed.

"From you? No, not really." Harry stepped back from his father and tried to shrug off his annoyance with Sirius. He'd done what he could, and now . . . well, it was up to Sirius to come to terms with what Harry had told him. Or not. "So, Draco. What did you think of him? He's your second cousin or something, isn't he?"

"My mother's cousin, so he's my first cousin once removed. Or was, rather, seeing as he's dead."

Harry wasn't sure what to make of Draco's tone. It was sort of . . . supercilious.

"But what did you think of him?"

"He's a bit volatile for a proper Black, if you ask me." Draco came forward into the reflection zone, sighing as he glanced into the mirror. "But then I tell myself that my house and vault came from him, so a little gratitude wouldn't come amiss. And besides, unlike Lucius and my mother, Sirius Black did have the good sense to avoid getting entangled with the Dark . . . er, with Voldemort, that is. But that's a bit hard to remember sometimes, as I grew up hearing him praised for massacring those Muggles. So . . . I suppose I don't know what to think."

Harry nodded to show that he understood. "If he ever calms down, I'll introduce you properly. I'd like you to be able to get to know someone in your family who was on the side of the Light."

Draco smiled. "I do have people like that in my family, Harry. I have you and Severus."

Harry smiled, too. "I meant, you know, someone in your family tree."

"Well, you're both in that as well, but Sirius Black is no doubt closer. But speaking of family trees . . . I'm very sorry, Harry, about your parents not being able to come forward."

"Are you?" Huh . . . Harry was a little surprised to find he had an urge to shove his hands into his pockets. Draco must be rubbing off on him. "I thought you didn't approve."

"Well . . ." A faint line of colour rose on Draco's cheekbones. "I suppose I might have thought that it was disloyal to Severus. But I should have known that wasn't how you were looking at things."
"No." Grabbing Draco’s hand, Harry pulled him more fully in front of the mirror, until they were standing side by side. "I think I'll have to stay in the conversation to make the mirror keep working," said Harry, "so we'll probably be like this. But who do you think should tell him about what I did with his vault and house?"

"You'd better do that. He doesn't know me. And I guess he won't ever, if he doesn't calm down enough to stay human--"

"Eh, he probably will. He'll want to talk to me again. Sorry I didn't get to mention you today, though. I did mean to."

"You had an awful lot to tell him. You still do, really."

"Nothing about your wandless magic or Lupin's mission," said Snape sternly as he came forward. "No Order business at all, in fact."

"Sirius is a member of the Order--"

"Not any longer, he isn't."

Harry was about to argue that, but Draco started talking before he could. "Besides, Harry, you heard how things are in that realm he's in. Our problems just aren't on their minds; they can't be, when getting news of them is so delayed. And what's the point of worrying him? He can't do anything, not from where he is."

"Yeah, I know, but--"

"You should give some thought to the revelation that Voldemort cursed your parents even after their deaths," interrupted Snape, his dark hair swaying as he shook his head. "Voldemort has established at least one point of contact between this realm and the afterlife." His voice went rough. "And now we know that there are Death Eaters present there. How can we be certain that some of them don't still report to him?"

"But my parents and Sirius wouldn't tell Death Eaters about the Order's plans!"

"Not knowingly, no. Of course not. But you heard your godfather. Information in the afterlife flows on a wave of emotion. They sense new arrivals, or not, based on apparently nothing but an emotional connection. We simply don't understand enough about the inner workings of that realm, Harry."

"Good thinking, Severus," said Draco.

*Great intuitive grasp of magic*, Harry thought again. If Draco thought that Snape's concerns made sense, then maybe they did.

"All right," he said, sighing. "You could be right. Sirius and Remus were the best of friends. Well, except while Remus thought Sirius actually had killed all those Muggles and betrayed my parents. But if he got really worried about Remus, like I am, then, I don't know. I suppose his emotions might carry the information around, especially in his case, since he seems so unable to . . . to control himself."

Snape gave a brisk nod. "Perhaps it's time to move the mirror to another location. I do believe I'd like to have my parlour back."

Harry's heart sank. "You don't want me to use it again?"
"No, you idiot child. I merely mean that it needn't stay here within the adoption wards any longer. I'm convinced that the process is safe enough. By the way, you handled Black's predictable overreaction quite maturely."

"Thanks," said Harry, though personally, he thought he'd been crying a lot lately. But then, finding out that his parents couldn't come speak to him had been an awful blow. Nothing to do but get through it, he told himself. No point in dwelling on things he couldn't have.

As if he would be able to stop himself.

Well, he could at least try. "Back to that old storeroom with it, then?"

"Perhaps a small room down the corridor from our quarters would be better."

A shorter walk . . . and within a stone's throw of Snape if Harry needed him for any reason. That sounded good, but only for later. For next time, Harry had something else in mind. "All right, but I'm calling Sirius again tomorrow and you're going to be right there, right next to me, Dad," he decided out loud. "No more keeping out of sight. There's no reason for that any longer."

"I hardly think that antagonising your godfather is prudent."

Harry smiled. "Maybe not, but he's my godfather. Like it was my marrow. I trusted my instincts then and ended up with the one thing I'd always wanted. Not to mention those wanded powers that'll help us end this stupid war. So I'm trusting my instincts again. You're going to be in the mirror with me."

Snape inclined his head, his dark eyes contemplative.

"Right?" asked Harry, because if he knew anything, it was that you didn't assume that silence meant consent. Not when dealing with a Slytherin.

"I shall wear my best robes," said Snape, giving a slight nod of agreement.

Harry appreciated the sentiment, even as he frowned. "Um, maybe not. Sirius might take that wrong."

"On the contrary, he might take offence if I wear anything else to be presented to a member of my son's family."

"Pureblood tradition," supplied Draco. "Though this one generally applies only when an adult has been adopted."

"And Harry is an adult now," said Snape calmly. "The fact that he was adopted prior to attaining his majority is irrelevant, since my introduction to Sirius Black is taking place afterwards."

Harry blinked. "But you already know him!"

"Not in this context," said Snape, clearly implacable.

"Adoption has a long and respected history among purebloods," added Draco, laughing a little. "Which tends to mean that loads of traditions have built up, and believe me, anybody raised a Black would have learned about them."

"In that case, I'll wear my best robes, too."

"That would be best, if you are so determined for the two of us to appear to him together."
"My best school robes," Harry clarified, almost expecting an argument. "Prefect's badge as well."

Snape merely shrugged, but Harry though he could see the faint glimmer of a smile in his eyes. Pride, maybe, that Harry wanted to acknowledge his membership in Slytherin.

All he said in reply, though, was, "Well, if you are determined to trust your instincts, I suppose you may as well trust all of them."

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Five: "Reflections"

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------
That night, Harry dreamed.

He was standing before the Mirror of All Souls, Severus at his side as Harry called and called for Sirius. No matter how he tried, though, nobody appeared in the murky blackness.

"He can't come," said Harry, balling his fists in frustration. "He must be off visiting Death Eaters again!"

Severus flinched, his pale features going even more pallid than usual, but Harry scarcely noticed. His thoughts were solely on Sirius.

"Maybe he can come and he doesn't want to," said Harry bitterly, striking the mirror until Severus grabbed his wrist to make him stop. "I as good as told him that I was choosing you over him, and Sirius never has been terribly stable, has he? He probably hates me now and never wants to see me again--"

"Perhaps you simply aren't reaching out to his true spirit, his true soul," said Severus, very gently, one hand on Harry's shoulder now, caressing away the tension in his muscles. "Try calling for an ungrateful cur, my son."

Harry nodded, thinking that his father was right. But then, Severus was generally right, wasn't he? About everything.

Closing his eyes, he concentrated, long and hard, thinking of every last horrible about Sirius that he could. Startling Harry, scaring him the year he'd hung about pretending to be the Grim. Taunting Severus in school, complaining of boredom until James flipped Severus upside down for some entertainment. Sending Severus to the Shrieking Shack when he knew perfectly well that only death at a werewolf's hands was waiting within. Switching roles with Peter Pettigrew at the last minute like that, not having the brains to see that Peter was already working for Voldemort and would betray the Potters at the first opportunity--


Harry opened his eyes to see an image swimming into view. "Sirius," he said, a little coldly after all the memories he'd just dredged forth.

"Harry." Sirius' gaze flicked to Snape. "Him. Why him, Harry? He doesn't even have the decency to wear his best robes."

"But he has!"

"Those are his best, are they?"

When Harry flicked a confused glance to the side, he saw that instead of formal robes in black and green, Severus was wearing cast-off rags that made Remus' usual attire look elegant.

"Why did you change?" he gasped.

"I didn't," said Snape coldly. "I never changed. You only think I have."

"Of course he hasn't changed," said Sirius, lips twisted, his voice a riot of contempt. "Why would
you believe he ever could, Harry? He's a Death Eater, always has been. Ask him why he didn't tell you that your parents had been bound away from your presence! Well, go on, ask him! He was in Voldemort's service at the time--"

"Pretending," gasped Harry, stepping away from Snape and toward the mirror. "He was only pretending, so he could spy on Voldemort--"

"Was he?" Sirius snorted. "If that's the case, then ask him why he adopted you as his beloved son and never once told you that he'd cast your real parents away from your presence!"

Harry turned to Snape to do just that, only to see the man's eyes glint with evil glee as he pulled a Death Eater's mask out of a ragged cloak pocket and began to put it on--

Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, suddenly awake, his gaze frantically searching the room, dimly lit by the muted glow of the wall sconces. Snape wasn't there, though.

The only things that greeted his eyes were the walls themselves, trunks and armoires, and Draco, shifting beneath his covers on the other side of the room.

In a moment more, his brother was stretching sleepily and sitting up, blinking until he saw Harry sitting up as well. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me that. You look like you've seen someone spit and roasted right before your eyes."

"Bad dream," said Harry shortly.

"How bad?"

Harry debated for a moment, then glanced to the side. "Dad was still a Death Eater."

Even in the dim light, Harry could see Draco clenching his hands in the blankets pooled around his legs. The other boy's tone of voice when he finally spoke, however, was deliberately light. "You know he's not, so laugh it off."

Harry turned and pinned his brother with a glare. "I don't hear you laughing. You know why not? It isn't funny."

"Well, you don't actually think . . . you aren't worried, are you?"

"Of course I'm not worried," said Harry, gritting his teeth. He could hardly believe that Draco would even need to ask. "I'm not stupid. It was just Sirius, trying to turn me against Dad!"

"No, it wasn't." Draco shook his head. "The dream came from inside your own head."

Yeah, Harry knew that. "Well, it was just me expecting Sirius to be an idiot, then."

"Is he such a terrible person?"

"No!" exclaimed Harry. "I'm not explaining things right. He's . . . well, he's great. And I love him. A lot. But, he and Snape are, um, pretty much enemies, that's all."

Draco nodded. "I'd gathered as much. There's nothing you can do about that, Harry."

"Except dream," muttered Harry, glancing away.
"I think you're just upset because you aren't used to it." When Harry looked at him blankly, Draco went on. "You're being pulled in two directions. Which is just a regular part of growing up if you have a mother and a father both. But things weren't like that for you, so no wonder you're dreaming about them fighting over you."

When Harry thought about that, it made sense. "Was that in the book, too?"

"What book?"

"Um, The Path to Recovery, something like that?"

"Some, yes. But the sixth-year Muggle Studies text also discusses dream interpretation, so it's been on my mind lately." Draco smiled. "Shall I go to Severus and ask him for some potion for you?"

That was a considerate offer, but Harry still rolled his eyes. "What, you aren't going to make me do it for myself this time? You don't think I need to talk to him about the dream?"

"I don't think Severus needs to hear that you're dreaming he's still a Death Eater, no," said Draco seriously.

Harry swivelled his legs off the bed and fished with his toes until he found his slippers. "I'll try not to mention that part. But I do have to ask him something."

"What?"

"Something that can't wait," said Harry grimly. "Go back to sleep, Draco."

Draco looked uncertain, but he lay back down, watching through narrowed eyes as Harry shrugged a night robe over his pyjamas and padded toward the door.

------------------------------------------------------

"Sir?" Harry knocked a little bit more loudly.

The door was abruptly flung open, Snape standing there in his own night robe, though his feet were bare. "I knew I should have given you some Dreamless Sleep. It's been a difficult day for you. Come in for a moment, Harry."

Harry did, but when Snape summoned a vial and pressed it into his hand, he made no move to drink it. "I actually didn't come for the potion, sir."

"Sir," echoed Snape, shaking his head. "What's on your mind, Harry? Something Black said?"

"Um . . . yes." Harry sank down into a chair and tried to get his thoughts into some sort of order. "Well, sort of. That binding on my parents. Why didn't you tell me about it? I mean, I understand that you wouldn't want to hurt me, so maybe you wouldn't think I'd need to know about it, since I wouldn't normally expect to be able to call them to me, anyway. But the minute I started talking about getting the mirror to work so that I could see them again . . . you really should have told me that I had no chance, no chance at all."

"I would have, of course." The rumpled bed compressed as Snape sat across from him. "Black's announcement came as a total surprise to me, Harry."
Harry swallowed, nodding, though he still had to ask, "He . . . Voldemort, I mean, he didn't ask you to brew a potion, or . . . or--"

"No," said Snape, folding his hands together in his lap. "I can't blame you for wondering; it's a reasonable deduction, given that I was spying when this must have taken place, but no. I swear to you, Harry, that I knew nothing of any scheme to bind your parents."

"Oh." Harry flushed, feeling like a right idiot. Of course Snape couldn't have known. The man loved him. He'd have told Harry about a thing like that. "Er . . . sorry, sir."

"Dad. Or Severus."

"Yeah." Harry swallowed. "Sorry, Dad. I should have had some faith in you."

"But you did. You came and asked me, straight away after your nightmare."

"How did you know I'd had a nightmare? I never said that." Harry frowned, concentrating for a moment on the fire that he nearly always kept burning around his thoughts these days. He scarcely noticed it any longer; Occlumency had got to be second nature. He could feel the sensation of flames blazing when he tried, though.

"No, I haven't been Legilimising you on the sly," said Snape, shaking his head. "I can often tell what you're thinking merely by the look on your face."

"Like just then."

"Yes."

Harry sighed, getting up off the chair to sit next to his father, instead. He felt better there, and better still when Severus draped an arm across his shoulders to pull him close for a moment. Perhaps that was what made Harry able to admit the truth. "I did have a nightmare. Awful stuff. I . . . I was talking to Sirius and he was trying to turn me against you."

"Seer dream," said Snape dryly.

"It wasn't a seer dream. It didn't follow the pattern, didn't have that whirling--"

"I was attempting irony. Badly, one must conclude."

"Well, even my regular dreams sometimes kind of . . . point to things," said Harry.

"Yes, I know."

"I don't suppose we can stop Sirius from saying something awful if that's what he wants to do." Harry sighed. "I'm . . . I don't know. I was really upset at first, thinking that you might have been involved in binding my parents away from me, but now I almost wish you had been, because . . . well, in that case you might be able to help me undo the binding, right?"

"Wrong."

Harry blinked. "What? You wouldn't help me?"

Snape's dark eyes narrowed as he stared down at Harry. "To dabble in necromancy?"

"It's not necromancy. We wouldn't be trying to resurrect their, ugh, dead bodies, or anything like that--"
"The kind of spell that can reach beyond the grave to affect those who should be beyond all reach of magic, Harry? It would be classed among the necromantic arts, at the very least. And no, I would not under any circumstances assist you to manipulate magic as dark as that."

"But we'd be undoing an evil spell," said Harry, swallowing. "We'd be doing something good."

Snape abruptly pinched the bridge of his nose as he sighed. "No, we most certainly wouldn't." He paused for a moment, as though gathering his thoughts. "I was in Voldemort's inner circle, Harry. One of his most trusted advisors--"

"That's what you think," muttered Harry, wanting to lash out. How could Snape say that it was evil to remove that awful binding? How could Snape want to keep him away from his parents? "Maybe he never trusted you at all. He didn't ask you to help him with this task, did he? Didn't even mention it to you!"

"I . . . I don't know. He thought you might be a spy?"

"He wouldn't have told me other key things in that case. Try again. Why did he not demand I kill you here at Hogwarts? I certainly had plenty of opportunity, had I wished it."

Harry remembered then. "Oh. Your hands. You told Voldemort that you had to be careful if he wanted you able to make Light magic potions . . . you can't have blood on your hands. Is that just literal? You did help hold me down for the needles, but you kept away from the blood--"

"How could it be literal when it's not even true?"

"Did Voldemort take it literally, I meant?"

"I meant him to take it as expansively as possible." Snape winced, just a bit. "Perhaps that was a mistake. Most likely that was his reason for keeping me away from the ceremony that bound your parents. Had I been less fastidious about what I was willing to do as a spy, I would have been able to furnish Albus with more information."

Harry hated to hear his father talking that way. "No, you were right to think up a way to limit what you'd have to do at those horrid gatherings. I mean, working for the Light is a good thing, but if it makes you kill and maim, how can that be good?"

Snape crossed his arms across his chest. "You prefer to ignore the fact that I did all that, and worse, when I first joined the Dark Lord's ranks."

*The Dark Lord.* Harry shivered.

"But that was before you . . . er, redeemed yourself."

"I did not redeem myself, because I doubt that such a thing can be done," said Snape, staring at the wall instead of at Harry. "If anything, Albus redeemed me. Or attempted to. Nothing can truly erase the suffering I caused, Harry. You don't know-- you don't know about the things I did in his service."
A sick feeling swam through Harry's gut. That usually happened whenever he really tried to imagine his father's bitter past, which was why Harry tried his best not to imagine it. Severus was probably right about Harry wanting to ignore the whole thing, but what else was there to do? It was like Snape himself had said: nothing could change the facts about what he'd done back then.

"I don't need to know." Harry laid a hand on his father's forearm. "I know who you are now. That's what matters."

"Remember that if you ever find out what Lupin has had to do to maintain his guise. He has no tale of brewing with clean hands to save him from the worst of Voldemort's demands."

Another thing Harry tried not to think about, so he distracted himself with the first question that popped to mind. "Why did Voldemort believe you about clean hands, anyway? He would have known what you'd done for him during his first rise!"

"Oh, it was not difficult to convince him that the headmaster had insisted on 'purifying' me in an effort to render the Dark Mark inactive. 'Dumbledore was worried that you would return,' I simpered. Voldemort was only too delighted at the thought that Albus' rituals had failed. I played to his vanity."

Harry thought that over and nodded. He wasn't sure he'd ever have a use for that particular strategy, but he supposed it might come in handy. "So then . . . this spell to bind my parents . . . Sirius said it involved atrocities, but he wouldn't tell me anything more."

"One of the few intelligent decisions he's ever made."

"You mean you won't tell me, either?"

Snape turned his head to stare at him. "Have you not listened to a word I've said? I don't know what the ceremony involved!"

"I just thought . . ." Harry laced his fingers together in his lap. "If I knew for sure how he did it, then maybe I could find a way to undo it."

"You haven't been listening." Snape abruptly grabbed both his wrists and squeezed. "Harry, I don't know the precise details of this binding, but I do know that necromancy always involves sacrifice. Human sacrifice, and the darker the magic, the more innocent the sacrifice must be. To reach into the afterlife is dark enough, but to bind parents away from their own child, their only child? I frankly doubt that one was enough."

"One sacrifice?" Snape's words about innocence seemed to penetrate, then, and the truth flashed through to Harry. He thought his stomach might drop straight through the floor. "Oh, God. Babies, that's what you're talking about. One baby wasn't enough? He had innocent little babies killed so that he could--"

Snape wrapped him into a fierce embrace. "For once I could curse your instincts, Harry. I was trying not to say it. You don't need to think on such things. And you are not to blame yourself. This was Voldemort's doing, not yours. You bear no responsibility--"

"I know." Harry bit his lip to keep from crying. He wasn't sure why the idea would hit him so hard. After all, Voldemort had tried to kill him when he was just a baby, so it wasn't like he'd ever thought the man was above slaughtering a child. But sacrifice . . . that was different. Harry had been intended to be a sacrifice last Samhain, and it had involved more than mere killing. Torture, first . . .
"You're thinking about it, even now," said Snape, rubbing his back a little.

Sighing, Harry let himself relax and be held. He even leaned his head on his father's shoulder and felt the man's hair brush against his nose. Greasy hair, but somehow that was kind of comforting at the moment.

"All right, so now we know," said Harry softly. "Awful, but I'm not mental enough to blame myself. I can't help that it happened. But can't we use the information for good? Now that we understand, can't we find a way to reverse it? I . . . I'm sorry that I want so much to talk to my parents. I know I shouldn't need it. It's not even normal. I mean, Sirius was right about that, but . . . why won't you help me?"

Snape set him slightly away, positioning him so that their gazes would connect. "Because necromancy is pure evil, Harry."

"It doesn't have to be--"

"Yes, it has to be. I studied it once, before I ever turned to the Light. The only way to reverse a necromantic spell would be to recreate the ritual in precise detail, in every respect save one."

"No sacrifice?" asked Harry, voice feeble because from the look in Snape's eyes, he knew that guess had to be wrong.

"Double the sacrifice."

Harry clenched his teeth to keep from screaming. It didn't help, though. "Fuck, fuck!"

For once, Snape offered no rebuke about his language. Not even a critical glance.

"There's no other way?"

"No. Trust me."

"I do." Feeling defeated, Harry flopped onto his back on the bed. What he really wanted to do was to start firing off spells. Anything, as long as it would dispel the anger churning inside him. "I just wish . . . ."

"Of course. The same thing you've always wished." Moving up on the bed, Snape sat with one leg bent as he settled a hand onto Harry's chest. "You have a hole in your heart that will never be completely filled."

Harry blinked back tears, because damn it, that was true, and it shouldn't be. "You fill it, Severus. I mean . . . how can you not? I love you. As much as I ever . . . well, hell. I love you more than I ever loved them, because I was too little to really know about love--"

Snape moved his hand to brush Harry's hair away from his face, his long fingers gentle as they swept across his skin. "You were too little to say the word, Harry. Not too little to love them."

Harry gulped, feeling ashamed that he wanted Snape's fingers to keep on stroking his hair. "Those poor babies--"

Snape's voice was soothing, just like his fingers. "Well, you heard Black. They were met by their loved ones, and someday, they'll see their parents again."

"And that's supposed to make it better? The idea that it was their time?" Harry laughed harshly as
he lay there. "I don't understand that, anyway. Am I supposed to think they were going to fall out of their cribs that same day, if Voldemort hadn't snatched them? Am I supposed to believe that they were going to die anyway, and the only question is how? And what about all those people at the Ministry? Hundreds of them, and they were all going to die that day anyway, because it was their time?"

"I didn't say that it was their time," corrected Snape softly. "I only said that they were at peace."

"I know, but Sirius said . . ." When it seemed like Snape would move his hand away, Harry angled his neck to keep it close. Snape made a low noise of amusement, and resumed carding his fingers through his son's hair.

"Black told you what he believed. Nothing more, nothing less," said Snape. "Perhaps he needs to believe it. That place he's in . . . it does seem designed to let the dead rest in peace. I wouldn't be surprised if most of the souls there believe that they died because their time had come. If you're dead already, that could be a comforting thought, I suppose. That doesn't make it objectively true."

Harry sighed and looked up at his father, sitting so patiently beside him. And it was probably three in the morning, too. Harry really ought to go to bed and let Snape sleep. He couldn't, though. Too much on his mind.

"So you think Sirius is wrong? He said he wasn't, he said he really knew the truth about life and death."

"I'm certain that he thinks he does." Snape moved his hand, resting the back of his fingers against Harry's cheek. "He loves you very much, and he didn't want to leave you. Certainly not like that, in the midst of battle, your safety still something very far from assured. He must have felt at first that he'd abandoned you."

"It wasn't his fault--"

"No, but I believe you are no stranger to inappropriate guilt."

"True," Harry admitted, smiling a little.

"I suspect the only way Black could come to terms with his own death was to rest on fate. A common human reaction to tragedy."

That had Harry smiling just a little bit more. "Sirius' death was a tragedy, was it? Can I get that in writing?"

"Don't jest," said Snape sternly. "It was a tragedy for you. I'd have to be an imbecile not to realise as much. And the man did have his talents, so it was a tragedy for the Order as well."

"Right," said Harry, chastened. "So . . . Sirius has convinced himself that it was just his time, nothing to be done about it."

"They may all be convinced of it. I, however, remain sceptical."

"Yeah, me too, I think," murmured Harry. "I don't know, even before I fell asleep tonight I was wondering about that. Don't take this wrong, but I was even wondering what was the point in fighting Voldemort. I mean, theoretically. If he's going to die when he's supposed to die no matter what anybody else does, then why go to the effort to kill him? We could just have a holiday while we wait for him to slip in his shower."
It wasn't often that Severus grinned, but that image certainly got to him. A wide smile broke out across his features; in the next instant, he moved his hand from Harry's cheek to cover his own mouth.

"We could send him slippery soap to help it along," added Harry.

At that, Severus actually laughed.

"You do see the fallacy in your argument, I hope," the man said after a moment, though he was still smiling. "You're assuming that Voldemort is the one fated to die, when the prophecy itself speaks to some sort of battle between the two of you, with the outcome not known in advance."

"Well, yeah, but then I thought that if Sirius was right and I was going to die when my time came, no matter what, and I'm fated to lose to Voldemort, then there's no point in preparing to fight him, is there?"

"But Black is not right."

"No, I don't think he can be," whispered Harry. "I can't believe that my parents were going to drop dead that Halloween, whether he came by or not. No . . . he did it. If not for him, they'd be here with me. And . . . and Lucius Malfoy . . . I did that. He wasn't going to die anyway if I hadn't acted. I'm the one who would be dead, in that case, whether it was my time or not."

"All true."

"And if being dead really made Sirius so wise, he'd have had the brains to accept the adoption instead of throwing a fit like a little kid!"

"A kid is a baby goat," observed Severus dryly. "I do believe he threw a fit like a dog, if anything."

Harry reached behind him, grabbed a pillow, and flung it at his father, who chuckled as he batted it away. "On that note, perhaps you should return to your own bed."

Yawning, Harry sat up. In some ways, he'd rather stay here and talk all night, but that wasn't really very practical. "Can I have a lie-in tomorrow? Please?"

"As long as you like."

Harry blinked, surprised that Snape had capitulated so easily. Or at all, really. Except for birthdays, the man was pretty strict about not raising his sons to be "lazy good-for-nothings," as he put it. "Really?"

"Of course. The longer you sleep, the longer before I have to see Black once again."

"Very funny, Dad."

"I thought so."

Harry got to his feet. He didn't exactly feel better about things; never being able to see his parents in the mirror was still an awful blow. And the thought of what Voldemort had done in order to bind them . . . that was beyond awful.

But at least he wasn't still vaguely wondering if life was nothing but a script somebody else had already written. It couldn't be. Sirius was wrong about that, but if the thought somehow comforted him . . . well, all right. Harry could let him think that he'd died because it was just his time to go.
What he couldn't let him think, though, was that he could argue Harry out of loving Severus. Nothing could do that, Harry told himself.

Nothing.

Ever.

When Harry finally wandered out of his room the next day, he saw that the Mirror of All Souls had been moved as Snape had suggested.

Draco grinned when he saw him. "First Severus, and then you."

"Hmm?"

"Oh, Dad slept in as well, that's all."

"We were up pretty late. Talking." Draco looked curious, and Harry couldn't blame him, not after the previous night's vague *I have to ask him something*. "I wanted to know if he'd had anything to do with binding my parents. But he didn't."

"You shouldn't have had to ask a thing like that!"

"Look, talking to dead people can get just a bit confusing," snapped Harry.

"To say the least," drawled Snape as he emerged from his bedroom, his hair sleek and straight. Harry tried not to stare, since it wasn't polite, but he couldn't miss the fact that Snape had washed his hair for once. Maybe it went along with wearing his best robes to be officially presented to Sirius. "We also debated predestination versus free will."

"We came down on the side of free will," added Harry.

Draco raised his chin. "Of course. Wasn't I more-or-less predestined to hate you and fight against you? And yet here I am, on your side. That's free will, right there."

"So it is, Draco," said Snape. "Ah, I see that the elves have moved the mirror. Shall we have lunch before we go and speak with your godfather?"

"Lunch and dinner both, maybe," muttered Harry, glancing at his watch. "No breakfast, I suppose. It's already gone eleven."

"You may certainly order breakfast foods if you wish."

Harry did. Full English breakfast, in fact, but then he wondered why he'd bothered, when he could barely eat a thing. Despondent, he trailed his fork through his egg, smearing yolk through the small piles of mushroom and tomato on his plate.

Snape regarded him critically over his cup of tea. "This reminds me of your behaviour before we went to Albus' office to fill out the adoption papers."

"Ha," said Harry. "Back then I just felt mixed-up. That's not a problem now. I'm proud to be your
son. It's just . . . knowing that Sirius is going to hate me when I choose you over him . . . well, what's the bloody point in talking to him at all?"

"Don't be ridiculous. He is not going to hate you."

"Stop being such a pessimist," said Draco. "What happened to your Gryffindor side?"

"I'm a full Slytherin," said Harry, slanting his brother a smile.

"Be judicious about using that phrase around Black," cautioned Snape.

Harry pushed his chair back and stood up. "Let's just get it over with."

Without another word, he went into the bedroom to change his clothes. Proper wizarding trousers instead of jeans, and a long-sleeved uniform shirt. Then his best school cloak, a new one that Severus had bought him shortly before his birthday. Harry had already charmed his special crest onto it, as well as onto the other new cloaks he'd got that day.

He had to admit, having a father to go school-shopping with had been great fun, as well as dead useful. Severus had suggested several books besides the "required" and "recommended" texts for his classes this term. Harry had protested at first, saying that the library would have whatever he needed, but Severus had insisted that copies he could keep on hand for reference all year would be a benefit.

Having an adult who cared enough about him to think of things like that had been a new experience for Harry.

Harry pinned on his prefect's badge and then went into the loo to try to do something with his hair. As usual, nothing much worked, but maybe that was just as well. He wanted to look his best for these formal "introductions," but he didn’t want Sirius to think he was trying to look like someone other than himself. He was just Harry, messy hair and all.

When he went back out into the living room, his family was waiting for him. Draco was wearing his best school robes and his own prefect's badge, which meant he looked much the same as Harry did, but Severus had put on formal dress robes narrowly edged with green. It made a welcome change from the usual stark, unbroken black.

"Shall we?"

Harry nodded, carefully picking up the frame which held the fragments of the two-way mirror. He tried not to look down at it. He didn't want to see the missing pieces, or start to count how many remained. What he wanted to do was pretend that he had a limitless supply and that Sirius would want to keep talking to him, now that he knew the truth about Harry's family situation.

The Mirror of All Souls was just two doors down from their quarters, in a room warded to open only to Harry, Draco, or Snape. "The password is butterscotch," said Snape in a quiet voice as he bid the door open.

"You're joking," said Draco, jaw dropping.

"The headmaster chose it."

When Draco still looked confused, Harry whispered that he'd explain about that later. Strange . . . Harry would have thought that Dumbledore's bizarre passwords were common knowledge. Not for Slytherins, apparently.
As the door closed behind them, Harry took up his position in front of the Mirror of All Souls. Somehow it looked more imposing than ever, but that was probably because there was nothing else in this room. Nothing at all, not even a rug on the stone floor. Well, they weren't wizards for nothing, Harry decided as he flexed his fingers, drawing his wand for show as his father insisted. He tried to conjure three chairs and ended up with three... well, three of something, anyway. Footstools, maybe, he thought as he eyed them.

Draco made a show of sighing dramatically as he waved his wand to change them into matching wing-backed chairs made of dark wood and sleek grey leather.

"I could have done better if I'd cast wanded," muttered Harry.

"We'd have got a couch the size of London--"

"Gentlemen," interrupted Snape, "we have more important things to do than argue over the furnishings."

"Yeah, all right." Still, Harry wasted another minute shoving the chairs into place, all three of them before the mirror, but pushed back a little to begin with. Then he chose a precious shard of broken mirror and pressed it against the Mirror of All Souls as he said the incantation to make it come to life.

"English, I told you to try English," complained Draco as he stood off to one side.

"Habit. I'll try that later. If Sirius ever wants to talk with me again--"

"Call him," said Snape quietly.

"Not until you're standing by my side like I want."

Snape gave him a bit of a sour look but complied at once, his robes billowing majestically around him as he moved.

Harry glanced at Draco, apologetic. "Sorry, but I'll introduce you once we get the rest sorted out."

"You're supposed to introduce your adopted family in order of age precedence, in any case," said Draco, shrugging.

That could have sounded snooty, but really, it sounded like a simple fact, nothing more. Harry smiled gratefully and closed his eyes to call Sirius.

It seemed to take longer than before, but maybe that was just because he was feeling so worried about the whole thing. What if Sirius refused to come? What if all he wanted to do was scream that Harry was being stupid, that Harry had to listen to him? What if his dream came true and Sirius was going to accuse Snape of horrible things--

"Harry," said a voice warmly, the sound coming from just in front of him.

Harry's eyes snapped open to see Sirius standing before him, leaning in against the surface of the mirror, both his palms splayed out to hold his weight. "Sirius. You came."

"You can't have thought I wouldn't. Unless--" Strangely, Sirius looked like he was biting his own tongue. That was when Harry noticed that Sirius' hair was long and straggly. Well, no wonder he was upset... he was staring straight at Snape now.
Harry could see them both before him in the mirror, which was a bit odd since he couldn't see his own reflection at all. And Snape didn't look like a reflection -- he looked like he was behind the mirror, in the same place Sirius was.

But that just proved, he supposed, that the mirror wasn't behaving as a true mirror any longer. Maybe Snape looked like he was in the same place as Sirius because, well . . . both men were in his heart, weren't they?

Or maybe it was just a trick of the light.

It was strange to see them side by side because of something else, too. Harry never thought he would see the day when Severus was better groomed than Sirius. And wasn't that saying something, considering how messy Sirius often looked? Now, he looked worse than usual, mostly because standing alongside him was a man with hair so straight and black that it was shining, hanging like a perfect curtain around his face.

"Unless what?" asked Harry.

Sirius just shook his head, the look on his face so stubborn that Harry dropped the subject. Best just to get on with the important bit, he supposed. Tucking his wand away in a pocket, Harry turned to the side and gestured.

"Sirius, I would like to present you to my adoptive father, Severus Augustus Snape. Severus, this is Sirius Black, named my godfather by my parents James and Lily Potter."

Sirius' mouth dropped open, which was a bit odd considering he wasn't being told anything he hadn't already known, except possibly Snape's middle name. That wasn't it, though. Harry knew that the moment the man spoke.

"Harry . . . somebody's been teaching you about pureblood customs."

"That would be my father," said Harry, raising an eyebrow. It was a relief when Sirius didn't start howling or chasing his tail. Maybe there was hope, after all. "Are you going to follow the custom?"

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," said Sirius swiftly. He couldn't exactly shake Snape's hand, though, could he? Instead, he moved one of his palms lower, still keeping it splayed out on the glass.

Severus took a brisk step forward and matched the motion so that he and Sirius were hand-to-hand. "Kin of my kin shall be blood of my blood," said Snape quietly. Harry was impressed; it didn't sound like Snape had any misgivings. But then, the man did know how to hide his feelings.

"Kin of my kin shall be blood of my blood," echoed Sirius, and he definitely sounded a bit queasy at the prospect, but he did say it, so Harry was impressed with him as well.

Snape stepped back at once and took up his place by Harry's side once more.

Harry didn't know what to say, really. Of all the things he'd expected to hear Sirius say today, that sentence hadn't been one of them. "Um . . . what's got into you?"

"Common sense, one would hope," said Snape, eyes narrowed in challenge.

"Shut it, Snape," retorted Sirius before centring his gaze on Harry. "Adoptions aren't terribly common in pureblood families, but the tradition is one worthy of respect."

"You didn't think so yesterday--"
Sirius grimaced wrapped his arms around himself. "Well, I'll admit you took me by surprise and I didn't know what to think--"

"You know what you thought," said Harry. "You were pretty damned clear about it."

"All right, all right! I hated the idea, fine!" said Sirius, raising his voice.

That was more like it. Harry didn't want to fight with Sirius, but he wasn't about to listen to a bunch of half-truths, either. They either had honesty between them, or what they had wasn't worth much. "So what changed?"

Sirius scowled and said one word. Probably the last one Harry expected.

"James."

"My dad?" Harry stepped closer to the mirror. "He . . . what did he say to you?"

Sirius folded his arms across his chest and mumbled something.

Harry felt a little pang go through his heart. "You can't tell me?" he asked mournfully. "That horrid binding--"

"That's not it." Sirius sighed. "James wasn't trying to pass a message to you, Harry. He was just talking to me."

"Saying what, Sirius?"

A long stare and another mumble, but this time, Harry could make the words out. "Hetoldmetopullmyheadoutofmyarse."

Beside him, Snape sounded like he was swallowing a laugh.

Sirius rounded on him. "I thought I told you to shut it, Snape."

"Oh, but we're kin now, Black," said Snape, his voice rippling with some kind of dark humour. "We're blood. You said it yourself."

"Doesn't mean you can mock me!"

"Was I doing that? From my perspective, I was merely pleased to hear that James gave you such fine advice."

"James, is he?" asked Sirius, baring his teeth. "Since when do you call him that? Even when you were working in the Order with us during the first war, it was Potter! You even made a point of calling Lily that!"

"Well, it shall be James now that he is kin of my kin," said Snape calmly. "He and Lily can't come here to do the greeting ritual, obviously, but please do tell them that I welcome them both into my family, Sirius."

Sirius scowled again, but he'd stopped baring his teeth, so Harry wasn't too worried that he would transform. "My dad really told you to pull your head out of your arse?"

"And ask if you were happy," said Sirius. "And no, he didn't 'tell' me, Harry. It was more like a yell, but maybe that was just because my ears were ringing from Lily's slap. She said that Severus was a fine man who'd put himself at risk time and again for the Order, and how dare I insult her
son's intelligence--"

"When did you do that?"

"I didn't!" Sirius' nostrils flared. "But Lily thought I had, the little--"

"Don't call my mum names!"

Sirius leaned closer to the mirror. "Oh, I adore your mum, Harry, but she's like a lioness when she
gets her dander up. Packs a hell of a wallop."

"She sounds like Hermione. I like it."

"How is Hermione?"

"Oh, no you don't," said Harry, almost growling. "No changing the subject. What was that about
insulting my intelligence?"

"Lily said that any son of hers ought to be able to choose for himself who he'd trust and who he
wouldn't, and that for me to say otherwise was calling you a fool."

"Well, it is," said Snape, looking impassively into the mirror.

"Right," Sirius answered, but grudgingly.

"What did you say back to her?" asked Harry.

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Before or after James let me up? Yeah, he was sort of . . . well, not sitting
on me, exactly. Let's just say that I was flat on my back by then and he was determined to keep me
there until I saw things his way. Both of them were annoyed as hell that I'd cut off what you were
trying to tell me, Harry. So I said that of course you weren't a fool, but you'd had a hard time
growing up and you might be a little bit confused about which adults to trust, and that was when
James yelled at me *again*, to pull my head out of my arse and just ask."

"Are you ever going to do so?" asked Snape.

"I don't need to ask if Harry's happy," said Sirius, sighing. "He obviously is."

"I am, yeah." Harry put both his hands onto the mirror, smiling when Sirius matched the motion.
"I'm really happy, Sirius. Severus is a great dad and I even have a brother now!"

"Oh, sweet Merlin," groaned Sirius. "You actually found a woman who could stand you, Snape?"

Off to the side, Draco clapped a hand over his mouth, looking like he was about to die from
holding in the laughter.

Meanwhile, Snape scowled. "I believe we should refrain from personal attacks. Unless you'd like
me to share with Harry during our *unlimited* conversation time," he said pointedly, "the thousands
of things I find objectionable about you?"

"As if you haven't already," muttered Sirius.

"He hasn't," said Harry staunchly. "He knows I love you and that it would hurt me to hear bad
things about you. Just like it hurts me to hear you say bad things about him, so like you said, shut
it."
Sirius gave a shaky nod. "All right. For you, Harry? Anything." His gaze flicked a bit higher. "So then, what's this I hear about a brother for Harry?"

"I adopted another boy as well," said Snape, very coolly. Harry knew then that the man was wary about Sirius' reaction. Probably, his reaction to the name Malfoy.

"One wasn't enough for you?"

Harry thought that was snide, but Snape seemed to brush it off. "Apparently not."

Both men sort of stared at him, then, until Harry figured out that it was up to him to do the honours. "Oh. All right." He waved for Draco to come into view of the mirror. The other boy had both his hands shoved deeply into his pockets. Harry hoped he'd be able to relax soon. "Sirius, I would like to present you to my brother, Draco Gervais Alain Malfoy Snape. Draco, this is Sirius Black, named my godfather by my parents, James and Lily Potter."

"Draco Alain Gervais Malfoy Snape, actually," said Draco, looking a bit put out.

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

"I'd like to think my own brother could remember my name!"

"Well, if it would stop changing, maybe I could!" retorted Harry.

"Gentlemen," said Snape softly. That was all he said, just the one word, but it was enough to make them both drop the argument.

Meanwhile, Sirius looked like he was calculating something as he stared at Harry. "Snape, you said. Did you change your own name, too?"

"No, of course not." Harry smiled.

"If you could tell him no to that, then why didn't you tell him no to that badge?" Sirius pointed, his finger shaking a little.

"Because I wanted to be a prefect," said Harry simply. "And for the record, Sirius, Severus didn't ask me to change my last name. In fact, he's gone to a lot of trouble to make sure I remember that I have two fathers. Just, you know, only one living one."

Sirius gnashed his teeth. "If he's so fair-minded about everything then why the hell did he make you leave Gryffindor? Both your parents were Gryffindors, Harry!"

"Yeah, I'm aware of that," said Harry, a little sharply. "Look, don't you see the lion on my crest? I'm still in Gryffindor. I'm also in Slytherin, that's all."

"You can't be in two houses."

"Well, I am."

"You can't be--"

"The counters lose points from both houses when I get docked."

Sirius shuddered. "Two houses. All right, Harry. But why did you agree?"

Harry hadn't actually agreed, not in the way Sirius meant. But explaining about the Hogwarts
Charter, he thought, would pretty much miss the point. Harry didn't want to make it sound like he'd had no choice in the matter, because then Sirius would think that he'd been tricked into it.

"Because I'm fine with it," he said. "Sirius, the Sorting Hat suggested Slytherin for me, which used to really bother me, but I'm not twelve years old any longer. Cunning and ambition don't have to be evil traits, you know. It all depends on how you use them."

Sirius looked a bit sick.

"I'm still just Harry."

"Do . . . do you want me to tell your parents about this?"

"Yes," said Harry fiercely. "I'm not ashamed. It's part of who I am. And just as well, Sirius. Voldemort wants to kill me. If I want to survive, I'd better be just as cunning as he is, don't you think?"

"Fight fire with fire," murmured Sirius, swallowing.

"Yes, and I'm lucky to have Severus to help me," said Harry, thinking of cunning and his Occlumency image, all at once.

Sirius wasn't willing to agree to that, obviously. Instead of replying, he turned his attention to the boy standing at Harry's side. "Malfoy Snape? So . . . you're Narcissa's boy?"

"Yes, sir."

Sirius snorted. "Well, trust Lucius Malfoy to give you three first names. Pretentious git."

"I'm also a Black--"

"That's hardly to your credit. The Black family tree is steeped in evil."

"Not all of it," said Draco quietly. "There's you, and my aunt Andromeda, and--"

Sirius' gaze sharpened. "You know Andromeda?"

"Er . . . no. But since I started living with Severus, I've had occasion to meet her daughter."

Harry thought that was neatly put. No point in mentioning that the "occasion" was the fact that Draco was suspected of murder.

"Tonks," said Sirius, his voice dreamy, like it had been a long time since he'd thought of her. "You're the same relation to me that she is."

"Yes, sir."

Sirius' voice hardened. "But you were born a Malfoy. You look just like your father."

Draco looked like he didn't know how to reply to that. After a moment, he lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug. "I was born a Malfoy but I don't look just like my father." He gestured to Severus.

Sirius sighed. "Have my cousin and her worthless husband both died?"

"No, sir," said Draco quietly. Harry wondered if he wanted to admit that Lucius, at least, was dead. That wasn't an option, though, not with Voldemort possibly able to access information from the
"Then how did you come to be adopted?"

Harry saw Draco swallowing. He looked to their father for guidance, but Severus merely gestured for him to go ahead and speak. "Well, Lucius wanted me to take the Dark Mark, but . . . but I didn't want that, so I went to Albus Dumbledore for asylum. Lucius disowned me, tried to kill me, and . . . and . . ."

"And Narcissa just stood by, I imagine?"

"Something like that. She did try to help me some, but it wasn't safe for her to publicly defy Lucius--" Draco took a deep breath. "It was very good of Severus to take me in."

"You never struck me as the type to rescue waifs and strays, Snape."

"It wasn't like that," said Harry. "Severus loves him too, Sirius. And me, I love him. And . . . well, I should probably tell you now that . . . well, you know the things you left for me? The vault, the house? I gave it all to Draco."

Sirius briefly closed his eyes. "You gave it all to Draco."

"Yes. Don't be angry. Please, Sirius."

"Did they mean nothing to you, Harry? All my worldly goods, the only thing I could do for you in the event of my death?"

"I felt so guilty," whispered Harry, leaning close to the mirror again. "I knew you loved me and that was why you wanted me to have all your things, but I felt like such an idiot, letting myself get lured to the Ministry, getting you killed--"

"Harry, it was my time!"

"I know, I know," said Harry quickly, though he didn't know it at all. They weren't going to get into that, though. Sirius was at peace and after the life he'd had, he had a right to that peace.

And the living . . . well, maybe they weren't supposed to be at peace, Harry thought.

"I'm just telling you how I felt when I found out I'd inherited your things. I . . . I didn't want them, Sirius, because it seemed too much like I'd ended up benefiting from your death, and I didn't want to benefit from it. I wanted you back."

"So you gave it all away."

"Um, no, not then." Harry smiled. "Severus wouldn't let me. He said to wait, because I might feel differently later. And he was right."

Sirius' gaze flicked to Snape's for a moment, and then returned to Harry. "But you still gave it away."

"Yeah, but not to get rid of it. By then, it was more that I really wanted Draco in particular to have the inheritance. Because . . . well, you know how rich the Malfoys are, and Draco had lost everything, but he was on our side, fighting for the Light, and he saved my life, not sure I told you that, and . . . and . . ."

"Harry, just calm down," said Sirius softly, his eyes swimming with kindness. "I'm not angry with
you. Just explain, that's all."

"Well, Draco's a Black," said Harry. "So your family home is more rightfully his than mine--"

"Not so, but go on."

Harry smiled, because he could tell by then that it was going to be all right. "I thought it was what you would do, if you were here, Sirius. He *is* kin of your kin and blood of your blood, and if you could have seen the way Draco stood by my side even when everything looked hopeless . . . well, you'd have wanted to help him, I was sure of it. He was like you, turning his back on a family steeped in evil, see? But you were gone and there was only me left, and I wanted to honour what you'd done in your life by giving it all to Draco who seemed like . . . I don't know. Your heir in a lot of ways, even though you never knew him."

Sirius turned to consider Draco for a moment, then nodded. "Well then . . ." He splayed a hand down low on the mirror again. "I suppose this is redundant, but that's hardly the point. You're Harry's brother now, so . . . kin of my kin shall be blood of my blood."

"Kin of my kin shall be blood of my blood," Draco repeated, his voice rough as he touched hands with Sirius. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I often heard your name while I was growing up, but of course there was a rather large misunderstanding about your loyalties . . . it came as quite a shock to learn that you weren't what I'd always assumed."

"Wicked as the day is long?" asked Sirius. "Not that the day is long or short here, come to think of it."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Draco said again.

"And you, Draco. Your aunt Andromeda was my favourite cousin, but Narcissa was all right until she married that black-hearted bigot," said Sirius, looking wistful. "So beautiful, Narcissa . . . she's doing well? Or don't you know?"

"We don't have much contact. We can't," added Draco, sticking to the pretence that Lucius Malfoy was still a threat. "But from what little I hear, she's well, yes."

Sirius nodded, his eyes still distant. "I hope so. I'll be here to meet her when she arrives, I think . . . but not if she comes alongside that terrible man she married."

"Yes, I think we've established that you can't abide Draco's birth father," interrupted Snape. "Are you under the impression that Draco has no feelings, Black? I can tell you from personal experience that having a dreadful father does *not* mean that one wants to hear him constantly maligned."

"Touchy, touchy," jibed Sirius. All at once, his eyes narrowed to mere slits, like a long-distant memory had suddenly come crashing through his mind. "But you would be, wouldn't you? What do you think, Severus? Will Hostilian Snape come to meet you when you arrive?"

Snape went perfectly stiff, his voice glacial as he rasped, "Where did you hear that name?"

"Regulus."

"You've seen him there?" gasped Harry.

A deep frown wrinkled Sirius' face. "Actually, no. I haven't been able to find him. But from what you've said, Harry, I gather I haven't been here long. Perhaps we're not meant to meet yet . . ."
"But he was your little brother," said Harry sadly. "You shouldn't have to wait to see him."

"Waiting doesn't bother us. Not here." Sirius ran a hand down the mirror. "Don't grieve for me, Harry. Not about that, or anything else."

"All right," said Harry, wishing he could reach through the mirror to hug his godfather. Just as well that he couldn't, though. He could sense his father's tension, behind him. Mention of Hostilian Snape had definitely touched a nerve, but at least the conversation had moved past him--

Or not.

"Regulus told me about your father when he was still alive," said Sirius, his eyes blazing as he looked at Snape. "Can you guess what he said, Severus?"

Severus almost spat his answer. "The loyal Sirius Black, best friend of the Potters, having secret meetings with Death Eaters!"

"He was my brother!" roared Sirius. "And he was having second thoughts about what he'd got himself into! Of course I met with him!"

"Gentlemen, we are a family!" said Draco in a loud voice, but the attempt at peace-making fell flat. Sirius was still shouting.

"Unlike some people, I actually cared about my family! Even the ones gone wrong! Ask him, Harry. Go on, ask him. Ask your father what happened to his own father. Ask him!"

Harry didn't want to, because he'd learned through long and painful experience that Severus Snape valued his privacy. He wasn't ready to talk about his past, not even with his sons, and that was all right, because Harry could wait. Learning Snape's secrets wasn't worth much when they were forced from him; that wasn't what love was about.

But Snape wasn't going to have the opportunity to share his past when he was ready. Sirius would see to that . . . but not if Harry had anything to say about it.

"Shut up!" he roared, marching up to the mirror, coming so close that his nose bumped into it. "Shut up, Sirius! That's Snape's private business and he'll tell us when he wants us to know about it and if that's never, then that's just fine! I love him anyway and you aren't going to change that, so bloody well stop trying!"

Sirius took a step backwards. "I just think you ought to know what sort of man you're claiming as your father, Harry."

"I do know what sort of man he is. I know him a hundred times better than you ever did--"

"Perhaps it's time you know me better still," said Snape, still in that glacial tone. "Seeing as Black can't resist telling you what he thinks he knows."

"Oh, I know what I know," spat Sirius. "You're no fit father for anybody. How can you be? How can you possibly be?"

"Stop it!" yelled Harry.

But Sirius didn't.

"You should have told him, Snape. You really should have told him. But you knew he'd turn
against you, didn't you?"

A wave of green washed into Snape's face, and for Harry, that was the final straw.

"Sirius, I'm going to turn against you if you keep hurting my dad, so shut the fuck up!" he screamed.

With that, Harry turned his back on the mirror and went to kneel before his father. Snape had fallen into one of the chairs Draco had transfigured earlier. Just seeing those three chairs made Harry want to scream again. What had he thought, that the four of them could sit down and have a normal discussion? That was never going to happen.

Harry laced his fingers through Snape's and pulled lightly. "Come on, Severus. Let's go home."

"Red--"

"No, Draco," said Snape hoarsely, before the other boy could complete the curse.

Harry glanced to the side to see Draco standing with his wand levelled on the mirror.

"Why the hell not?"

"Harry will want to talk with him again," answered Snape, pushing to his feet without once looking at the mirror. He moved like he'd aged decades in a single afternoon.

Draco snarled as he tucked his wand away and rushed to Severus' side.

Harry glared at Sirius as they passed in front of the mirror. "Go tell my dad that as far as I'm concerned, your head's still stuck up your arse."

"Harry--"

Harry turned his back, and didn't look behind him when Sirius called his name again.

___________________________________________________________________________

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Six: "Fathers and Sons"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

___________________________________________________________________________
Fathers and Sons

Chapter Notes

Thanks to my lovely helpers for their generosity in providing feedback, encouragement, and betaing/Britpicking. I couldn't do this without them -- Arwen, Keira, Susanna, and Claudia. In addition, Mercredi and I have had some fantastic chats recently where we worked out a lot of details for this and future chapters. During the final beta she even rewrote some key bits when I felt stuck. *Hand on heart* -- Thank you, Mercredi. I love having you with me in this story universe!

---
This was painful to write; readers will likely find the content of this chapter disturbing. If discussions of child abuse are triggering for you, please stop reading here. Also, readers should keep in mind that AYLNO and its sequels are based on books 1-5 of the canon. Year-Snape is a pureblood, not a half-blood, and his father was an artist named Hostilian. We learned that much in Year. In this chapter, the tapestry of Snape's past has a few more threads woven into it.

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters or this fictional universe. JK Rowling, some publishers, and some film companies own everything. I'm not making anything from this except a hobby.

Timeline and Caveats: See Chapter 1.

"I am perfectly capable of standing on my own," said Snape in an icy tone as he shrugged off Harry and Draco's arms. An abrupt swish of his wand made the door to their quarters close with a thud.

"Yeah, of course you are," said Harry, nodding to show his support. "And you don't have to tell us anything. Right, Draco?"

"That may be right, but it's not very realistic," said Draco as he started taking off his outer robes. "I'm sure Severus would rather you hear about his father from him. Unless you're volunteering never to speak to Sirius Black again?"

"Ha. I just might," said Harry, scowling at his former optimism. What had he been thinking, that Sirius and Severus could chat with one another like one big happy family? That was never going to happen. Sirius was too much of a . . . a prick, Harry decided, almost grinding his teeth. "It'd serve him right if I shoved that mirror in a drawer and never, ever looked at it--"

"No," said Snape sharply. "Black is your only link to your parents. I won't have that cut off on my account. James and Lily may not be able to send you messages, but through Black, you can communicate with them."

"I meant it when I said I'd choose you--" retorted Harry.

"It would be a poor father indeed who asked you to make such a choice." Snape regarded Harry levelly for a moment. "You said once that you wanted to know me better. I do hope you meant it."

Harry swallowed. "I'm sure the story can't be that bad. I mean, whatever you did, you had your
"Whatever I did," repeated Snape slowly. "Harry . . . if the story revolved merely around my own actions, it would be far easier to tell. I've warned you to have no illusions about me. But . . . there is more to this than Black realises."

Draco came around behind Severus and without a word, began to help him out of his formal robes. Snape stiffened at first, but then nodded and let the other boy get on with it. Harry took the opportunity to get comfortable as well. Only when they were all seated in the living room, Draco and Harry on the sofa while Snape occupied his favourite wingback chair, did Harry reply.

"You could just tell us the part that Sirius knows, if you like."

Snape's black gaze bored into him, those eyes looking like endless tunnels again. Without meaning to, Harry shivered.

"Without the proper context, I'll look even more black-hearted than I no doubt was," Snape finally answered. "Not that context can exonerate me. Before we begin, I will need a solemn promise from both of you never to discuss these matters with anyone other than myself. Harry, that includes Black."

"I solemnly promise," said Draco at once.

"I solemnly promise, too," said Harry, just as quickly.

Snape slumped in his chair as though somewhat at a loss. "I . . . I suppose it comes as no great shock to either of you to hear that I had less than an ideal childhood."

Harry's mouth went dry, probably because the look on his father's face was so very grim. Suddenly, he was convinced of only one thing: that he'd been wrong to want to hear all of this. He should never have asked at all, and he definitely shouldn't have pressed.

He'd take it all back if he could, but of course Sirius had made that impossible.

Snape fell silent, his eyebrows drawn together, a deep frown on his features.

"Maybe a potion would help," said Draco in a quiet voice.

"Veritaserum?" Snape curled a lip and glared.

"I didn't mean that. Something mild, just enough to loosen your tongue."

"Excellent idea. Whisky it is," said Snape in clipped tones. "The password to my drinks cabinet is paz y soledad. I'd like two fingers, neat, and do be sure to serve three glasses in all. You and Harry are of age, after all."

"I don't want any--" Harry tried to protest.

"Three glasses!" snapped Snape.

Harry and Draco both jumped a little at his tone. Harry tried to pretend he hadn't, and thought that Draco was doing the same, since the other boy got up awfully fast to deal with the drinks.

Harry heard the clink of glasses being set out, and then Draco's voice, sounding hesitant. "Ogden's, or a single malt--"
"Glenmorangie," barked Snape, clearly at the end of his patience. The moment Draco returned, Snape snatched his drink and drained it.

If the tone of voice alone hadn't told Harry how upset their father was, that would have. Snape never guzzled spirits. He tended to nurse a drink instead, consuming it over the course of half an hour or more. Harry had seen him make one goblet of wine last all evening when he was marking papers.

"Another?" asked Draco blandly as he handed Harry a short, squat glass.

"No. Sit."

Draco did, sipping delicately at his whisky. Harry put his on a side table and crossed his hands in his lap.

"Spirits aren't a cure-all, apparently," drawled Snape. "I've still very little inclination to speak."

"There's really not much need," replied Draco. "I think I've figured it out, and frankly, I'd be shocked if Harry hasn't done the same."

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose, like he could feel a headache coming on. "Oh, do tell."

"Harry?"

Harry took that to mean that Draco didn't want to shock him with some terrible revelation, just in case Harry hadn't yet realised what must have happened to Hostilian Snape. But of course, Harry had.

That didn't mean it was easy to say. In fact, the whole idea made his stomach twist. "You . . . you killed your own father, didn't you?"

Snape bared his teeth, a low growling noise emerging from between them. "The two of you haven't much imagination. I didn't just kill my father. I obliterated him."

Harry swallowed, trying to figure out what the hell that meant. He couldn't, though. He was going to have to ask, and he really, really didn't want to.

He didn't have to, as it turned out. Draco spoke up before he could, and he managed to avoid the blunt question at hand. Draco really was a full Slytherin.

"You said we couldn't understand without some context. Why don't you stop trying to shock us, Severus, and give us some?"

"Pardon my reticence," snarled Snape. "I haven’t spent hours practicing this discourse in my bathroom mirror!"

Draco looked a bit deflated at that and opened his mouth to speak --to apologize, Harry figured--but when Snape practically growled, he snapped his mouth shut.

Harry wiped his palms on his trousers and cleared his throat a bit. "Why don't you just start at the beginning?" he asked, giving a shaky smile. "All right? We'll understand."

Snape scowled. "How can you possibly understand? Trust me, Harry. You can't, not unless you'd lived through what I did, and I would sooner obliterate myself than wish that on either one of you."

"Well," said Harry, "I understand one thing. You're my Dad and I love you, and whatever you did,
or had to do, years and years before we ever met? It's got nothing to do with now, all right? Nothing to do with us."

"Agreed," said Draco, his nod lending emphasis to the word.

Snape sighed. "You two shouldn't make promises without knowing the full situation. It's hardly strategic. As for the beginning, Harry . . . I'm not certain when it first began, to be quite honest."

"Well, then start with what you told me once. Remember? It went something like, *Once upon a time, I was an angry young man. The Dark Lord used that."

"That's as good a place as any. I suppose." Snape sighed again as he eyed the splash of whisky in Harry's glass. Harry almost expected him to ask for it. Instead, the man shook his head slightly and said, "We'll begin with what made me so angry, then. You both know that my father fancied himself an artist. What you don't know is that he was willing to go to great lengths in pursuit of his 'calling,' as he termed it."

Harry waited a moment, but Snape had fallen silent again. "I . . . I know he was abusive," he ventured. "I mean, I'd have realised that much by now even if I hadn't looked into your Pensieve."

Draco shot Harry a critical look, but didn't make any comment about such a horrible breach of manners. Instead, he spoke quietly to Severus. "I can understand what it's like to have an abusive father."

"Not like this, thank Merlin," Snape said as he exhaled. "Stop interrupting, both of you. Let me tell this in my own way."

"Of course," said Draco.

Harry merely nodded.

Snape took another long moment to marshal his thoughts. "First of all, you should understand that I was very poor, growing up. My father was a talented wizard who could have earned a decent living in any number of fields, but as he chose to devote all his time to his 'art' rather than the support of his family, we were in a desperate situation indeed. My mother did what she could, but she was often ill. So much so that she died when I was seven years old."

Snape shivered as if the memory still bothered him, even after all these years. "She shouldn't have died, not then. Not like that. Whatever Black may have to say about the afterlife, I refuse to believe that it was simply her time. No . . . *he* did it."

Harry drew in a breath, shocked, but remembered in time not to interrupt.

Snape shot him a glance. "Hostilian didn't kill her, Harry. Not directly. But what little money we had might have gone for potions and salves to treat her symptoms. With proper treatment, her consumption could even have been cured. But these things were dear, and there were no Galleons to spare, not when my father needed them for potions that would enhance his dubious talents."

"Oh," said Draco, clearly not worried about interrupting. "Titian's Tincture, things like that. Those cost the earth."

Snape nodded. "Not that one in particular, however, since my father practically spat on traditional forms of art. Oh no, *he* was part of the avant-garde. A true visionary, he thought himself. A purist with interest only in the abstract. Needless to say, this made him a laughingstock in the small circle of wizarding artists. What use is there in a painting that represents literally nothing? It will never
be able to speak, as wizarding portraits are expected to do. My father couldn't ever hope to make a living from his art, not unless he lived among Muggles. Merlin only knows why he wasn't willing to do that. He admired them enough. Mondrian, Pollack, Picasso . . . I grew up blaming Muggles for our plight. Despising them, actually, with a hatred so intense I could feel it licking like flames inside me. If it wasn't for them filling his head with nonsensical ideas about shapes and splotches that meant nothing, nothing, he could perhaps have resigned himself to producing proper wizarding art and earned a living.”

Harry nodded, puzzle pieces falling into place inside his mind. The way that Snape had once sneered that his father had been a purist . . . Harry had found the contempt a little baffling, since Snape at one point had himself believed in the superiority of pure wizarding blood. Snape's disdain for his father's purism made more sense now that Harry understood what the word implied in this case. It hadn't been about blood at all. Snape's father had actually liked Muggles . . . or at least he'd liked their art.

Which meant one thing, really: Snape's willingness to follow Voldemort made a lot more sense than ever before. Anybody who spoke against Muggles would have appealed to that hatred Snape had mentioned . . .

"You must have questions by now," Snape said, leaning back in his chair, his dark eyes shadowed as he stared first at Harry and then at Draco.

"No, not really," murmured Harry. "Just . . . I imagine that things must have got even worse after you were left alone with Hostilian."

"And now we come to the crux of the matter," said Snape in an odd tone. "I don't think you can know how apt your comment is, Harry."

The spirits in Draco's glass sloshed as his hand began shaking. He abruptly put the glass down.

"Yes, you'd know, though, wouldn't you?"

Draco shuddered as he sat beside Harry. "He . . . oh, Merlin. He did more than drink expensive potions in his quest to acquire more talent, didn't he? Dark Arts?"

Snape closed his eyes, his face a rigid mask that gave no clue to his emotions, but his voice gave everything away. It was a rasp of remembered pain, every sound underlain with the fury of a young child who had suffered without reason. Without recourse.

"Even before my mother died, my father was using me in ritual magic. At first, it was merely uncomfortable, but as he delved ever more deeply into Dark Arts, the rituals grew worse." Snape cleared his throat, his hands clenching, though his eyes remained closed, his features immobile. "There is an entire branch of the Dark Arts devoted to wish-fulfilment. Draco, you're no doubt aware of what that entails."

"Yes," said Draco as he quickly snatched up his glass and drained what remained, much as Snape had done before. "Do you want me to explain?"

"Please."

Shifting on the couch to face Harry, Draco made short work of it. "All rituals of this type are illegal because they rest on the premise that you can transform pain into positive magical energy if the conditions are right. You need . . ." He glanced once at Snape, and then hurried to keep speaking. "You need a young child, someone whose magic is immature, and you hurt them in these
ritual ways, and try to harvest their agony so you can transform it into wish magic."

"Ritual ways?"

"You don’t want to know. Trust me, Harry. I really wish that I didn't know about them."

"You mean, Lucius, he . . ."

"No, not this." Draco made a scoffing sound. "He gave me books to read on the subject. His way of threatening me, I suppose. As if I can't understand what I read . . . by the time he had me reading in the Dark Arts, my own magic was developed enough that it would have fought back against the rituals. And anyway, Lucius was far too critical for any of the rituals to work. You have to hurt the child for no reason whatsoever, you see. It can't be punishment. It can only be done in service of the ritual itself."

"That's sick--"

"That's merely the tip of the wand," interrupted Snape, his eyes snapping open. "Draco forgot to mention the single most important factor in these rituals. The child has to be willing."

"Oh, my God," breathed Harry. "That's horrible."

"You see why only very young children will do." Snape's lips twisted. "You can convince a three-year-old of anything. Literally."

Harry nodded, thinking of the Dursleys, and how Snape had understood, better than anybody else, just what it had done to Harry to have been lied to for all those years. And then he thought about that vision he'd seen in the Pensieve. Snape's mother, cowed by her husband, unable to protect her child from these horrible practices. Though she could have left, couldn't she?

Maybe not, though. Not if she'd been so ill.

In fact, the more Harry thought about it, the more he was sure that Snape had glossed over that part of the story. The child Harry had seen in the Pensieve had looked half-starved, and the woman hadn't been much better.

Hostilian hadn't just diverted money that could have been better used for potions; he'd kept his family in such abject poverty that there hadn't even been enough money for food.

Once again, Harry was struck by the feeling that it was no wonder his father understood him so well. He'd known what it was like to starve, too . . .

"When my mother died, however . . ." Snape stopped and swallowed several times. "I'm not certain I should mention the rest. It's not something that men your age should have to contemplate. But . . ."

"It's the context," said Draco after a long moment of silence.

Snape nodded, looking down at his hands, then. Like he was ashamed, when he hadn't done anything to feel that way. Or at least, not when he was a child. Whatever had happened to Hostilian must have taken place later, since it had something to do with Voldemort . . .

"The abuse--" Snape started over. "The pain rituals upon which my father relied were all but useless by the time I was seven. My own magic had begun to develop, you see. It fought back . . . there was only one thing left to sacrifice to the dark rituals. My . . . my innocence. Such as it was.
I'd seen so much of the Dark Arts by then that I already felt tainted with them."

That explained why Sirius had claimed that Snape knew so many curses when he'd arrived at Hogwarts. Still, Harry frowned. "You weren't tainted, Dad--"

"I didn't have a lot of magical innocence left, all the same," said Snape harshly, though he kept his gaze trained down. "But that wasn't the kind of innocence my father needed. As long as my mother was alive, he-- he refrained from the worst of the rituals. Merlin only knows why. If she did nothing to stop the other . . . perhaps he simply knew he couldn't face her after he'd put those darkest arts into practice."

"Where the hell was Wizard Family Services?" Draco suddenly erupted.

Snape lifted his head and gave a little shrug. "Just as well they weren't involved, Draco. I'd never have been permitted to adopt either one of you."

Harry blinked. "What? Why? It's not your fault that your father--" Was a bastard, was what he'd been going to say, but remembering Snape's remark about even abused children not wanting to hear their parents insulted, he changed course in mid-sentence. "It's not your fault he did those things."

"No, but had they known about my own childhood . . ." Snape sighed. "Sometimes victims of abuse become perpetrators of the same, Harry. It's not right or just for the Ministry to make decisions on that basis, but then, you know my opinion of the Ministry, adjunct offices included."

"I understand those ten thousand lines better now," said Draco in a hushed tone.

"Ronald Weasley's, or your own?" drawled Snape.

Draco's pale skin flushed. "His, of course. Actually, I'm surprised you didn't assign him ten million lines. That truly was a vile thing he said, accusing you of . . . when . . . yeah."

It had been vile, all right, but Harry still felt like he'd lost the drift of the conversation. "What does any of this have to do with Ron?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "What do you think the worst of the rituals were, Harry? Darkest arts, does that give you a clue?"

Harry swallowed. "Um, sacrificing a baby? But Dad's still here, so--"

"Hostilian was chasing wish magic, not necromancy!"

"Your brother doesn't deserve your scorn," said Snape in a tone that was somehow stern and level all at once. "He wasn't raised amidst the Dark Arts, the way you were."

"Well, what kind of innocence did you think Dad was talking about?" asked Draco, glaring.

"Oh," said Harry, feeling like an absolute imbecile. He closed his eyes, wishing the floor would open up and swallow him. "You mean your father would . . ."

"He's trying not to say it, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"That's quite enough, Draco," said Snape. "I can speak for myself."

"You don't have to," croaked Harry. "I . . . uh, I get it, now. He . . . he . . ."

"Touched me in an improper manner. To say the least." Snape's voice was calm, like he'd come to
terms with all of this years earlier, but Harry knew that wasn't really true. Snape was still ashamed. Harry could understand that. Sometimes, late at night, he still blamed himself for the way his aunt and uncle hadn't loved him, even though he knew that he'd had no power, none, to change their feelings.

What you knew in your head didn't always match what you knew in your heart.

"That's . . . God, Dad. I don't even know what to say. That's just . . . beyond horrible."

"It was, yes." Sighing, Snape gestured toward Harry's glass of single malt. "I think you should drink that. The story's only going to get worse."

Harry didn't want alcohol, but now wasn't the time to argue with his father. Taking it in hand, he started sipping at it, trying not to make a face. Neat whisky was terrible, though. It burned his tongue and tasted awful.

Draco smiled very slightly and got up to toss powder into the Floo. "One butterbeer, chilled, with ice."

It shimmered into existence on the table; Draco scooped it up on his way back and poured Harry's whisky into the larger glass, a smooth twirl of his wand causing the drink to mix itself. "Try it now."

It still wasn't the greatest thing Harry had ever tasted, but at least it was drinkable. "Thanks."

Draco nodded as he took his place on the couch once again. "So, Severus. Go ahead and tell us the worst. I think it's safe to say that Harry and I will understand, whatever it is. In fact, I'm bloody well likely to approve--"

Snape skewered Draco with a withering look, but after a moment, he glanced down at his hands again. "I began to attend Hogwarts at the age of ten, which was the case then for children whose birthdays fell in the winter. Coming here was more of a relief than either of you can understand, though I suppose Harry has an inkling. For months at a time, I could avoid being dragged into my father's mad pursuit of talent. Holidays, however, continued to be . . . fraught with difficulty."

"Yeah," said Harry, swallowing as he thought of how he'd longed to stay at Hogwarts for the summer. And he, of course, had had very little reason, not when compared to his father. "Did you . . . uh, did you ever think about telling Dumbledore? Asking for help?"

"Did you?"

"I . . . I guess I hinted, sometimes. But no, not really."

"You were in the headmaster's favourite house, with every reason to trust him," said Snape quietly. "And still, all you could manage was to hint. Now imagine that from your first day here, you'd heard from your housemates that the headmaster despised and distrusted Slytherins on principle."

"That's not exactly true--"

"It's an oversimplification, but it's not entirely false, either. I still believe that if a Ravenclaw or a Hufflepuff had been lured into a werewolf's den, barely escaping with his life, the perpetrators would have been expelled. For some reason, when the target was a Slytherin, Albus found every reason to keep them in school." Snape waved a hand as though to say that it no longer mattered. "I wouldn't have told him in any case. There are some topics that children simply can't broach."
"And you need to stop blaming the victim," said Draco, crossing his arms and frowning at Harry.

"What . . . I'm not--"

"You're saying that he could have stopped it if only he'd done this or said that. It's an insidious way of putting the blame on the child, and that's not where the blame belongs."

Harry blanched.

The hard glitter in Draco's eyes vanished almost at once. "It's a common impulse, Harry," he said, lifting his shoulders slightly. "The fact that you go there probably just shows, you know, that you think of yourself in the same way. Like you could have done something about your own situation."

Harry made a face. "What made you so clever?"

"That recovery book, for one." Draco sat back again. "Bits and pieces of it have been coming back to me ever since Dad first started telling his story."

Harry nodded and swivelled to face his father. "$\text{Sorry. Really. I didn't mean it was your fault. I just . . . I just wish your father could have been stopped. That's all I meant.}"

"I know," said Snape. "$\text{We have a great deal in common, Harry. I spent years battling the idea that I should have asked for help. I couldn't, though, and not just because the matter was so very shameful, or because like you, I could barely imagine trusting an adult. It was also something that I think Draco can understand. Children don't stop loving their parents on account of abuse. In fact, it can lead to . . .}"

"A neurotic striving for approval," whispered Draco.

"Oh, yes." Snape steepled his hands. "$\text{I used to sketch. And sculpt. Trying to show my father that I shared his interests. Trying to be worth something in his eyes. But when I was younger, I didn't really understand the depth of his contempt for traditional art forms, and I have no talent for anything but those. I soon learned that he would most likely Incendio my efforts the moment he spotted them, but for many years I kept on trying and hoping. And failing.}"

"Yeah, Dudley's crayon pictures always got taped to the 'fridge while mine were binned," said Harry. "$\text{Even when I tried really hard to make them good.}"

Snape nodded. "$\text{And when it came to Hostilian, rejecting my drawings was tantamount to rejecting me. After all, I'd learned from my earliest years that art was all that mattered to him. Literally. But still, I loved him at least as much as I hated him. And hatred . . . the impulse toward vengeance . . . it leaves you open to manipulation.}"

Voldemort, thought Harry, tensing. He didn't know what his father was going to say, but he knew it was going to be bad. Very bad.

"By the time I was fourteen years old, I was an accomplished brewer dabbling in creating my own potions. I could probably have passed the N.E.W.T. the year before. My love of the subject started early, about the time I first realised that my mother's frequent bouts of consumption could have been alleviated and even cured, had we been able to afford the correct potions. I vowed then and there that nobody I loved would ever suffer from such a lack again. I was driven to study and practice . . . but soon enough, anger had me turning my brewing talents toward purposes other than healing."

Snape sighed, picking up his empty glass and staring at it. "$\text{This part of the story is difficult,}"
though I suppose it shouldn’t be. Both of you are old enough to understand. I . . . I . . . Sometime during my fourth year here, I began to feel stirrings of sexual attraction. Up until then, I'd dealt with what happened to me during the holidays by what your therapist would call avoidance, I suppose. I simply didn't think about it, not even when it was happening. Sometimes I almost felt as though I were two separate people, only one of whom had those experiences. But that all changed when I began to desire several of the young ladies in Slytherin and Ravenclaw. If I'd felt tainted before, it was nothing to the way I felt at the prospect of any sexual contact with another person. I desired it, yes. Physically, I was the same as any young man my age. Mentally, however? I was convinced that I could never have anyone that way, that I'd been so thoroughly defiled that nobody would ever, ever wish to touch me."

"That's not true; you weren't defiled at all--"

"I know that," Snape interrupted. "Believe me, Harry, I do know. And before either one of you draws insane conclusions, I'll state for the record that I've surmounted those feelings by now; I'm hardly a virgin. But I am speaking of how I felt and thought at the age of fourteen."

"Right," said Harry, his neck so hot that he knew he must be blushing. He knew that he was being silly, but the thought of his father having sex . . . it was just really embarrassing. When he'd joked about Snape getting together with Marsha, he'd only been thinking about them dating, not . . .

"This change . . . it also changed my feelings toward my father," continued Snape after a moment. "I began to understand more clearly just what he'd done to me. Or, not what he'd done, perhaps, but exactly how wrong he'd been. He'd sentenced me to a future of abject loneliness, and worse--at least for a boy that age--celibacy. I stopped avoiding the topic inside my own mind. Anger became fury, and fury became nothing short of rage. I lost all interest in healing potions, my experiments turning more and more toward the dark. I began brewing with my father in mind . . . and when I was fifteen, I succeeded in dosing him with something of my own creation."

Harry tensed. This was it. Obliteration, whatever that meant--

"It was a potion designed to cause him excruciating pain every time he laid so much as a finger on me."

Harry blew out a breath. "That doesn't sound dark. I mean, you were just protecting yourself."

"Protecting myself by means of the Dark Arts," Snape shrugged. "If I had to do it all again, I'd no doubt brew the same potion. I saw no other way out. Hostilian was stronger than I was, both physically and magically. I couldn't stop him, not in any kind of fair fight. But then, Slytherins aren't renowned for those. Still, it was the first step toward the Dark Lord, because my old Potions Master, one Horace Slughorn, took it upon himself to share my expertise with Lucius Malfoy, whom he'd taught a few years earlier." Snape's expression conveyed disdain. "Slughorn's practise was to curry favour with those he believed would become influential. Your father was one such, Draco. Slughorn couldn't have told Lucius what my special potion did; that knowledge was mine alone. But Slughorn did know enough about potions to recognise my talent in the subject. He recommended me to Malfoy, believing he was doing both of us a good turn. Who wouldn't want to work as a private brewer for a family as wealthy as the Malfoys?"

Draco drew in a breath. "I'm sorry, Severus. So sorry. I didn't know. It was Lucius who . . . ?"

"Brought me before Voldemort the first time, yes." Snape glanced without rancour at Draco. "Because of course, Lucius knew that the Dark Lord would be very interested in a private brewer, particularly one capable of inventing new potions. New potions that could inflict pain . . . oh, he was most certainly interested in me. Not that I was foolish enough to boast. He frightened me too
much for that. I could see myself subject to his power, and the prospect was alarming, to say the least."

"Then, how . . . ?"

Draco, with his quick grasp of magic, had already figured it out. "You didn't yet know Occlumency."

Snape nodded, his fingers tensing on the glass he still held. "The Dark Lord read the truth about me within mere moments of our first encounter. Not just what I'd done to my father, but what had made it necessary to begin with. The full story of my shame and degradation at his hands. And yes, it's true that the Dark Lord frightened me, but what you must also understand is that after that, he knew exactly how to persuade me into his ranks. For a long while, he said nothing of what he'd learned about me, but he didn't hesitate to use the knowledge. That very night, he drew his followers--and me--into a circle and lectured us at length on the worthlessness of Muggles."

"Muggles," repeated Harry, nodding.

"Lucius remarked on it after we'd left," added Snape. "'The Dark Lord usually rails against Mudbloods,' he said. At the time, I thought little of the comment, but many months later I remembered it and realised how skilfully I'd been manipulated."

"That set the stage," continued Snape after a moment. "What followed was a series of more private meetings. Sometimes Lucius was invited; sometimes I was alone with the Dark Lord. We spoke more of Muggles, my contempt for them growing by leaps and bounds. But we also discussed me. My talents, my wishes, my plans for my own life. He . . . he was everything I'd ever hoped my own father could be. Someone who saw me as a person with worth. Of course, the Dark Lord saw no such thing. I was a tool to him, just as I'd been a tool to Hostilian. The difference was that this time, I didn't know that I was being used."

Snape set his glass aside. "For more than a year, I basked in his attention and enjoyed our frequent meetings. He used my contempt for Muggles to guide my thinking into paths that would parallel his own. 'What is a Mudblood, Severus, except a Muggle with a smattering of magic?' he would ask. From there, it wasn't a large leap to believing that half-bloods were something less than full wizards, too. It's a seductive philosophy for the pure-blooded, of course. Most human beings enjoy feeling superior to their fellow man."

Draco began to fidget.

"Of course the Dark Lord said nothing at all about his own mixed blood." Snape sighed. "But my own credulity is a topic for another day. What matters now is what I did to Hostilian. During my seventh year at Hogwarts, the Dark Lord began to praise me more highly, speaking of how he would need my talents during the inevitable conflict to come. By then, I knew Occlumency; he'd seen to that so that I could defend my mind should the headmaster grow curious about my frequent absences from school."

Harry gulped, a lot of things making sense now. Voldemort was the one who'd taught Snape to shield his mind. No wonder his methods had been "harsh," as Snape had once put it.

Snape abruptly rose to his feet. "I will return in a moment, and then we'll finish this." Striding to the Floo, he took a pinch of powder and called out, "Headmaster's Office!"

Green flames roared up to whoosh him away.
Harry turned to Draco. "Do you think he needs Dumbledore here for some reason?"

"I can't really imagine why." Draco frowned. "All of this, even the parts we don't know yet . . . I'm sure the headmaster must know all about it. He probably made full disclosure a condition of taking Severus into the Order when he turned on the Dark Lord."

Harry made a face. "Voldemort, all right? It's hard enough hearing Dad call him that, even though I know he's doing it because . . . well, it's the context, I guess. But not you, too--"

"Voldemort, all right. I am trying, Harry."

"I know." Harry frowned. "I can't imagine why Dad would want Dumbledore down here, though. Telling us everything is hard enough with just the three of us in the room."

"Maybe Dumbledore knows something and Severus wants us to hear it directly from him."

"Maybe," said Harry doubtfully. 

Draco got up and strode the length of the room and back. "You haven't finished your drink."

"It's pretty vile."

"A single malt mixed into Butterbeer? I've no doubt of that."

"You're the one who mixed it."

"I had to do something. Dad obviously wanted you to drink it--"

"I'm not sure what Dad is thinking," complained Harry. "It can't be good to teach us to drink away our stress."

"He's hardly doing that. Not even by example. You don't think that one double makes him drunk, do you? It's a relaxant."

"I thought we learned last year that alcohol is a depressant."

"Which makes you feel relaxed--"

"Fair enough--"

"I imagine it's Severus' way of treating us as adults," said Draco, one hand rubbing his chin. "Those things he had to explain . . . he wouldn't have done it if we weren't of age. It's not appropriate to talk of such things to children."

Coming from Draco of all people, that statement gave Harry pause. Just what sorts of things did purebloods think were and weren't appropriate for children? After all, Draco had been reading Dark Arts books before he'd even begun to attend Hogwarts! Not to mention Lucius Malfoy's idea of discipline: letting a snake crawl all over Draco just because he couldn't learn a spell fast enough, and wizard's beatings . . . And it wasn't just Malfoy, either. Last year, Snape had insisted that Harry go into that Pensieve to witness the way that Death Eaters tortured whole families--

Harry breathed in through his mouth, trying to forget those images. Besides, his brain felt twisted like a pretzel by then. As far as he was concerned, sometimes pureblood culture just didn't make sense.

One thing did make sense, though. Harry understood now why Snape had always dodged questions
about what had made him join Voldemort in the first place. Not that Harry had ever really pressed those questions. He was glad now that he hadn't. Really glad.

"The drinks are a reminder to him that we're not children," continued Draco.

"Well, that explains why he always let us drink before we turned seventeen," said Harry, trying not to sound too scathing about it. So Snape wasn't consistent. Harry probably wasn't either, so almost straight away he waved a hand. "I know what you mean. Good thinking, really."

Draco peered at him. "Are you all right?"

Harry nodded. No need to ask what his brother meant. "Yeah. I know Dad always tells us how terrible vengeance is--"

"Yeah, do-as-I-say, not-as-I-do."

"But I can understand that," added Harry. "I mean, I can't blame him for killing the man who made his whole childhood so . . . unbelievably horrible. But he obviously has his regrets, and he can see now that it must have cemented Voldemort's power over him, so it's no wonder he tells us not to do the same. Are you all right, though?"

"I'm more relieved than ever that you killed Lucius," admitted Draco as he shoved his hands in his pockets. "He didn't . . . I mean, he never molested me, but you know how harsh he was, and the more I hear about Hostilian, the more I want to kill Lucius myself."

For his part, Harry felt relieved that he had killed Lucius, though his arms began to itch madly as he thought about it. He took the opportunity to scratch rather viciously while Draco gazed in the distance, but stopped when Draco turned to him. Then he had to speak quickly, hopefully before his brother noticed that something was wrong. Something else, that was.

"Er . . . if you want revenge, you could always set fire to Lucius' portrait--"

"The Order might need it," said Draco sourly. "You know that. But . . . hmm, as long as we're dreaming of vengeance, I hardly think that fire is the worst thing I could do to that portrait. You know what would be?"

When Harry shook his head, Draco flashed a smile full of glee. "Snogging Rhiannon right in front of him, that's what. I'd introduce her as a Muggle first, of course. Hell, if I had my way, I'd introduce her as my Muggle fiancée and watch him choke on the thought of his precious pure blood flowing into half-wizard children."

"Dumbledore's never going to add a Muggle to the Fidelius spell," Harry pointed out. "I'm not sure he could if he wanted to, and that would put her in danger, wouldn't it? And anyway, you promised Dad that you wouldn't go anywhere near that portrait again."

"I said I wouldn't go near it alone. If I'm with Rhiannon, I won't be alone, will I?"

"He meant you could see it with Remus so the two of you could pry information out of it, and you know it!"

"Oh, relax. I said I was dreaming, didn't I?"

Harry wasn't sure he trusted the look on Draco's face. But . . . Rhiannon couldn't enter Grimmauld Place unless the headmaster agreed, so Draco didn't have much hope of putting his plan into action. Just as well; that portrait was absolutely vicious. Harry didn't want his brother anywhere
near it. Harry shuddered just thinking about the vile, manipulative things that blasted portrait had said.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, suddenly remembering. "Lucius knows! Or, knew, I mean."

"Knew what?"

"What happened to Hostilian. I think so, at least. When the portrait was telling me that I was fated to go dark, it said something about it. Something like, 'I wonder if Severus will put you down himself when you turn. He's certainly capable. Has he ever told you about--' I bet he was talking about Dad killing Hostilian."

"That's pretty vague."

"Yeah, but--"

"And Dad didn't just kill him. He obliterated him, remember?"

"What do you think that means?"

"You're about to find out," said Snape over the noise of the Floo whooshing him back. He stepped out, his arms full of a large stone basin.

Well, that explained the trip to the headmaster's office. Snape had gone to fetch the Pensieve.

"We weren't meaning to gossip, sir," said Harry, feeling bad that the Floo had allowed Snape to overhear their last couple of comments.

Snape set the Pensieve on their dining table, stretching out his arms once they were free of its considerable weight. "Harry, you wouldn't be normal if you and your brother had sat here in silence after the things you'd just heard. I prefer you normal, so enough said."

"You've always treated me like I was normal," said Harry with a smile.

"You are normal, you idiot child. Your circumstances, on the other hand, are frequently extraordinary."

That was one way of looking at it, thought Harry. He wished more people could see it like that.

Draco was staring at the Pensieve distrustfully. "I know what that is, but I don't have a lot of experience wandering about in one. You . . . you want us to see how the Dark Lord manipulated you, I suppose?"

Voldemort, Harry almost sighed, but for his father's sake, he refrained.

"Not exactly." Snape sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs around the dining table, his posture stiff. Controlled. "What I told you before was difficult enough to admit. This . . . I've never spoken of it. Not to anyone. Albus knows, but only because I allowed him into my mind. He deserved to know what sort of person he was taking into his confidence, such as it was."

"Such as it was?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You surely don't assume that he trusted me straight away, do you? He'd have been mad to so much as contemplate it. I could easily have been ordered to 'betray' the Dark Lord so that I could gain Albus' trust and learn the Order's secrets. No . . . even after I opened my mind to him, Albus regarded all my words and actions with a healthy degree of scepticism. I was
delighted to see it. It would have been quite a blow to discover that I'd thrown in my lot with a credulous fool."

"Yeah, all right--"

"He grew to trust me completely, in time," added Snape. "I think you know that. His testimony kept me from Azkaban, after all."

"We trust you, too," said Draco in a plaintive voice. "There's no need for a Pensieve. We'll believe what you say."

"This will say more than I can." Snape walked the short distance to where Draco stood, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I understand your reluctance to stand in his presence again, but you know that this is just a memory. It isn't real."

"It was real for you," said Draco, blinking.

"Yes." Snape's hand tightened on his son's shoulder. "I can tell you what happened, how he persuaded me to this horror, why I agreed . . . but unless you see these things for yourself, I fear you won't truly comprehend the story. In the Pensieve you can see me as I was then, Draco."

"The context," whispered Draco, his voice almost breaking apart.

"Yes," said Snape again. "And too, I would like you to observe firsthand how very seductive the Dark Lord can be. You were at one meeting, but that was one reserved for torture." Snape glanced at Harry, a dark shimmer of sympathy haunting his eyes, but then he returned his full attention to his other son. "You've never seen the Dark Lord at his most persuasive. In case he ever turns the sharp edge of his wit to the task of twisting you the way he did me . . . well, forewarned is forearmed."

Draco finally nodded, though his mouth was turned down as though the prospect made him ill.

"And you?" asked Snape, turning toward Harry, though he kept his hand on Draco's shoulder. "Would you rather hear what happened than see it with your own eyes? You're likely to find it beyond disturbing."

"Torture, then," said Harry, biting his lip. "You don't mean needles, do you?"

"A Dementor, actually." Snape peered closely at Harry. "You've some experience of what that means."

"More than some," muttered Harry, thinking of the awful sight of Dementors trying to feed on Sirius' soul. Not to mention the feeling of nearly being Kissed.

Or the sound of his mother's screams.

"It can't affect you," said Snape, obviously reading the look on his face. "You won't relive the night your parents died."

"Why should you have to relive the night your father died, though? You're planning on coming in with us, aren't you?"

"Of course." Snape's hands fell to his sides. "I want Draco to see for himself how persuasive the Dark Lord can be. You, on the other hand, have no real need of such knowledge. The Dark Lord--"
"Voldemort," interrupted Harry. He couldn't stand hearing the other, even though he understood why Snape had gone back to it. Still, if they were headed into that Pensieve, he wanted his father going in with the right attitude: namely, that Voldemort wasn't his lord. Not any longer.

"Voldemort won't be trying to subvert you," Snape continued, just a hint of an edge in his tone. "On the other hand, you've said many times that you want to know more about me. I can't think of a better way than witnessing this. However, it's your decision. We're past the point at which I'm willing to shove you into a Pensieve."

Harry knew exactly what his father was talking about. Are you a man or a boy? he'd asked once. Of course, he'd just been goading Harry, back then. Snape had wanted to get even for Harry's demanding questions about the Death Eater meeting Snape had attended.

He was asking the question again now, though much more indirectly. And the difference was, this time he wasn't trying to provoke a reaction. He only wanted Harry to go into that Pensieve if he was ready to do it. If he was a man, able to see his father's past for what it honestly had been. If he was ready to leave his childhood illusions behind.

Not that he'd had that many illusions about Snape to begin with. Harry knew he wasn't perfect. He'd always known that.

He had, however, tended to avoid thinking about the uglier aspects of Snape's past. Just as Snape, when he was younger, had avoided thinking on things that were too horrible to contemplate.

Are you a man or boy?

The words echoed inside his mind again, almost taunting him, but this time, he was goading himself. Snape wasn't pressuring him, not in any way.

"I'll go in with you," he said quietly.

Snape nodded, a single crisp motion that implied approval. Then he made his way back to the table, both his sons at his side. When he lifted his wand, Draco shivered. When the strand of memories that emerged from his temple was thick, sodden, and solid black, Harry gulped.

Tucking his wand away, Snape took Harry by the left hand and Draco by the right. "Ready?"

Together, the three of them plunged headfirst into the past.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Seven: "January 9, 1977"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight and Mercredi

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They landed on an open plain surrounded by gently rolling hills, great rectangular slabs of stone all around them. It was an almost moonless night, the glittering stars barely shedding enough light to see by. Harry squinted in the darkness and noticed that his father and brother were doing the same.

"Stonehenge," whispered Draco.

"Never let it be said that the-- that Voldemort has no sense of the dramatic," murmured Snape.

"Why did you come here alone?" asked Harry, gesturing towards the dim figure of a younger Severus Snape standing in the middle of the circle of stones.

"The date is the ninth of January."

"Your birthday--"

"Yes. Over the Christmas holidays, Voldemort had given me a Portkey timed to activate at midnight on the ninth." Snape's voice took on a mocking note. "Happy birthday to me."

"It wasn't just your birthday," said Draco, clearly appalled. "This is your seventh year, isn't it? And if you were ten that September when you first started school . . . this was your coming of age!"

"A flair for the dramatic, I told you."

"But didn't your father at least--"

"No," Snape interrupted Draco. "That potion I'd given him was still in effect, remember. He was angry with me. Obviously. He didn't say a word to me during the holidays. Not one, but that was a relief, to be honest. I was tired of hearing how worthless I was."

"Still, no coming of age ceremony--"

"Oh, but I had one," said Snape in a sardonic tone. "Watch."

Just a few seconds later, a loud crack echoed across the plain, and Voldemort appeared within the circle of stones, a few feet from young Severus, who immediately fell to his knees.

"My Lord."
Harry winced, but said nothing.

"Severus," said Voldemort warmly. "Thank you for meeting me here, and on your coming-of-age, no less. It must have been a busy day for you, and still you found time."

Snape let go of his sons' hands then, and stepped closer to the unfolding scene, letting each decide on his own if he wished to follow.

Harry gritted his teeth and stepped forward, Draco trailing behind.

"I can think of no higher honour than being allowed a private meeting with you on this of all days, my Lord," said Severus, tilting his head back as he continued to kneel.

"Oh, Severus," crooned Voldemort, one hand now stroking over Snape's hair, much the way one might pet a favoured hound. "So loyal. You truly are a treasure. You do know that, don't you?"

Severus trembled slightly as he knelt, the words clearly meaning the world to him.

Harry had to struggle not to cry. He knew what it felt like to be starved for affection. God, if Voldemort had been kind to him the first time they'd met, if Harry hadn't known that the man had killed his parents and tried to kill him . . . it was so easy to see why Snape had fallen into his trap.

"I would hope that I am of some use, my Lord," whispered Severus.

"Rise, my faithful one. I have something for you."

_Hostilian_, thought Harry, feeling sick.

But Voldemort had more finesse than to start with that, Harry soon realised.

"A gift to celebrate your coming-of-age," said Voldemort, a large, flat box covered in festive wrappings appearing in his hands. "Today you became a man. Allow me to be the first to greet you as such. The honour is mine, Severus Snape."

Severus' expression was tentative as he grasped hold of the box. "May I?"

Voldemort threw back his head and laughed. "But of course."

Severus gasped as he drew a thick black cloak from the box. The clasp at the top glittered gold in the starlight, and the heavy folds of the cloak looked like velvet to Harry. Or perhaps even some sort of fur, skilfully woven into a smooth, graceful sweep of fabric.

Only then did Harry notice that young Severus' own robe was not just threadbare, but tattered in places. Yet he wasn't shivering, despite the January cold. Harry soon understood why.

"Warming charms are well and good," said Voldemort, shaking his head slightly. "But there is nothing like a fine cloak. If anyone deserves the best, Severus, you do."

Severus still looked awed, the expression becoming something more like worship as he lifted his gaze from the cloak to thank Voldemort. "My Lord is truly too generous--"

"Criticising me, Severus?"

"Oh no, my Lord," gushed Severus at once. "You always know best."

"Just so, just so," agreed Voldemort, nodding. "Off with that rag your father provided, then. It's
time to look like what you are, Severus, whether he will acknowledge it or not. A strong, capable wizard well-able to distinguish between those who deserve to be a part of our world, and those who do not."

"Yes, my Lord," breathed Severus, dropping his own cloak to the brittle winter grass before donning the fine new one he'd been given. "Thank you."

Voldemort waved a hand in careless gesture. "It is nothing, Severus. There is much more I would like to give you. But first, we must talk of serious matters. You are a man, now. It is as a man that I would speak with you now."

"As my Lord desires."

Voldemort nodded brusquely and conjured a pair of chairs covered in green leather. He swept his cloak to the side as he sat down. Severus hesitated for a moment—wondering if he should kneel once more, Harry assumed.

But then he sat down as Voldemort obviously expected.

"A war is coming," said Voldemort. "You've heard me speak of this. A war between the wizards who would protect our world, and those who would destroy it in the name of inclusion. Of fairness. Tell me, Severus, is it fair that good, strong, pure-blooded children should have to see their education compromised by the presence of Mudbloods whose magic is doubtful at best?"

"No, my Lord," said Severus, leaning forward in his chair, his dark eyes gleaming, his expression rapt.

Harry felt ill watching it. Couldn't his father see that Voldemort was basing his conclusions on a tissue of lies? Snape had known Lily Evans. The Head Girl in his own year, for God's sake. He must have noticed that her magic wasn't weak, that Muggleborns could be just as powerfully magical as any other witch or wizard!

"Is it right that doddering fools like Albus Dumbledore should make decisions that affect the rest of us? Were you consulted, Severus? Were you asked if you would care to breathe the same air as Mudbloods?"

"No, my Lord."

"Yet you are forced to attend classes with them. Sit alongside them at meals. Fly alongside them in lessons. Bathe in the same facilities with them."

"At least Slytherin has few filthy half-bloods and even fewer Mudbloods, my Lord," said Severus in a voice that proved him eager to please.

Harry's gaze shot to Voldemort. Tom Riddle, really. He wasn't young, of course, but as wizards went, he wasn't old, either. He looked strong and healthy. Handsome, actually, not too different from the way he'd appeared in the Chamber of Secrets. He wasn't yet a monster; Harry assumed he'd only truly begun to look like one when he'd been reborn in the graveyard. The foulness of that magic . . .

But of course, he was a monster already. Inside, where it counted most. The things he was saying were proof of it. So much hatred . . .

For himself too, Harry suspected. And yet somehow Voldemort hadn't realised as much. He hadn't batted an eyelash when Severus had insulted half-bloods.
"Yes, you were fortunate at the Sorting," Voldemort was crooning, now, his voice oozing misplaced compassion. "I despair of those chosen for Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, I surely do. How will they learn the truth when they are Sorted into Houses so bereft of those who understand it?"

"I've done my best, my Lord--"

"But subtly, subtly," interrupted Voldemort. "Which is as it should be, Severus. You're a loyal servant, far too important to lose to expulsion. We must have you become a fully-qualified wizard complete with several N.E.W.T.s to bolster your reputation as such. Think of your influence then, and be content."

"Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort suddenly chuckled. "And Gryffindor, Severus? Have you done your very best to sway the students of Gryffindor to see the way that things must be?"

Severus scowled. "My respect for you is such that I cannot lie, my Lord."

"I know you cannot lie," said Voldemort, tapping his forehead. "You remain unshielded in my presence, always. Which is as it should be. The student must not seek to supplant his master. Not ever, Severus."

"Of course not, my Lord."

"And Gryffindor?"

"I will beg your pardon on my knees if I have erred." Severus' voice trembled, but that didn't stop him. "I judged the house of Gryffindor to be a wasted effort. They are led by the Mudblood lover James Potter, who abuses his position as Head Boy to sneak nightly to the Astronomy Tower where his disgusting Mudblood girlfriend ruts with him like a slut in heat."

Harry gritted his teeth, not sure what bothered him more: Snape's insulting word choice, or the mental image of his parents having sex on the stone roof of the tower.

"Ah, a literal 'Mudblood lover,' in that case."

"And he a pureblood," said Snape, turning his face away to spit on the ground. "Gryffindor worships him, my Lord. Their very own Head Boy and Quidditch Captain. He can do no wrong in their eyes."

"And yet there are those who can see the truth," murmured Voldemort. "Even in Gryffindor."

"My Lord?"

"The time for that is not yet ripe," said Voldemort smoothly. "Let me merely say that I am pleased with you, Severus. You have done well."

"I seek only that your noble vision for our world may supplant the terrible times in which we live," said Severus, humbly bowing his head.

"We shall live in a world remade by truth. Ere we die, it shall be real. That, I promise you."

"Yes, my Lord."

Voldemort was smiling as Severus raised his face. "You want to help me bring our perfect world into existence, I know. Your dedication to the cause is appreciated. If I had more followers such as
"I am, my Lord," said Severus in those fervent tones usually reserved for vows. "I am. In truth, I am."

"You are my follower in truth, and in spirit also," said Voldemort, tilting his head to one side as he made a *tsking* noise. "But in body?"

Despite the dark night, Severus' face seemed to light up with some sort of inner glow. "You speak of your mark, my Lord?"

"Indeed. You would consent to be branded as mine, today and henceforth? Branded forevermore, until you breathe your very last?"

"I would be honoured to be considered worthy," said Severus, his voice ringing clear as a bell. "And I will breathe my very last in your service."

Voldemort studied the young man sitting alongside him for a long moment, and then he raised an eyebrow, his voice hardening slightly. "But you are not yet worthy."

Severus' expression fell. In the next instant he had slipped from his chair to kneel before Voldemort, his head deeply bowed.

Voldemort patted his head. "Oh, Severus. Do not despair. There is a way for you to prove yourself. You see, while you are strong of mind and magic, there is still one thing making you think yourself weak. Note that I do not say you are weak. But as long as you think of yourself that way, you will not come into your full strength."

"What must I do?" asked Severus, his voice nothing more than a thin reed of sound.

Voldemort placed a finger beneath his chin and tilted his face up. "Do you trust me, Severus?"

The younger version of Snape nodded, while the Snape standing beside Harry drew in a sharp breath. Harry took that to mean that something even worse was coming next.

"Do you love me, Severus?"

"Yes, my Lord," breathed Severus. Now that Harry was closer, he could see that the young man's eyes were glowing. "I love you with my whole heart."

Draco shuddered where he stood, but Harry gave no reaction. He'd tensed himself the moment before, expecting something like this. God, the Snape he was watching was so much like him . . . he just wanted someone to see and appreciate him. Given that, he'd been like low-hanging fruit, ripe for the plucking . . .

And he was so young. Younger than Harry was now, and making such a dreadful choice . . .

Harry gulped after all, the feeling washing over him that it could so easily have been *him* standing there. If Voldemort had played his cards differently, if he'd tried to "subvert" Harry, as Snape had put it--

No wonder Snape had wanted to make sure Draco saw all this . . .

Voldemort spoke again, his voice ringing with pride. "I think you are ready to become worthy."

"What must I do?" asked Severus once more.
"End it," said Voldemort, his tone so gentle that if Harry hadn't known better, he would have thought the man a fountain of kindness. "End your pain, Severus. It's time."

Severus blinked, swaying slightly on his knees. "My Lord? I . . . I don't understand."

Voldemort tapped his own forehead again. "I've been inside your mind, Severus. Can you really believe there is anything about you that I don't know? I've known from the first.

"Known?"

"About your father," said Voldemort quietly. "About the terrible things he did to you."

The younger Severus paled so rapidly that Harry thought he might pass out. "I-- I--"

"You thought I didn't know, Severus?" asked Voldemort, just as gently, his face twisting in sympathy. "How could I not? Occlumency comes naturally for you, to be sure, but you don't believe my Legilimency weak enough to fall before it, do you? You can resist that old fool who heads your school, but me? Never."

Snape shakily nodded in agreement. "But . . . those flashes, our lessons, the things you made me relive. They were never--"

"Oh yes, they were merely the ordinary frustrations of childhood. Augmented in your case, but mild in comparison to the true horrors you suffered at your father's hands. Of course." Voldemort smiled. "I saw those horrors the first time you came before me, before you'd learnt to discipline your mind. And knowing what you had endured, I was careful during our lessons not to draw forth any such memories. It wasn't yet time. But now that I know how well you love me . . ."

Severus nodded, his hands obviously twisting together under the fine cloak he wore.

"And so, your father." Voldemort made a sneering noise. "He's hardly worthy of the term, leading you so far astray from the truth. Or trying to, that is. You were stronger than he, weren't you? You didn't allow yourself to be seduced by Muggle culture, as he did. You saw his obsession for what it was: something worthy only of contempt, as he himself is worthy of contempt for the way he's treated you, all along."

A strange clacking noise began to echo through the clearing; it took Harry a moment to realise that it was coming from the younger version of Severus, whose teeth were chattering.

Voldemort smiled. "I know I haven't misjudged you. You're ready. You do trust me, don't you? You told me that you did."

Ugh. Such manipulation. Snape was like a fish, Harry thought. He'd taken the bait, and now, Voldemort was slowly, carefully reeling him in. Toward darkness.

"Yes, my Lord. I do trust you." When Harry looked closely, he could see the younger Snape swallowing convulsively, like he was trying to convince himself as much as Voldemort. "Of course I do."

If Voldemort noticed Snape's reluctant body language, he pretended otherwise. "Then trust me in this," he said, his voice calm, quiet, and soothing. "You will never be whole until you free yourself from your pain and rage and childhood fear, which is all you have binding you to your father. Let him go, Severus, for only then will you be fully able to give yourself to me. And only then can I accept you, hmm?"
Severus gave a shaky nod, even as Voldemort's finger, supporting his chin, caressed the skin there.

"You are ready?"

Another nod. It looked tentative to Harry, and he couldn't think it had looked sincere to Voldemort, but then, sincerity wasn't the point. Voldemort had staged this scene in order to get Severus Snape into his clutches. Voldemort didn't care how he got there.

"What would you have me do, my Lord?"

"Why, whatever I command. A fitting goal for this, your initiation into my service. Once you are fully mine, you will go on as you have begun. Doing whatever I command, whether you understand my plans or not. You must demonstrate that you do indeed trust not just my intentions, but my wisdom as well."

"Yes, my Lord," murmured Severus, sounding more sure of himself when in fact, he didn't know what was coming. He knew it would involve his father, but Harry was positive he didn't know it would include a Dementor.

"And your father deserves to be punished for all he did," continued Voldemort, still stroking Severus' chin.

"He has been," said Severus quickly. "I brewed a most terrible potion--"

"Ah yes, the liquid Cruciatus." Voldemort's voice practically caressed the last word.

"I think of it that way," admitted Severus, his cheeks flushing. "As your lordship obviously knows. But it isn't quite accurate. It only hurts him if he--"

"Touches you, yes, I know. Or you him. And it only works at all because you found a way to harness your rage; the potion is specific to him alone. I told you, Severus. I know everything about you. For example, I know right now that you are confusing self-defence with punishment. Your father suffers only if he attempts to harm you once again. He has never suffered, never, for the things he did before you became such a wonderfully talented potion-maker."

Harry was surprised by Severus' reply to that. "He's suffered all along, my Lord. The ultimate punishment for one such as him is that the rituals always failed. His talent remains as non-existent as ever, his judgment of art and himself still deeply flawed."

"Ah, clever, clever Severus. Another thing I love about you."

The younger version of Severus preened under the praise.

"But that is not the sort of suffering he truly deserves, is it?" Voldemort gave his acolyte no chance to reply. "Together, we will resolve this matter and set you free."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Stand at my side," directed Voldemort in a voice so smooth it was almost oily. "Stand at my side in your fine furred cloak, and show him what sort of man you have become. One who doesn't need him, not for anything. For I will be your father now, Severus, and you, like all who follow me, will be my most beloved son."

Oh, God. Voldemort as a father-figure. Yet Harry could see how skilfully the man had cast himself into the role, and how desperately Snape had longed for someone to love and value him.
Harry could understand that, oh yes, because he'd longed with all his heart for the exact same thing.

Voldemort drew his wand and twirled it, his eyes gleaming with intent though he spoke no words. His magic was powerful enough that he didn't need any.

A wizard suddenly slammed down into the clearing, his arrival looking like he'd been delivered by a particularly vicious form of Portkey.

Beside Harry, Snape abruptly fell to his knees and wrapped both arms around himself.

"It's all right," Harry said urgently, bending down to grab his father by the hand, lacing their fingers together. "We don't have to stay. We've seen enough--"

"I should face what I did, and you should do the same," croaked Snape, even as Draco, who had rushed forward to pull Snape to his feet, repeated Harry's words that they should go.

"Be quiet and watch, both of you," rasped Snape, refusing to stand at Draco's urging. Maybe he thought his legs wouldn't hold him. "I . . . I cannot come here again."

Since Snape wasn't leaving, Harry turned his attention back to the unfolding scene. The wizard who had arrived was clearly Hostilian Snape. He was tall and pale, with a hooked nose, dark eyes, and hair that seemed even blacker than his son's. For all that, though, the two men didn't really look alike, not to Harry. Hostilian's features were more twisted, his face deeply lined with wrinkles, his hands resembling claws as he scrabbled at the ropes binding him.

The evil he had practiced had left a mark, Harry thought. Just as it would leave a mark on Voldemort.

"You know who I am?" asked Voldemort in a booming voice.

Hostilian sneered, his face transforming into an uncanny mirror of the one Snape used to show Harry, back when he'd hated Harry. "Should I?"

"Indeed you should!" Voldemort stepped closer to the bound man, leaning forward to stare into his eyes. "You, who dedicated your life to the mad pursuit of art. I could have given you talent beyond your wildest dreams, Hostilian Snape. But you chose to devote yourself to the meaningless filth that Muggles call art. You contaminated your talent. You cursed yourself to remain in obscurity. You could have been great. Instead, you are nothing!"

Hostilian opened his mouth to speak, but with a wave of his hand, Voldemort cast him into silence.

"Severus," he said, beckoning. Once Snape was by his side, he continued speaking. "Here is your son, grown into a man this day. He has a talent too, but unlike you, he chooses to use it for good instead of evil. He shall be great while you become less than nothing."

Hostilian's mouth opened and shut as he tried to shout some sort of reply.

"You molested your own son," said Voldemort, practically hissing with rage. His wand snapped up. "You may answer the charge!"

"I didn't--"

Voldemort's wand slashed down again, cutting off any further sound from Hostilian.
"Severus? Speak."

For a moment, the younger Severus looked like he didn't know what to say. Then, his features cleared. *Do as I command*, Harry remembered Voldemort saying.

"You molested your own son," spat Severus.

"I judge you guilty, and you will answer for it," warned Voldemort. "Severus . . . lay your hands on him."

Snape hesitated, but only for an instant. Stepping forward, he planted both his palms atop his father's cheeks.

Hostilian convulsed in his bonds and screamed, though no noise emerged past the barrier of Voldemort's spell.

"Enough," said Voldemort after a moment. "You subjected your son to wish magic in a selfish, fruitless quest for talent!" His wand snapped up. "You may answer the charge!"

This time, Hostilian screeched, words tumbling quickly past his lips. "It wasn't fruitless and he wanted it, I tell you, he wanted it--"

A slashing motion of Voldemort's wand cut off the rest. "Speak, Severus."

"You subjected me to wish magic," said Snape furiously.

"And now you should answer his charge, my loyal one," said Voldemort, his voice as gentle with Snape as it had been harsh with Hostilian.

"I never wanted it," Severus growled, leaning forward to speak into his father's face. "I never wanted it and it was fruitless! Artist? You're a hack! And if you're planning to say next that I must have wanted it because I was willing, I'll rip your tongue out where you stand, I swear, Father! I might have been willing to undergo the pain rituals when I was younger, seeing as you'd warped me into thinking they were my duty, but after Mother died, I was never willing, never, and all the compulsion magic in the world won't change that simple fact!"

"I judge you guilty and you will answer for it. Lay hands on him, Severus."

When Severus placed his palms in exactly the same position as before, Hostilian obviously found it excruciating.

This time, Voldemort gave no command for it to stop.

"Do you know why you're in pain?" he asked in a conversational tone as he began to pace back and forth before the two men: one anguished, one looking like he hated himself and what he was doing every bit as much as he hated his father. "You brought it on yourself. You tormented your own son in terrible ways, and you wouldn't let up until he himself forced you by means of a marvellous potion. You may answer the charge."

At a nod from Voldemort, Snape finally moved his hands away.

Hostilian could barely speak; his voice emerged as an almost silent croak. "I . . . I never enjoyed--and it was needful--"

"So that you could make art like a Muggle?" roared Voldemort. "I think not! You are hereby
sentenced, Hostilian Snape! You are sentenced to a life of agony and torment and regret. An unending, eternal life of agony and torment and regret! Severus, my loyal lieutenant? Summon the Dementor."

Hostilian's mouth made a perfect circle as he screamed; this time, Voldemort hadn't bothered to silence him.

When the Snape who was on his knees began shaking uncontrollably, Harry moved closer to him and hugged him tight. Harry couldn't imagine what this must be like for his father . . . the only thing worse than knowing he had done such a thing must be to see it happen all over again.

"Watch," said Snape in a low tone, even as he shook in Harry's arms. "Watch."

Harry turned his head to see that the younger Severus looked confused. And no wonder. How did one summon a Dementor?

No sooner had he raised his wand, however, than a filmy grey shape was gliding forward from behind a stone in the distance. Either the Dementor had been lurking there all along, or Voldemort had wordlessly summoned it himself a few moments earlier.

Its ghostly robes floated like tattered cobwebs as it drifted toward the younger Severus, who began to gasp with obvious panic.

"Not him," snapped Voldemort, swishing his wand in commanding arcs that seemed to draw the Dementor towards the center of the stone circle, where Hostilian stood. Still tightly bound, still screaming, his eyes bulging as the Dementor approached.

"I'm sorry, Severus!" the man began to scream as he thrashed violently. He suddenly broke through the spell that had been holding him upright and plunged sideways to the ground, where he wriggled like a worm. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm your father, Severus! Don't do this to me, don't do this!"

The younger Snape clenched his hands and fell to his knees so suddenly that Harry thought his legs must have buckled.

Voldemort was at his side at once, kneeling down beside him to stroke his hair. Voldemort, on his knees . . . Harry knew then and there that the evil wizard would do anything, anything to persuade Severus into his service.

No wonder Dad wanted Draco to see this. No wonder he wanted him to know . . .

"Let your father scream and plead and wail," said Voldemort quietly as he continued to pet Severus' hair. "He can do you no more harm, my loyal one. Let him suffer. Forever. It's what he deserves."

A voice echoed in Harry's mind . . . how fortunate that we don't all get what we deserve . . .

"It's justice, Severus. It's what the Ministry would do to him for his crimes, were he to have a trial. This way is merely more expedient."

Harry almost gulped, remembering his father lecturing him on the danger of thinking oneself jury and executioner rolled into one. No wonder he'd known. No wonder . . .

Severus was gasping by then. "But the Kiss? I can't, I can't . . . the authorities, my Lord. The Aurors. Wouldn't it be better to--"

"Trust the Ministry?" Voldemort shook his head. "No, Severus. There would have to be an inquiry.
Into all of it, every last bit. And the papers do love a scandal. Do you want to the world to read about your father's crimes? No, no. This is a private matter. Haven't I long respected it as such?

Severus, Harry thought, looked defeated by that argument. He nodded dully. "I won't stop you, my Lord... but I must go, I must leave here, I must--"

"Remain in weakness? Oh no." To Harry's horror, Voldemort bent forward and dropped a slow, lingering kiss on the top of Severus' head. "I love you too well for that. You will have to give the order yourself. You are the one who must set this in motion, and so end it. You need to end it, for only then can you become the strong, whole wizard you were meant to be."

Strong... whole, when this very act was the one that had ultimately shattered Snape. A horrible act that could never, ever be undone... no wonder Snape had such strong views on vengeance. He didn't want Harry's anger to reduce him to doing something like this with his dark powers--

"But..." The younger Severus sounded like he was hyperventilating. "But what of his soul?"

"That's the beauty of Dementors," said Voldemort in that sweet, kind voice that Harry had grown to hate. "Your father's soul will be trapped inside the Dementor, reliving his worst memories for all eternity. And that's altogether fitting. Why should Hostilian Snape be allowed to move on as though he were a good, pure-blooded wizard who'd earned his rest?"

"He won't move on?" Severus, Harry thought, sounded horrified rather than relieved.

"No, and that's as it should be," crooned Voldemort. "Your father won't be able to haunt you, that way. No small piece of his soul will ever be able to animate a portrait. You'll be rid of him, Severus. Forever. And isn't that what you deserve?"

"No, Severus, no," howled Hostilian, still thrashing in his bonds. He'd managed to flip himself onto one side, his eyes seeking frantically for his son. "I'm your father, your father!"

"I'm more your father than he ever was." Voldemort pulled the younger Severus into a close hug, much as Harry and Draco were doing with the older one. Draco actually had his face buried against Severus' shoulder and was shaking as he clutched his father.

"Who has been proud of the strong wizard you've become?" continued Voldemort. "Who has shared your triumphs and your pains this past year? Who opened your mind to your birth talent? Who honoured your coming of age with a gift worthy of your talents?"

"You, my Lord," whispered Severus, his arms coming up to wrap themselves around Voldemort.

"Who truly appreciates you?"

"You, my lord." Severus rested his head on Voldemort's shoulder, his eyes clenched as he tilted his face to the side. "Only you."

"Severus, no--"

Voldemort slashed his wand through the air just once to render Hostilian mute, then shifted back on his knees, his eyes gleaming as he gazed at the young man facing him. "Come into my service now, Severus."

As Severus glanced once more at his father, shutters seemed to descend over his eyes. In the next moment, he drew his wand and laid it on the ground, clearly offering it to Voldemort. "In your service," he whispered, his voice rough.
"Excellent, my brave one. Excellent," breathed Voldemort, scooping up the wand and handing it back to Severus. "I knew you were strong enough to do this. I knew you wouldn't let him weaken you. Now, this particular Dementor is, at present, leashed to certain spells I've laboured long to develop. The incantation you need is--" Voldemort stopped speaking and began to write with his wand, fiery letters that hung in the air for the space of several seconds. Besamsempra. "The eternal kiss, eh? But you must think with all your heart and mind and soul of your father when you command the Dementor. The hatred in your spirit will be the force that animates the spell."

Harry knew what was going to happen; how could he not? Despite all that, he felt himself hoping against hope that this younger Severus would find the strength to turn the spell against Voldemort.

Can't you see what he's doing? he wanted to ask. Your father is no prince, but the greatest evil here is Voldemort! Set the Dementor on him and spare the world the horrors he'll inflict, then call the Aurors and have them throw the book at your father! Don't do this, not like this--

But of course, Severus did.

He rose slowly to his feet, his wand pointed at the Dementor who was hovering ten feet in the air, Hostilian Snape below. It was clearly waiting for orders; Hostilian looked like he was begging for his life still, but he didn't seem to be reliving his worst memories. The Dementor now was dormant. Silent. Waiting.

And then, the younger version of Severus Snape sent it into action. "Besamsempra!" he called, his voice strong and resolute, his arm steady as he held his wand focussed on the Dementor.

And his eyes, terrible. Like endless tunnels again. Like bottomless pits. An absolute lack of mercy or pity, and no end to the hatred. They weren't gleaming, not now. The young wizard's eyes were dark, clear through.

Harry shuddered, struggling not to turn away from the sight. He loved his father, even despite this, and he didn't want to make it seem like anything had changed.

Because the important things hadn't.

The Dementor swooped down like a bird of prey, its horrid mouth gaping, its bony fingers emerging from the folds of its robes, curling like a child's fingers in search of candy.

Voldemort released the silencing spell.

And then Harry heard it: the sound of Hostilian Snape's last earthly scream being sucked inside the Dementor, along with greyish wisps of something Harry thought he recognised, even if he couldn't identify it for certain.

His soul.

Hostilian went slack the way Sirius had when he was being Kissed, his fingers and feet twitching spasmodically while the Dementor's hands caressed his head as tenderly as would a lover. The smoky wisps drifting from his mouth became thicker and thicker, until they looked like a solid mass of sludge.

And then, the ultimate horror.

The Dementor's sucking lips latched onto Hostilian's unconscious ones, and a new noise echoed through the clearing.
The sound of a soul breaking free from its moorings, but not to be released in any natural fashion. This sucking, *slurping* sound was the noise of a human being’s soul being swallowed alive.

The Dementor licked its fleshless lips as it drifted upwards again, leaving the shell of Hostilian Snape behind. The man was still alive, Harry knew. Still breathing, his chest rising and falling like clockwork. Inside the chest, his heart still beat.

But there was no more *him* left, or at least, not inside his body.

The younger Severus clenched his eyes shut and looked like he was holding in a scream, while the one Harry was holding simply shuddered, his gaze steady on his younger self.

Voldemort gave his new follower no time for regrets. With one sweeping motion of his wand, he caused the Dementor to vanish. "Severus," he said sharply, repeating the name until the young man looked at him. "Your arm."

"Yes, my Lord." The tone now wasn't so reverential as before, Harry thought. Severus' voice sounded dull. Numb . . .

But he didn't hesitate as he swept his cloak aside and rolled up his sleeve to bare his left arm to the chill of the January night.

Harry swallowed, seeing the pale, unmarked skin. No bandage now, no ugly mass of raw flesh. He wished his father's arm could look like that again.

Maybe it would, he thought, once Voldemort was dead for good.

When Voldemort touched his wand to Severus' inner arm, though, Severus gave a violent flinch.

"Second thoughts?" asked Voldemort, sounding highly displeased.

"Nobody can know," gasped Snape, waving toward the still-breathing body of his father. "Nobody can-- the Dementor, what I did . . . nobody can ever know."

By the last four words, he sounded like a broken man.

"I thought you trusted me, Severus," said Voldemort sadly.

"I do, I do, but--"

"You're young and not used to having someone who truly cares about you. Of course." Voldemort moved his wand away and patted Severus on the shoulder. "I understand. But I am worthy of your loyalty, as I shall demonstrate. I'll call a trusted servant to us and have him serve as bonder for an Unbreakable Vow. Will that satisfy?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord," breathed Severus in clear relief. "Thank you."

"If you don't wish *him* to know the details, however, you'd best end your father's life," said Voldemort, his kind tone a complete contrast with the horrible suggestion he was making. "The state he's in just now, it's rather obvious that he's been Kissed."

Harry clenched his fists. How fiendish. How *cruel*, to demand that Snape do yet more! To make that the price of silence -- for that was what Voldemort was doing. Not in so many words, but that was what it all came down to.

And the younger version of Severus was in no fit state to negotiate better terms.
Though clearly, he wasn't blind to the implications of what he was about to do. "Priori Incantatem," he murmured. "If the Ministry should investigate . . . and it's well-known that I think very little of my father--"

"Oh, I'll see to it that there's nothing to investigate," said Voldemort, chuckling. "But for your peace of mind, Severus, by all means sheathe your own wand. Here . . . use his."

From an inner pocket of his robes, Voldemort drew forth a length of brown wood spotted with black.

Severus shivered, his fingers trembling as he took it, but then he walked quickly to the eerie form of his soulless father, and cast the spell.

"Avada Kedavra."

The light that emerged from the end of the borrowed wand was more a wash than a blast, but it was the exact shade of green that used to haunt Harry's nightmares.

"That killed him?" murmured Draco. "It didn't look-- I mean--"

"There wasn't much power behind it, no," said Snape, rising to his feet and pulling both his sons up with him. "Nor very much hatred. I suspect I'd already expended it."

"Then why . . ." Draco's voice trailed off as if he wasn't sure he should ask such a thing.

But Snape understood the unspoken question. "Because I truly wanted him to be dead, I suppose. Not just to hide what I'd done, either. By then, I thought it was the . . . the right thing to do."

He stumbled over those last few words, the irony clearly not lost on him.

"Well done, well done," said Voldemort warmly, though Harry thought his eyes were glittering in a way that meant that inside, he was displeased by the feeble spell. For now, though, he was clearly intent on encouraging Severus.

Of course . . . Severus Snape hadn't yet been branded with the Dark Mark. Voldemort was still seducing him. Still luring him in.

Voldemort closed his eyes and waved his wand in a complicated swirl, a skull and snake emerging in wispy trails from the end of it. A moment later, someone Apparated into the circle of stones.

Someone strikingly familiar. "Sirius?" gasped Harry.

"Regulus," corrected Snape.

"Oh." In that one moment, a lot of things fell into place and suddenly made sense. How Regulus had known that Snape had done something to his father, but hadn't known about the Dementor--or he would have told Sirius about that, too.

"My Lord?" inquired Regulus, dropping gracefully into a kneel.

"Best you stand," said Voldemort as he knelt and gestured for Severus to do the same. "We shall need a bonder."

Regulus rose to his feet, drawing his wand while Voldemort and Severus grasped right hands. He
touched the tip of his wand to their linked hands and with his free hand, gestured for Severus to speak.

Severus looked like he didn’t know what was expected, just as he'd looked surprised when Voldemort had grasped his hand.

"The vow needs three separate terms," said Voldemort calmly, sounding like mentor, teacher, and father rolled into one. "Be clear when you issue each, and wait for my agreement and the bonding spell to react before you speak the next."

Severus visibly swallowed. "My Lord . . . will you keep secret the information you have acquired about . . . about my father?"

"I will," said Voldemort, calmly watching as a lick of flame shot forth from Regulus' wand and wrapped around his wrist and Severus'.

"Will you also keep secret the . . . the events that happened here during the past hour?"

"I will."

A second band of flame joined the first, twining around it until they looked inseparable.

As Regulus and Voldemort looked on expectantly, Severus shifted on his knees, clearly trying to come up with something to offer as a third term. The things he might have asked! But then, Harry realised, Voldemort was hardly likely to agree to something that didn’t suit him.

"Will you forever keep those events secret?" Severus finally asked.

"I will," said Voldemort in confident tones.

A third flame shot around their hands and bound itself to the others, the whole thing a brilliantly glowing orange rope.

When Regulus lifted his wand, the bond marking the Vow vanished.

Voldemort pushed to his feet, though he motioned for Severus to remain on his knees. "You'll find some offal over there," he said to Regulus, carelessly motioning towards the dead body of Hostilian Snape. "Take care of it for us, will you? And dispose of this wand."

Regulus nodded respectfully as he took Hostilian's wand from Voldemort's outstretched hand, then turned away to do as his lord had bid.

The moment he was gone, the body with him, Voldemort spoke again. "Your arm, Severus?"

This time, Severus didn't flinch away when Voldemort's wand touched his inner arm.

"Mosmordre," said Voldemort, pressing the tip of his wand almost viciously against Severus' skin. A hissing noise followed, and then the smell of burning flesh.

Severus clenched his teeth and swayed on his knees, his face twisting in agony, but he didn't cry out or scream.

"That's . . . impressive," said Draco faintly, sounding ill.

"I wanted to prove myself," said Snape, beginning to back away from the scene unfolding in the middle of Stonehenge. "That he knew about my father might mean he looked on me as weak, I
thought. I couldn't have that."

He sounded so calm that Harry couldn't stop his question. "Seeing yourself taking the Mark . . . it doesn't bother you?"

"Not like the other."

Draco's question emerged almost panicked. "There's nothing else we need to see here, is there?" he asked, his voice pitched high. "There's no more, nothing else--"

"No," said Snape, shaking his head. He sounded . . . odd, Harry thought. Calm still, but like he was holding on by a thread that might snap at any instant. "Come."

Grasping both his son's arms, he pulled them upwards by force of will.

The moment they were free of the Pensieve, Draco staggered to a chair and practically fell into it. "I didn't know," he babbled. "I . . . I only ever heard of his power, his grand plans, and then on Samhain I saw his cruelty for myself, but I never knew he could be so . . . so . . . so completely . . ."

"I think the word you want is charming," said Snape dryly. "Of course he can be. Terror and intimidation aren't his only tools; he knows how to persuade."

Draco shuddered, nodding. "I feel like . . . like I've just stepped aside and let a Killing Curse pass me by." He suddenly straightened in the chair, though his eyes looked just as haunted. "No, I feel like you just shoved me out of the way of that Killing Curse, Severus. Merlin . . . if it hadn't been for you, I'd have ended up in his circle. I know it. If you hadn't taken me in, I'd have had no choice but to go back to my family--"

"We're your family," said Harry.

"Oh, shut up," snarled Draco, shooting Harry an annoyed glance. "I know that. I'm trying to say something, here. I . . ." He swung his gaze back to Snape. "I owe you. Everything, and I don't think I ever even thanked you--"

"You know perfectly well that I don't want thanks."

"I know, but--"

"That is enough, Draco," said Snape sternly. "I didn't take you into that memory so you could babble like a Hufflepuff. I only wanted you prepared in case Voldemort ever attempts to subvert you. Now, have you any questions? Either of you?"

Harry had one. He didn't really like to ask it, but he wanted to understand his father's mindset on that fateful night all those years ago. "Yeah. Um . . . well, I can see how Voldemort made himself seem, I don't know, almost kind-hearted at times, but he's the one who taught you Occlumency, isn't he? And you'd already learned it by then, and you told me once that you learned it from someone whose methods were harsh, so . . ." He swallowed. "It just seems like that would have given you an idea what he was really like."

Snape finally sat down, his mouth twisting into a macabre smile. "Oh, but that was for my own good, Harry," he drawled, sarcasm in every word. "Yes, it was painful, but the Dark Lord only put me through it because I was so important. So skilled. Such a wonderful addition to his cause, and so on and so forth. I drank it all in like an absolute fool." Snape shrugged, his voice returning to its normal cadence. "And too, my lessons didn't last long. Occlumency is a birth power for me. I only
needed to be pointed towards it."

Harry nodded, remembering that Snape had said that.

"Did he change straight away?" Draco suddenly asked. "No . . . that was badly put. I mean, as soon as you bore the Dark Mark, did he openly show his true colours?"

"He's more subtle than that."

"Then when . . ."

Snape stroked his chin, clearly thinking back. "The first time he subjected me to the true horror of his service was when I received my N.E.W.T. results. Divination, to be precise."

"Your Troll score," said Harry, swallowing. Yeah, that would have enraged Voldemort. Hadn't he just said that he wanted Snape to do well on his exams?

"An arrogant indulgence on my part. I should have known that I couldn't convince the Ministry scoring committee to see the subject for the fraud I thought it."

"I thought the Dark . . . I thought that Voldemort was more arrogant," said Draco. "Not that he isn't, but I was shocked he would agree to an Unbreakable Vow. Suggest it, even--"

"Oh, my God," said Harry, a chill sweeping over him. "But he broke it. He broke it and it didn't kill him!"

"What's this about?"

Harry gulped and looked his father in the eyes. "Lucius, or the portrait, I mean . . . it told me, well, by implication anyway, that you'd killed your father. I didn't put it together at the time . . . oh. Well, I suppose maybe Regulus told Lucius--"

"I told Lucius," said Snape calmly.

Harry gaped.

"Many years later, and I said nothing about the Dementor, of course."

"But why would you--"

Snape gave a grim smile. "Because I'd become aware of how Lucius was treating his own son. I mentioned that he would want to be careful not to be too harsh with Draco, because that sort of thing only breeds resentment, and it certainly hadn't worked out well for my own father, had it? I left it to Lucius to draw his own conclusions."

Draco paled. "I think he drew the wrong one. But . . . it was good of you to try."

"Don't call me good. I am categorically not good," corrected Snape, glancing from Draco to Harry and back. "Have you any other questions?"

Harry only had one. He could see from the look on Draco's face that he was thinking the same thing, especially after what their father had just said. "Are you all right, Dad?"

Stupid question. What did he expect, that Snape would openly admit to feeling torn apart inside after reliving such a terrible memory?
"I'm peckish," said Snape crisply, his eyes glittering in a way that warned Harry not to press the issue. "Draco, why don't you set the menu for dinner?"

Draco's eyes grew wide. "Is it that time-- oh, it is."

"Time can become rather distorted when one ventures into a Pensieve."

"Whatever suits, then?"

Harry could have clouted his brother for that. Of course Snape wouldn't want to order that way. He probably wasn't really hungry in the least! Or worse, "whatever suits" might result in nothing but a glass of spirits.

"Set the menu," said Snape tightly.

That time, Draco got the message and did as his father had asked.

Harry wasn't surprised when dinner turned out to be a pretty subdued affair. He tried a couple of time to draw his father into conversation, but Snape batted away his efforts the way he might swat at a bothersome fly.

It was Draco who managed to keep Snape from brooding all evening long.

"We're brewing," he announced as soon as the meal was over.

"I think I'd like an early night--"

"We're brewing," the other boy said again. "Harry and I aren't letting you go to your room until we've laid in a fresh supply of Dreamless Sleep."

"Really, Draco--"

"Really, Severus," said Draco, his tone an exact mirror of his father's.

"It's not as though the supply in my bathroom has gone off--" For all his protests, though, the dull glaze over Snape's eyes had begun to fade a little.

Draco had too much sense to point out that the prospect of brewing was starting to distrac Snape from his troubles. On the other hand, Harry didn't particularly like what he did point out. "Oh, but Harry hasn't had nearly enough brewing practice this summer. And with term about to start, he really should brush up on the basics. I'm sure you'd be the first to agree, yes?"

No doubt about it; Snape's eyes sparkled with a bit of mirth, that time. "Oh, yes. I couldn't agree more. Harry?"

There wasn't a way out, Harry thought. He'd do anything for his dad. "All right. Might as well get
back in practice. N.E.W.T. Potions . . . even though I don't need that exam any longer!"

Snape just stared at him.

"Officially need it, I meant," muttered Harry. "Oh . . . let's just get started on that brew."

---------------------------------------------------

"I think you should have some as well," said Draco that night after he and Harry were dressed for bed.

"Dreamless Sleep?"

In answer, Draco held out one of the vials they'd filled that evening.

Harry shook his head. "I'm all right."

'Really?' Draco cast a spell that caused Harry's sleeves to abruptly flip up to his elbows.

Harry scrambled to yank them back down, but by then, it was too late. Draco had seen the long scratches that marred each forearm. "I was just feeling a bit . . . frantic."

"So let's make sure you don't get even more 'frantic' in your sleep." Walking across the room, Draco thrust the vial into Harry's hand. "Come on. It's been a hard day for all of us. I had some too, if it makes you feel better. And you know that Dad took some."

"Just don't tell Dad," said Harry as he gave in and downed the potion. "He's got enough on his mind."

"That was obvious from the mere fact that he didn't notice you turning away to scratch like a hyena."

"Don't tell him!"

Draco took back the empty vial and gave Harry a considering look. "All right. But only because there wasn't any needle involved. Nothing's going to keep me quiet if I think you're sticking yourself, and that's final."

"Fine, whatever." Harry flopped into bed, wishing Dreamless Sleep worked faster. He didn't want to think just now. Not about anything.

"Too much spleenwort in that batch," said Draco as he climbed into bed. "I can tell. Dad really must be more affected than he's letting us know. He should have noticed."

"How can you tell there's too much spleenwort?"

"You don't feel it? A little . . . I don't know. It's not exactly like being drunk, but--"

"Yeah," said Harry, though part of him wasn't sure if that was just the power of suggestion. "I feel a little loopy."
"Maybe it'll help us sleep." Draco flicked his wand and plunged the room into darkness.

It didn't, though. Harry felt like his brain was spinning. Or maybe just his thoughts.

Draco seemed to be having the same problem, otherwise Harry didn't think he would ever have come out with his next comment.

"At least I understand now about the greasy hair."

"Huh?"

"Very common reaction. Classic, even, if one believes that book," murmured Draco in a dazed voice. "Dad didn't like what his father was doing to him, so he started trying early on to make himself as unattractive as possible--"

"I don't think we should be talking about Dad this way," said Harry, his arms itching again. "It's... it's not really our business, and he didn't tell us so we could gossip--"

"I just think it explains some things. Ron Weasley's lucky that Dad didn't toss him out a window--"

"Yeah, he is." Harry really did think that the ten thousand lines had been what his father had said, an effort to make sure that Ron saw enough of Harry to calm down and remain friends... but he also thought that Snape would have found another way to do that if he hadn't been so enraged by the slur against him. That particular slur... it really was a wonder Ron hadn't come out a lot worse.

"Hostilian Snape wasn't bad at art, though," continued Draco in a wandering voice. "Dad's wrong about that bit. That crest he drew, the one you duplicated for the well-wish? That was absolutely brilliant."

"Hermione duplicated it," said Harry crossly. "And it wasn't brilliant. How could it be, when we know now what the man did in order to get more talent?"

"Those rituals worked, that's all I mean--"

"Don't say that--"

"I didn't say that made them right--"

"We're gossiping again--" Harry had to take some deep breaths to settle his stomach. He wasn't sure if that was due to the Dreamless Sleep being slightly off, or to the feeling that they were wrong even to think about what Snape had suffered as a child. Snape had clearly meant to keep the whole thing a secret, and he would have succeeded if it hadn't been for Sirius. "We have to change the subject."

"Probably for the best... so then, I wonder how Rhiannon's doing." Draco made a sound like a yawn. "I think she must be starting uni soon. That's so strange. Why don't Muggles apprentice?"

"I think they used to. Maybe?" Harry yawned too, the potion catching up with him. "Um... ask your Muggle Studies teacher..."

"Yeah..." Harry heard a sound of shifting blankets. "Good night..."

"Night..."

For several long moments there was only silence, and then Draco's voice came again. "Jus'..."
don't scratch . . ."

The suggestion jolted Harry back to full awareness. "I'm not."

Draco yawned again. "No, I meant . . . when you talk to your moron of a godfather. Er . . . what are you planning to tell him, anyway?"

Harry only had to think about that for three seconds. "Nothing, really. We promised Dad, and even if we hadn't, there's no way I'd repeat any of that. Not his fucking business, is it?"

"Then . . . what are you going to say?"

Harry adjusted his blankets. "That I know everything, and not to ask, and that I love Severus as much as ever, and if he can't be civil about it, I can't talk to him until he can be."

"Sounds . . ." Draco's voice drifted off and then came back. "Yeah, all right . . ."

Harry wasn't sure if he went to sleep then, or a long while later. Instead of spinning, his thoughts seemed to be moving like treacle down a hill, so slow he could barely follow them.

All he really knew was that after he got to sleep, he didn't dream.

Not about anything.

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Eight: "The Hogwarts Express"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
"And I really can't say anything else," finished Harry, glaring fiercely at the image of Sirius sitting cross-legged in the Mirror of All Souls. "It's Severus' personal business. All you need to understand is that I know everything now, and I still trust him and want to be his son."

Sirius cleared his throat, licking his lips a few times before he said anything. He was clearly wary of Harry's temper. As well he should be. Harry had started this conversation with an ultimatum. Either Sirius would stop insulting Snape -- to Harry, at least -- or Harry would stop visiting him. His choice.

It probably didn't hurt that just a few moments after that, Harry had reminded Sirius that everybody had regrets. Everybody had done terrible things.

Like trying to get a classmate killed by a werewolf, for example. What was that except attempted murder, clear as day? It would have been actual murder if Harry's dad hadn't arrived in time to save . . . well, everybody, really. Snape from being killed, Remus from being found out and expelled, and Sirius from the full penalty of the law.

James Potter hadn't been perfect, that was the truth, but saving everyone that day made up for a lot of things. Harry went warm inside thinking about it.

"Are you sure, though, Harry?" Sirius finally asked, licking his lips again, "that Snape told you the whole truth about what happened to his father? I mean . . . no offence to Slytherin since you're one as well, now, but they do have the knack of . . . er, slanting facts in their favour."

It only took Harry three seconds to decide he wouldn't take offence. Sirius was trying to be reasonable; that was all that really counted. "Yeah, I'm sure. I saw the whole thing in a Pensieve, Sirius. Every last bit. And if you start spouting rubbish about how he must have hexed the Pensieve, I swear I'll--"

"No," interrupted Sirius slowly. "I don't know that such a thing can be done. And even if it can . . . listen, Harry. I'm not as bull-headed as you think. Last time when we were talking, I could tell that Snape . . . that Snape had some . . . some feelings for you. But damn it, Harry -- it's Snape!"

Harry smiled, most of his anger evaporating. Because here was Sirius' real issue, right? And as issues went, it just wasn't that serious. "Yeah, I know he's Snape, and you've never got on, you two. But Sirius? No offence to you, but that's your problem. I happen to--"

"Yes, yes, you love him," said Sirius in a long-suffering tone. "I did hear you the first ten times."

"More than that, I like him, Sirius. Look, it's a bit weird since he's my dad and all, but sometimes I feel like we're mates! I don't know . . . would I have got on with James like this? I think maybe not-
"Harry." Sirius' tone was about as full of reproach as a voice could be, Harry thought. "How can you say a thing like that? James can't come forward to tell you himself, but he loves you, loves you dearly--"

"Oh, I know," Harry smiled. "You tell him that I don't doubt it, and that it was Severus, by the way, who proved to me that I don't have to choose, that I can have two dads, right? But what I meant was that with James, I'd have grown up with him, you see. It's a little different with Severus. I was close to grown, anyway, when we first started to get along--"

Harry leaned closer to the mirror, so close that his nose nearly bumped it. Sirius looked an inch away from laughing. "What?"

"I remember, that's all. What it was like to believe that sixteen is nearly grown."

Harry peered at him suspiciously. "Are you making fun?"

"A bit."

"Well, I'm seventeen now, anyway."

Sirius' lips twitched.

Harry gave him a pleading look. "Stop it."

Another twitch, but then, "All right."

"Do you think you'd end up mates with your dad if he raised you from when you were small?" asked Harry, his head tilted to one side.

"I'm afraid I'm not one to answer that, unfortunately."

"Yeah, well I can't ask Severus," muttered Harry, only to realise a second later that there was someone he could ask. "You're there with my dad, so talk to him about it, all right? Only, don't make it like a message he's trying to get to me, since then the magic'll interfere. Just . . . sound him out. And while you're at it, ask him and my mum for some good stories of when I was little. Tell them that I can remember loads of things, but--"

"You don't remember being one year old!"

"I do," insisted Harry. "This is what I mean about trusting me, Sirius. I really do know what I'm talking about."

Sirius shifted like he was uncomfortable sitting on the floor. Odd that he hadn't conjured a chair for himself, in that case. But then, maybe he'd just copied Harry, who didn't mind sitting cross-legged at all. "All right then, you remember."

Harry decided to take pity on him. "Only because Severus brewed me a potion. Truthful Dreams. It makes my memory kind of . . . open up while I sleep. And when I wake up, I can still remember what I learned."

"But how can you be sure that these dreams aren't just . . . dreams, Harry?"

"They're not like normal dreams. They're too real."

Sirius still looked doubtful, Harry thought. "I had a little green blanket decorated with silver unicorns," he added. "I'm always rubbing my cheek
against it. When I'm not chewing it, that is."

Sirius widened his eyes. "Lily used to complain about how you wouldn't stop gnawing that blanket!"

Harry smiled fondly. "It was so soft." He crossed his arms then, feeling smug. "I wouldn't know a thing about it if not for Severus."

"I suppose that was . . . good of him."

He'd said the word *good* so reluctantly that Harry couldn't help himself. "The world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters, Sirius. Isn't that what you told me? He was one, but there was good in him even back then, and all the bad stuff? It was really a long time ago."

"It wasn't so long ago that he treated you worse than owl droppings!"

"Seems like it to me," said Harry, shrugging. "And he apologised, anyway. Even offered to write lines."

Sirius gaped.

Harry grinned. "But I declined."

"I see what you mean about an odd relationship."

"Ask my dad about being mates or not with his dad, then," said Harry, going back to his point. "And ask him for stories of when I was little. I'm sure that Truthful Dreams must have left things out. And . . . and . . ." Harry racked his brains, trying to remember what else he'd meant to say. "Oh, right. Tell my mum that I've got this brooch, this ugly glittery pear thing that Dudley said belonged to our great-great-grandmother . . . uh, Rose Anna Evans. See if you can find out if my mum used to ever wear it, all right? But . . . um, maybe leave off saying that it's ugly."

Sirius nodded. "There's no guarantee that this will work, Harry. I can definitely carry messages from you to your parents, but if they attempt to send some back--"

"Don't let them," Harry quickly put in. "Just talk like you want to know. Like talking to me got you interested."

"I'll do my best," said Sirius gravely. "At least this way I think James and Lily will speak to me again. They were so upset with me after last time that I thought I'd lost them as well as you. James asked me what I thought I was doing, trying to take away the only father you'd ever known."

Those words tugged at Harry's heart. "I know him too, through those memory dreams. Tell him that, Sirius, and that I know how much he loves me. I don't have to rely on other people to swear it's true, not now. I know it for myself."

Sirius cleared his throat. "That'll mean everything to him, Harry."

Harry doubted that. After all, James had Lily there with him. But it would probably mean something. "I'd better go now, but don't worry. I'll call you again."

"To hear what your parents had to say."

"And to talk to you, you berk."

Sirius flashed a smile as he nodded.
"Bye," said Harry, a little sadly.

His intention to end the conversation was all it took to make the mirror ripple back into its usual appearance. Stepping close, Harry looked all around the floor to see if the shard he'd used had somehow come back out of the transformation, but it hadn't.

It had been used up, like the others.

Like it or not, he was steadily working his way through the pieces of the broken mirror. At some point, he'd have none left, and he'd have to truly say goodbye to Sirius, and through him, his parents. But this chance to talk with all of them was more than he ever thought he'd get, so Harry refused to think about how he was going to feel when the Mirror of All Souls fell silent for him.

"All is well, I trust?" asked Snape in his deep voice as soon as Harry let himself into their rooms.

"Yeah, but I'm surprised you'd guess it went all right," said Harry, shrugging off his school robes and hanging them from his usual hook. He'd worn them to make a point to Sirius. Dual crest, Slytherin prefect's pin . . .

"Oh, Black can be an imbecile but he's not completely lacking in common sense," drawled Snape. "The last thing he wants is to alienate you."

"You could have fooled me," muttered Harry, shaking his head. "Anyway, he thought it was good of you to give me Truthful Dreams. You know, so I could remember things from when I was only a year old?"

Walking closer, Snape raised an eyebrow. "As I recall, I dosed you with that potion because you'd had a nightmare."

"Well, yeah, but you gave it to me later knowing I wanted it so I could dream about my parents--"

Snape clicked his tongue. "Have you been misdirecting your own godfather? Cleverly enough that he didn't notice, too. How very Slytherin of you."

"Well, I am," said Harry, and then wondered why he felt defensive about it. Severus certainly sounded pleased. "And Sirius knows. Uh, that I'm in Slytherin, I mean."

"He knows about your crest. I doubt very much that he believes it suits you. But no matter. He'll learn."

"If we have enough time," said Harry, carefully laying the broken mirror flat on the table in the dining alcove. He had an impulse to smother it in cotton wool to keep it safe. Instead, he flopped into the nearest chair and stared at the mirror morosely. "I haven't counted the pieces left yet, because I don't really want to think about the end, but sooner or later I won't be able to avoid knowing there are only three left, then two, then . . ."
"You really can't complain about the gift this mirror represents." Severus dropped into the chair nearest Harry. "Most people who lose a parent simply have to wait."

By the end, his voice was so bleak it sounded hollow.

Harry wouldn’t have understood that before, but he did now. Snape's father wasn't in the afterlife, was he? His soul was stuck inside that Dementor, still. Not that Snape probably wanted to see his horrid father again, but even so, it couldn’t be easy knowing that Snape had sent him to a place like that.

Not Snape, not Snape, Harry told himself, a little frantically. Voldemort had tricked him into it. But Snape was the one who had let himself be tricked . . .

Harry decided he couldn't think about it any longer. He meant what he'd told Sirius: he still loved and trusted his father. But it was so strange, knowing these things. It meant he understood Severus Snape better than ever before . . . but it also meant that he understood less about everything else. Like life.

How could a father ever, ever do that to his own son?

"So, where's Draco?" asked Harry, eager for a distraction.

 Snape's voice acquired a sardonic edge. "Where do you suppose he would be, hmm?"

Harry didn't have to think long. "In the Owlery, sending off a letter for Hermione to post to Rhiannon."

"A good guess, but in fact he's gone to consult with Miss Burbage again."

"Well, it can't be easy, jumping into seventh year Muggle Studies like that."

"I do wish he'd return, though. I've news for both of you."

Harry rubbed his hands together. "Well, his loss that I get to hear it first."

"Yes, I can see that you're devastated," said Snape dryly.

"Come on. Spill."

"You won't have to wait until the Welcoming Feast to see your friends. You'll be on the Express with them."

Harry grinned. "Brilliant! I can't wait to see the look on their faces when they find out that I'm a Slytherin prefect. I didn't want to tell them in a letter. No fun in that!"

"You aren't the least bit concerned about their reaction?"

Harry shook his head, though privately, he was a tiny bit concerned about Ron. Oh, he'd be all right with Harry being a Slytherin prefect, but when it came to living in Slytherin half the time? Harry wasn't sure. "What changed your mind about the train? I thought you said there wasn't any point since Draco and I already are here."

"You're a junior member of the Order, and as such, I expect you to keep this information strictly to yourself," said Snape sternly. "With the way Voldemort has been attacking landmarks, the headmaster is concerned that the Hogwarts Express could become a target."
"And that means you want me on it?"

"No, of course not." Snape scowled. "But I have more responsibilities than those of a father. Albus is arranging as much protection as possible on board the train. There will be extra Aurors guarding the students and watching out for anything suspicious, and the teachers have also been told to lend a hand. Including the new Defence instructor."

"Great." Harry made a face. "Bo Peep."

"Pardon?"

"She's a shepherdess, like Bo Peep. I'll show you." Harry made sure to draw his wand, holding it to cover his wandless magic. "Accio Draco's sixth-year Muggle Studies book!"

It contained a collection of nursery rhymes that Draco had asked Harry about. When they'd seen the illustration of Bo Peep, Draco and Harry had spent the better part of ten minutes chortling over it.

"Think she'll dress like that?" asked Harry, tempted to laugh again as he pointed at the colour drawing of a woman with a billowing blue checked skirt topped with what looked like a corset worn on the outside.

"Maura Morrighan is not a shepherdess in the sense you suggest," said Severus, closing the book with a decided snap.

"Dumbledore said she was."

"Not of sheep, certainly. She's skilled when it comes to magical creatures. Including dragons, I do believe."

"So she'll be like Hagrid in a dress?"

"I doubt the woman has a single dress to her name. Could we return to the point at issue?"

Harry bit back his next jibe about shepherdesses. "Right, of course. The Express. Where do I come in?"

"Several places, actually." Snape sighed. "You're a prefect, which means that you and Draco should attend the meeting on the train. More than that, though, is the fact that if the Express is attacked, you and Draco are competent to Apparate."

"So we'll just run away and leave the rest of the children to die, will we?" asked Harry, outraged.

"No, you'll be expected to Apparate them while the Order and Aurors hold the attack at bay."

"Oh," said Harry, feeling stupid.

"No matter how many teachers are on board, it won't be enough to get the students to safety. The Order will need all the help it can get, and as Albus pointed out, you and Draco are in fact . . ."

"Members."

"Junior members," Snape ground out.

Harry reached across the table and patted his father on the shoulder. "But adults now."

"All the same, I'd rather you were not on board." Snape sighed. "But then, should an attack
transpire, I'd rather that none of the students were present, with the possible exception of Mr Zabini."

Harry frowned, thinking of how he'd have to room with that prat this year. Half the time at least. There were definite disadvantages to being in Slytherin.

On the other hand, what had Zabini done except call Draco names and manipulate some of the others to give him a hard time? Compared to what Nott had done last year, that wasn't much. "You don't really mean that about Zabini."

"I don't wish death upon annoying students?"

Harry chuckled. "No, you don't, and you won't be able to fool me on that account again. Don't worry though; your secret's safe with me. About the train, though . . . why don't the students just floo to the castle?"

"The Express must run in any case. Can you imagine a first-year Muggleborn's parents being willing to send their child through the fireplace? And too, the Acting Minister, in his infinite idiocy, has determined that our regular procedures will remain in effect. To do anything else, he told Albus, would merely offer aid and comfort to the enemy. "Snape began to speak in a sniping tone. "We mustn't let You-Know-Who know that his actions have affected us, you know. That will only embolden him, and besides, what will the public think?"

"Scrimgeour's an arse. Putting children in danger just because it's better for his bloody public image to act like nothing's wrong--"

Snape held up a hand. "I don't believe the students will be in danger."

"Come again?"

Snape's smile was razor-sharp. "Think about it, Harry. Voldemort is undoubtedly insane, but the core of him is still steeped in what he learned in Slytherin. There's very little profit in slaughtering hundreds of schoolchildren. He wants control of the wizarding world. That's not the way to gain it."

"But he used children to attack the Ministry! Killed them doing it!"

"Yes, but not publicly. The Order knows for certain, but all anyone else has is speculation that the Ministry attack might be connected to the summer disappearances of Muggleborns and half-bloods."

"Why keep it a secret?" The moment Harry asked, he knew. "Oh, shite. If you release the information, Voldemort will know he has a mole in his ranks!"

Snape nodded. "War is made of hard decisions. Is it better to withhold information and preserve a tactical advantage?"

"Of course it is. It's Remus."

"Protecting him may mean the deaths of others," argued Snape. "Of course, protecting his position may ultimately reveal a means to end the war entirely, which will mean the salvation of others still."

"You're getting ready for that Ethics class."

"I sometimes find myself wondering if there can be any such thing in war," muttered Snape.
Harry patted his father's shoulder again. "If you don't think the train will be attacked, then why are you so annoyed I'll be on it?"

Snape glowered. "I don't like to see my children being used."

"Just because I can Apparate?"

"Your dark powers, rather. If the train is attacked, and the opportunity presents itself, Albus thinks you may be able to end the war in one fell stroke."

"Wouldn't that be a good thing?" asked Harry, puzzled because Snape sounded so angry at the mere prospect.

"You aren't ready."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Are you talking as my teacher or my father?"

"Your father, I suppose."

"Will you ever think I'm ready? I mean, as a father?"

"Probably not," admitted Snape with a grimace. "Sometimes I think it would have been better for the three of us to leave here for parts unknown."

"I couldn't abandon my friends, Dad. You know that."

"Yet one more reason to have you on the train." Severus' lips lifted in a grim smile. "I know you too well, Harry. I truly do not believe that anything will happen, but if something did, you would never forgive yourself for not being there to help."

Harry's arms itched at the mere prospect. "Yeah," he said, swallowing. "Especially since I could maybe do more than just Apparate some of the children to safety."

"If anything happens, you're to adhere to your stated mission. That's what members of the Order do, Harry."

Harry almost opened his mouth to argue, but thought better of it. No point in announcing his plans, not when it meant only one thing: his father would keep him off the train. But the truth was that this all went back to ethics. Yeah, Harry had promised to take orders when he'd joined the Order of the Phoenix. But if he saw a way to use the advantage of surprise they'd so carefully preserved, a way to destroy Voldemort with a wanded spell, Harry would have to break his word. Winning the war so he could keep his family and friends safe, after all, was more important than keeping a promise. A lot more important.

"I'll protect the children," he agreed out loud, hoping that his father would overlook the ambiguity of his wording. Considering that this was Snape, though, a distraction was probably in order. "But Draco and I aren't the only ones able to Apparate, remember. Hermione got her license before the Ministry was destroyed, and I'm sure a lot of the seventh years are competent, even if they aren't officially allowed to use the skill, yet."

"I doubt that Miss Granger or the others possess much experience in Side-Along Apparition."

Oh. Harry hadn't thought of that. "But . . . neither do I. And I don't think Draco knows how."

Snape smiled, the expression grim. "I suggest you both acquire the skill. Since the wards here will
interfere, we'll go to Devon so you can practise."

One flick of the man's wand had the door to their quarters flying open. A second flick sent a galloping silver doe bounding down the corridor.

Harry stared after it, a little bemused. "A deer, really? Mine's a stag."

"I am aware of that," said Snape dryly.

"Bit weird they'd be so similar."

For some reason, Snape looked away, then.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Bollocks," snapped Harry. "What is it? You hate having a Patronus that's so much like Prongs? I thought you'd forgiven my dad! I thought you couldn't love his son and still hate him--"

"What I hate," said Snape, his words lashing out like a whip, "is having Patronus that's so much like yours, Harry!"

Harry took a step back and tried to hide how much that hurt. When he heard the wobble in his voice, he knew he'd failed. Miserably. "What . . . but why?"

Snape sighed, his anger clearly leaving him, though he still looked disturbed. "Think about it, Harry. What does the spell mean?"

"I . . . uh, I expect a saviour . . . oh."

"I'm supposed to support and protect you, not the other way around," said Snape, shaking his head. "And what can a doe to your stag mean except an acknowledgment that my magic is far weaker than yours?"

"It could just be a coincidence," said Harry. "Doesn't it have to be? I mean, when did you first master the spell? Long before you knew what my Patronus would be, right? Long before you knew I'd have dark powers."

"You're obviously unaware that Patronus forms can change."

Harry swallowed. "Has yours?"

Stupid question. Snape just stared at him in answer.

"Er . . . what did it used to be?"

"Something less revealing, I assure you."

So Snape didn't want to talk about it. Harry didn't like that, but he knew better than to pester the man. "Well, I'm sorry that the change bothers you," he said stiffly.

"You shouldn't have to be my saviour," said Snape in dark tones. "I am your father; I should be the one to save you from the darkness waiting outside these walls."

"You have, Severus," said Harry, seriously. "And I don't just mean on Samhain. You've saved me
in a lot of ways. The needles. And steering clear of revenge fantasies. And having a family to call my own. I don't think you know what that means to me."

"And as for the other?"

Harry shrugged. He'd rather the prophecy not be true, except for the fact that if it wasn't, there might be no hope for any of them. "All I know is I wouldn't be able to save you if you hadn't saved me first."

Snape blew out a long, shuddering breath. "You're a good son, Harry."

"Is Harry playing at that again?" asked Draco as he walked through the open door.

"No more than you're playing at being a Muggle, spending so much time with Miss Burbage." Snape's expression was shuttered by then, as though he hadn't just finished having an emotional discussion with Harry.

"She asked about you."

Snape looked profoundly bored by that titbit. Harry really didn't understand what Draco was getting at, but the boy's next outrageous claim brought that into clear focus. "She thinks that an unmarried man with two sons could probably do with some feminine influence."

"I was unaware that you'd become so highly skilled in Legilimency, Draco."

Draco threw Harry an exasperated look, probably because Snape hadn't taken his bait.

"She mentioned as much, Severus. She's hoping that you'll ask her out."

"Miss Burbage did not mention that last bit," said Snape scathingly.

"No, but she hinted and hinted," said Draco earnestly. "Honestly, she did, Severus. She even said that she'd learnt to cook the Muggle way but it was no fun to have nobody to cook for, and did I think you'd mind if she brought a meal around for us all to share. I'm starting to think that the reason she's been so helpful lately is that she sees me as a way to get to you!"

Snape snorted. "She's been teaching here for years, Draco. I think I would have noticed if she was longing for a way to get to me."

"Would you have? I mean, no offence, but you're the most anti-social . . . er . . ." Harry had to hide a smile. He couldn't help it, though. Draco was usually so smooth. Seeing him make an awful gaffe like that made Harry feel loads better about his own foot-in-mouth disease. "Severus doesn't like it when you say 'no offence' and then proceed to offend him," he drawled.

"Severus, in fact," bit out Snape, "knows perfectly well how anti-social he can be. Enough to ensure that Miss Burbage does not look upon me as a potential love interest!"

"Well, I'm sure she never used to," said Draco, shoving his hands in his pockets. "But now she sees you a little differently, don't you think? Far from being a loner, you've adopted not one son but two, which has to make you look less commitment-phobic, and I'm sure it doesn't hurt that one of them is Harry Potter. You know."

"I'll have you committed if you go on much more in this vein," said Snape sternly. "She's a colleague, do you hear me? The last thing I need or want is the complication of a romantic
relationship, particularly one with a fellow teacher. I prefer to maintain a professional demeanour here at Hogwarts. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Draco, clearly subdued.

"If indeed the woman has become delusional, you're not to encourage her."

"But I still want her to tutor me!" Draco flashed Severus a grin that was sly and uncertain at the same time. "I don't have to dash all her hopes, do I? I don't have to march in there and tell her she's got no chance, hmm?"

"That's terrible," exclaimed Harry. "Tell him he has to, Dad."

"And imply that I'm aware of her . . . fixation?" Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's leaping from the cauldron into the flame, Harry. No, no, the best way to deal with this is to act as though I've absolutely no interest in her, not even enough to note her own interest. Assuming there is any."

"Oh, it's there," said Draco, nodding.

"I still think it's terrible to lead her on."

"You're not the one who needs to jump into a N.E.W.T. course without doing the six years that preceded it," said Draco haughtily, before turning back to their father. "Miss Burbage caught sight of your Patronus, by the way. 'Oh, how hauntingly lovely. I had no idea Severus was so sensitive,' were her exact words."

Snape groaned and raised both hands to his temples.

"Would it be so terrible to find somebody to love?" asked Draco softly. "She's a very pleasant woman, Severus. Not a quite the beauty Rhiannon is, of course, but not exactly a flobberworm, either."

"Draco, drop it," said Harry. "This wasn't funny when I thought you were taking the piss, and now that I think you're not, it's pushy and in bad taste."

"Bad taste!" Draco fixed a glare on Harry.

"We don't have time for brainless argument," snapped Snape. "You and Harry have a great deal to learn and very little time to practise. I'll explain more once we're in Devon."

He reached for the powder that would let them floo to Grimmauld Place.

Draco was as predictable as ever. "Oh, Devon. You know, Rhiannon's going to Uni in London, but her term hasn't started yet and she's still staying with her uncle in Exeter. Maybe this evening I could--"

"No."

"You can come with me," wheedled Draco. "Remember the trip wires you and Harry laid? None of them have sounded an alarm, have they? I'm sure it's safe--"

"No."

"But I haven't seen her for weeks, and this'll be my last chance before I'm caged here at Hogwarts for an entire year, and--"
"Enough, Draco!"

Draco fell silent, but pursed his lips.

Snape glared at his son for a moment, but then another expression flitted across his features. It came and went so swiftly that Harry barely caught it, but for an instant, it had looked as though Snape had something he longed to tell Draco.

Something that for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to say.

Gritting his teeth, Snape stepped into the Floo and pulled both his sons in after him, flinging the powder down with more force than was really needed. "Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!"

Learning to Apparate another person was both difficult and painful, Harry soon found out. He managed, though, and so did Draco. It took them several solid days of practising, and about four splinchings each. Those hurt a lot more than Harry would have suspected; they gave him some sympathy for what Draco had suffered the night he'd stolen Harry's wand back from Lucius Malfoy.

Snape had the required potions on hand. Between those and healing spells, he patched them up and made them get "straight back on the broom," as he put it.

Draco said nothing more about Rhiannon until they'd finished practising that first night. Even then, he didn't mention her, but the way he demanded that they spend the night in Devon was almost the same thing. Clearly, he thought that if he could persuade Snape to that, it would be only one step further to get him to agree to a trip into Exeter.

Snape was adamant, though. Devon was as safe as he could make it, but it wasn't Hogwarts, and they were sleeping in the castle.

They returned the next day, and the next, for another torturous round of Side-Along practise.

By the final evening, Harry felt like he'd been knocked flat by a bus. Not even the prospect of seeing his friends in the morning could generate much enthusiasm. He actually wondered if he'd be able to wake up in time to board the Express. Never mind that it didn't leave until eleven a.m.

"It's because Apparition itself is fairly new to you," said Draco airily. "I've known how for years and years."

Harry didn't even have enough energy for a comeback. "Shut up," he groaned.

Draco turned to their father. "Well, since Harry's knackered anyway, perhaps this would be a good time for me to dash off and see Rhiannon."

"A pity I neglected to bring along any bottles of Waldenhofler's Acuity Draught," interrupted Severus. "How many times today have I already told you no?"
"A few." Draco beamed Snape a smile so bright it looked pasted on. "But what better time for it, eh? Tomorrow the students all return to Hogwarts, once term starts, I won't be able to see Rhiannon for months and months."

"No. And stop asking."

"Ten minutes, Severus. That's all I ask--"

"Which part of 'stop asking' did you fail to understand?"

"But it's my last chance, Dad--"

"One more word," thundered Severus, "and I'll regret what I've done for you, you ungrateful boy!"

Ouch.

Exhausted as he was, Harry could see how that hit home. It wasn't quite as bad as You don't deserve to be my son, but . . . actually, maybe it was just as bad.

In any case, it was a lot worse than Draco deserved for saying dad in that wheedling voice.

Draco's whole expression seemed to crumple for an instant, but then his pride came roaring in and he straightened to his full height, his features going stoic, his eyes hardening into absolute granite. "So sorry to have inconvenienced you, Professor Snape, sir."

Without another word, he drew his wand and clutching it, vanished from sight.

"If he's gone to Exeter, I swear I'll snap that wand I gave him," erupted Snape, grabbing Harry and hurriedly Disapparating with him.

Just as well. Harry was pretty sure he couldn't have managed on his own. Not after the last couple of days.

They arrived in Grimmauld Place just in time to see a green flare flashing through the Floo.

"He's just gone home, Dad," said Harry, panting. "You'd better tell him that you didn't mean it."

"I did mean it," said Snape darkly. "But you're right; I'll have a talk with him."

Or not, as it turned out, because Draco had already taken a sleeping potion by the time Snape and Harry arrived.

"Wake him up," insisted Harry. "You must have an antidote, right?"

Leaning close to Draco's prone features, Snape carefully inhaled. When he stood up, he was shaking his head. "I could rouse him if it were truly urgent--"

Harry staggered to his own bed before his legs gave way from exhaustion. "It is urgent!"

"He'll be sick half the night if I drag him out of this sort of sleep." Snape closed his eyes. "I trust you remember how terrible it is for him to vomit."

"Oh."

"The morning will be soon enough to speak with him." Snape deftly summoned a tee-shirt and shorts from Harry's trunk as he moved closer, then thrust them into his son's hands. "Do you need
help getting ready for bed?"

Harry would have burst out laughing, except that he was just too tired. "I'm seventeen, Severus."

"And about to faint, from the look of you."

That was probably true, but Draco wasn't the only one with pride, so Harry forced himself to his feet and made his way over to the bathroom. "You can tuck me in if you like," he tossed over his shoulder as he closed the door.

He felt like he was moving in slow-motion, but after what had to be far too long, he was dressed for bed with his face scrubbed and his teeth brushed.

He was also stunned, because when he opened the bathroom door, he saw that Severus was sitting on his bed . . . waiting to tuck him in.

Harry let him, and then he rolled on his side and hugged the blanket to him, grinning.

Only for ten seconds, though. After that, he was fast asleep.

As it turned out, the morning wasn't a good time to talk to Draco. He spent most of it in the bathroom, claiming that he had to be "properly attired" to greet his classmates, when really, he was just hiding in there so he wouldn't have to see Snape.

"Come on, Draco," Harry finally called through the door. "He didn't mean it!"

"I saw the look on his face; he most definitely did mean it, Potter," came Draco's reply, the words clipped and aloof.

"He was just annoyed with all your Rhiannon-whingeing!"

"Just because the man screams in horror at the idea of a romance of his own, is no reason to deny me a chance to see her!"

Harry knew that Draco was more rational than that. Saying such a thing just proved that he was mental from missing his girlfriend. Draco understood how dangerous it would be to go to Exeter, though. Harry was positive of that.

He was also positive that Draco wasn't going to admit--not right now--that he could see reason. Or at least, not that kind.

"Would you open the bloody door?" he shouted, out of patience. "Some of us have to pee!"

Draco abruptly flung the door open.

"Snape just needs a chance to talk with you," said Harry quickly. "Give him one. Don't start the
"You don't appear to need the facilities," drawled Draco, looking Harry up and down in the instant before he slammed the door in Harry's face.

Sighing, Harry got his shoes and socks on and went to knock on Snape's bedroom door. He was actually pretty embarrassed to have to ask, but after the way Snape had waited to tuck him in, he thought it would be all right. "Can I use your bathroom? Draco won't let me in ours."

Snape moved aside to allow Harry entrance. "Sulking, I take it?"

"Something like that."

"Your brother is going to feel like an imbecile by five past eleven," said Snape cryptically.

Harry had reached the bathroom door by then, but that remark was so strange that he paused before going in. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"I don't understand."

Snape sighed and pushed the bathroom door open. "I'd rather not discuss the matter, Harry. Try to do something with your hair. It's worse than usual."

Harry was about to say that Snape was a fine one to talk, wasn't he, but when he raised his eyes to retort, he realised that he didn't have much cause. Not this morning, at any rate.

Snape's hair was smooth and shiny, hanging in a sleek curtain around his face, but it didn't look oily.

"Uh..."

Snape's forehead creased with irritation, though the shove he gave Harry was very gentle.

Bemused, Harry closed the door behind him and set about trying to do something with his own hair. The spells Hermione had taught him only went so far, but after ten minutes, he'd managed to get his hair to lie mostly flat.

When he came out, Draco and Snape were having tea and toast together.

Silently.

Harry sighed and decided he'd better just stay out of it. Better than have Draco remind him that Harry hadn't liked it when Draco had told him how to treat their father.

Besides... he wanted to see what Severus had meant about five past eleven.
Nothing could have prepared Harry for the sight that greeted them halfway down the long walk toward Platform 9 3/4.

"Dudley," gasped Harry, blinking to be sure it was really him. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" asked the blond boy. He was still horribly chubby, but nothing like the whale he'd been in years past. In fact, it looked to Harry like the other boy had got back on his diet and lost a little more weight. "I'm seeing you off to school."

Harry still felt dazed. "I . . . I can't believe it. How did you know where to find me?"

Dudley laughed. "I know I'm thick, Harry, but after six straight years, I did notice the day and time you left each year." His smile widened, though his blue eyes held more than a hint of sadness. "I didn't see you as much as I'd have liked to, this summer. And now I won't be able to see you again until June, will I? I thought I'd better not miss this chance."

Harry checked his watch. "The train leaves at eleven sharp, Dudley. I wish I'd known you'd be here. I'd have made sure to come earlier so we could have more time together."

Dudley's smile faded. "I know, but I didn't want you to do that. It . . . it might not be safe to hang about in the station. For you, I mean."

"Or you," said Harry thickly. "You . . . you understand, then? I know you went into hiding, but they don't tell me anything. Which is probably good. I mean, the fewer people who know, the better."

"I understand more now than I did at your party." Dudley grimaced. "I probably shouldn't even be here now, but--"

"No, indeed you should not," said Snape. "Though for my son's sake, I appreciate the sentiment. However, I believe you should say your good-byes now, and I will find someone who can see you safely returned to your place of residence."

By "someone," Snape meant someone who already knew where Dudley's hiding place was, Harry knew.

"Oh, well, I took the tube to Piers' new place and had him drive me here," said Dudley. "To confuse the trail, you know. And also because I don't have a car any longer."

"What happened to the car?"

Dudley rolled his eyes. "Oh, nothing, Harry. Your sort decided I ought not to have it, that's all. I don't know if it's in storage or turned it into a chicken, do I?"

Oh . . . the Order had thought the car might be too recognisable, then. Which made sense, considering that Voldemort and his Death Eaters had known where Harry used to live.

"If you don't get it back when this is all over, I'll buy you a new car," Harry promised. "Any kind you like."

Dudley immediately brightened; some things never changed. "Can I have a Hummer?"

"Can you afford the petrol?"
"A Mini, then."

Harry laughed. "Severus is right. We'd better get you back where you belong. But it means a lot that you came to see me, Dudley."

It was only a little awkward to reach out and hug him.

Maybe, in time, it would feel completely natural to have a cousin he could hug.

"'Bye, Harry," said Dudley, his voice quivering a little. "I . . . I don't know what's going on, exactly. They don't tell me much, but . . . but . . . you take care of yourself, all right?"

"You too, Dudley," said Harry thickly.

"Good-bye, Dudley," said Draco. "It was good to see you again."

Dudley started. "Oh. Hallo, Draco. Sorry. I didn't see you there."

Draco nodded, obviously not offended. "I understand. You were very glad of a chance to see Harry."

Snape manoeuvred Dudley a small distance down the platform, then peered closely at Draco before they left. "Remember what I told you."

"Of course," said Draco, his voice cooling. "Always, Severus."

As soon as their father had led Dudley away, Harry turned to his brother. "Remember what?"

"He reminded me over breakfast not to leave you alone," said Draco, just a little bit loudly. "Because of your . . . well, you know all about it."

Harry nodded grimly. It had been nice to forget about that for most of the summer, but now that school had started, the game was back on, he supposed. He had to maintain the illusion that he needed protection, that his magic wasn't back to what it used to be before he'd been blinded and all the rest.

Let alone that it was far stronger.

"We'd better get past the barrier in any case," added Draco in a lower voice.

"We've still got about twenty minutes to spare."

"True, but most of the Aurors are probably on the other side."

Shrugging, Harry adjusted his rucksack -- all he had with him, this time, which made for a nice change from a trolley. He wouldn't even have brought that much, but he didn't fancy a dash around the castle to fetch his robes for the Welcoming Feast.

Draco had shrunk his own robes and tucked them into a pocket but Snape, in true wizard style, had opted to transfigure his robes into a tweed three-piece suit that vaguely reminded Harry of Remus. When he used to look like himself, that was.

In a way, it was too bad that Remus had to act as though Lucius Malfoy were estranged from Draco. If they could appear to be on better terms, then "Lucius" could have come to the station to see his son off for his final year of schooling.
But then, Harry would have had to see Remus wearing Lucius' face. Harry had told Severus that he was up to that, but sometimes he wondered how true that really was. Those sculpted features, so cold and haughty . . . Harry couldn't help it; they reminded him of Samhain, of the sight of that needle coming towards his eye.

"Harry!" called a voice from further down the platform.

Harry turned to see who it was, and then wished he hadn't. Ugh. Just what he needed. "Hallo, Piers," he said, doing his best to sound as unwelcoming as possible. "I thought you were waiting in the car."

"Oh, so you have seen Dudley?"

"Didn't he just imply that?" asked Draco coldly. "How stupid are you?"

Harry made a sharp motion with one hand. "Let me handle this."

"Let me know if you need help," murmured Draco, though he did move off a few feet. He kept his wand hand in his deep trouser pocket, though.

Harry found that both endearing and annoying. It was all right for Draco to want to protect him, but please, from Piers? Harry could handle him on his own.

"If you're looking for Dudley, you're out of luck. You should just go back to your car and be on your way."

"Without him, you mean?"

"He won't need a ride back," said Harry shortly. "Change of plans."

A sly smile crawled across Piers' thin lips. "Just as well. I was hoping for a chance to see you alone, Harry." His eyes raked Harry up and down, the look in them frankly creepy. "I'd like to see more of you. A lot more."

His tone of voice left no doubt as to what he meant by that.

"Get lost, Piers. I'm not interested."

Piers' smile turned ugly, not that it had been remotely pleasant to begin with. "You don't know what I'm offering, little boy. Virgin, I'll bet. Well, you wouldn't turn me down so fast if you knew what I could do for you--"

Harry had heard enough. More than enough. Turning his back on Piers, he started to walk away.

Piers' hand landed on Harry's shoulder, his fingers scrabbling to get a firm grip on fabric.

Harry snapped, then. Curling his right hand into a tight fist, he whirled without warning and smashed his fist straight into Piers' nose. Piers fell to the station floor and squealed like a stuck pig. Blood spurted from between the fingers he was clutching over his face.

Draco whistled, long and low.

Harry swallowed, feeling a little guilty as he looked down. He'd just meant to make Piers let go of him. He hadn't really intended to make him gush blood. Or make his own hand hurt so much, come to think of it. Harry flexed it a couple of times, wincing as he stretched out his fingers. Ow . . .
"Come on," said Draco, taking Harry by the arm and rushing him down the platform. "Time to go."

"Don’t tell Severus," said Harry as they ran. "I don't need a lecture."

"What makes you think you'd get one?"

"You got one, and all you did was throw Diet Coke at him."

"True--"

"Besides," said Harry as they reached Platform 9 3/4, "I don't think Dad would appreciate the way I just drew attention to myself."

Draco stopped a few feet shy of the barrier and pulled Harry out of the way of several students pushing trolleys towards it. "You never know. He might be pleased that you used some of those Muggle fighting skills he taught you. But don't worry; I won't say a thing."

"Thanks."

"Come on, let's go through together."

So Harry wouldn't be left alone on either side of the barrier? Harry would have rolled his eyes, but he had to clench them instead as he walked through the wall. The feeling of passing through it was a lot like Apparition, and after all that practise, he didn't exactly welcome the sensation.

"Harry!" called Hermione gaily as she waved to him from across the crowded platform. The minute she reached him, she gave him a close hug. "Oh, it's so good to see you!"

"You too, Hermione."

"I swear you've grown an inch since your birthday party--"

"I feel like the invisible man," drawled Draco.

Hermione punched Draco lightly in the arm. "I saw you. Sorry. How have you been, Draco?"

Draco lifted his shoulders a mere fraction of an inch. "I'm sure you can guess."

"Yeah... it's got to be rough," said Hermione, effortlessly picking up on the oblique Rhiannon reference. Like Draco, she kept her comments so vague as to be nearly meaningless to anybody who might overhear. "But this is your last year of school--"

"That won't make a difference unless things--" The war, Harry knew he meant, "--are settled."

"True." Hermione sighed a little. "Well, Harry and I will just have to keep you distracted, hmm?"

"Nothing could distract me from what really matters." Draco made an effort to smile. "On the other
hand, I've still got a great deal of studying to do, to catch up with the rest of the Muggle Studies students. A pity you're not still in the class. I could use a partner."

"Did you get through all the books I gave you?"

Draco offered Hermione a hand to assist her to board the train. She didn't need help, but she still took his hand, and then the two of them were walking down the corridor together. Harry suddenly felt like the invisible man, the way they were chattering to one another.

"Oh, yes. Very helpful, Hermione. I can't thank you enough. I've been working with Miss Burbage, who's quite nice, though you know that, I suppose. She's set me some extra reading. Fiction, mostly--"

Harry didn't hear what else he said, because suddenly Luna Lovegood was standing in front of him. "Harry. I've been looking for you."

Harry wouldn't mind talking to her, not in the least, but he didn't want his brother to get in trouble for leaving him alone on the train. Draco was so engrossed in his conversation with Hermione about all things Muggle that he didn't seem to have noticed that Harry had fallen behind. "Wait for me, Draco," he called out, and then gave Luna his full attention. "How have you been? Good summer?"

She smiled in that vacant yet sincere way she had. "Oh, yes, marvellous. Dad and I went off to hunt Tibetan fuzzyprickles. We didn't find any, but . . ." She twirled around in place, looking almost like a ballerina. "It was almost as though we had. You know how they give you that sense of peace and contentment. I still feel like I'm floating."

Harry hated to bring her down to earth, but on the other hand, he needed to be sure she was at least aware of Voldemort's recent activity. Though with Luna . . . it might be a lost cause no matter what. "Um, you heard about the attack on the Ministry, right? A lot of people died."

"Yes. The Tragedy of the Thirty-First," she said, raising a hand to the corner of one eye. "Dad and I weren't in Britain at the time. We were still caught in the clouds."

Harry decided not to ask.

"But that reminds me," added Luna in a bright voice, as if they hadn't just been discussing the worst mass-murder in British wizarding history. She fished for a moment in her bright pink purse, and then pulled out a cucumber that had clearly seen better days. It wasn't quite rotting yet, but it was looking more than a little soft in places.

Luna thrust it out toward Harry. "Here you go!"

Harry managed not to make a face as he took it from her. "Uh . . . thanks, Luna. Er . . ." He almost hated to ask. "What's the occasion?"

Luna gave him an indulgent look, like that was the silliest question she'd ever heard. Or maybe like Harry was the cutest thing she'd ever seen.

All Harry knew was that Draco broke off his conversation with Hermione to chuckle softly.

"It's your coming-of-age present, of course," said Luna, just as though she gave out veg on a daily basis. For all Harry knew, though, she did. "I'm so sorry I wasn't at your party. I came home from Tibet and saw from the invitation that I'd missed it."
Harry nodded. "I wish you'd been there, but maybe one less person was a good thing, considering what happened that night."

"Why, what happened?"

"The Ministry attack, remember?"

"Oh, was your birthday on the thirty-first?" Luna frowned as she closed the flap on her overlarge purse. "Well, that's not right, it is? I don't think the papers should be calling your birthday a tragedy--"

Harry decided he was better off not trying to straighten her out. It was probably impossible, anyway. "So what do I do with the cucumber, then? I can't remember."

Luna giggled, twirling around again. "Oh, Harry! You're so funny!"

Before Harry could reply, she was scampering off, skipping her way down the length of the carriage. She gave Harry a little wave before she pulled open the door leading to the next carriage along.

Harry blew out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding, and caught up with Draco.

"Hungry?" asked Draco, looking down at the cucumber as they made their way to the front of the train.

"It's my coming-of-age present from Luna."

"Enough said." Draco drew his wand and banished the vegetable.

"Draco," said Hermione reprovingly. "That was a gift!"

"Eh, I was going to bin it anyway," admitted Harry as he wiped slightly gooey hands on his trousers. "Blast. I meant to tell her that she's with us for Potions this year."

"She's not in our year," said Hermione, pulling open the door to a compartment.

"Combined classes--"

Hermione suddenly made an apologetic noise in the back of her throat. "Oh. I should have said something sooner, Draco. I'd love to keep discussing your studies, but you know, this is one of the prefects' compartments, and--"

"So?"

Ron was already in the compartment, and had no trouble saying the part that was giving Hermione difficulty. "So you're not a prefect any longer, are you? Go and find another seat, somewhere else. We want to talk to Harry."

Draco plucked his shrunken robes from his pocket and with an elegant flourish of his wand, enlarged them. As he shrugged them on, he gave Harry a warning look. A work-with-me look.

"I happen to be a prefect again. See the badge? Much more aesthetically pleasing than your own garish lion emblems, I must say. Now, if you don't mind . . ." He shouldered his way into the compartment. Then, he turned back, a look of astonishment plastered on his features. "Well, you heard them, Harry. Only prefects are allowed in here!"
Harry almost laughed, now that he understood the joke. "All right," he said, pulling his mouth down into a frown as he began to inch his way backwards. "I'll see you at the Welcoming Feast, I suppose, unless this year there's a special prefects' table set up . . ."

"Draco, he's your brother!" chided Hermione.

"Rules are rules--"

"As if you give a brass Knut about the rules--" put in Ron.

"Oh, and you lot do? Only when you're trying to keep me out of my rightful place, I see--"

Ron bared his teeth. "Snape only made you a prefect again because you're his sodding son, and you know it!"

"Au contraire, he did it because he knows whose side I'm on."

"What was his excuse last time?" Ron didn't wait for an answer. "Harry's not going anywhere without one of us. Are you mental, Malfoy? Don't you remember last year? Hermione and I got a Howler, and we're not about to get another one!"

"Snape."

"Where?"

"My name is Snape."

Ron crossed his arms. "Fine then, Snape. We aren't making Harry sit by himself, end of story. Just what kind of brother are you, anyway?"

"Let me understand you clearly," said Draco in a pleasant voice. "You won't break the rules for me, but you will for him. There's a word for that, you know. Hypocrisy."

"There's a higher rule at stake!" protested Ron.

"Just say you're a hypocrite and I'll let Harry in, straight away."

"That's enough, Draco," said Harry, digging in his rucksack for his own robes. They emerged wrinkled, but that wasn't what mattered. He flipped them until he found the prefect's badge, still pinned on, and thrust the wad of cloth forward. "I'm a prefect, too. See? Draco was just having you on."

"That wasn't funny," said Hermione, shaking her head at all of them before breaking out into a grin. "But you're a prefect, Harry! That's wonderful! All four of us, prefects!"

"Yeah, that's great, mate," said Ron gruffly as he stared at the gleaming badge. "I always did feel a little bit bad that you didn't get one of these."

"You forgot to tell him that he only got it because he's Snape's sodding son."

"Oh, stop it, Draco," said Hermione impatiently. "Ron didn't mean that."

"Sure I didn't--"

Hermione rounded on him. "Would you rather have Zabini in here? Or Crabbe, or Goyle? Name another seventh year Slytherin who will do more than Draco to help us, to help our side. Well?"

He plonked himself down on a seat and crossed his arms, a mulish expression on his face.

Draco sat down too, the motion so refined and elegant that Harry knew he was mocking Ron. Harry wasn't happy, but at least Ron hadn't noticed.

As it was, Draco didn't have long to get comfortable. Just a moment later, Tonks flung the compartment door open, her Auror's robes flaring dramatically as she stepped inside. The effect would have been quite impressive if she hadn't immediately ruined it by tripping over her own feet.

She straightened, her wand out and trained on a single individual. "Draco Malfoy. Stand up, straight away. You're coming with me."

"It's Snape!" ground out Draco.

Harry was on his feet in an instant. "Why? What's the matter? Where are you taking him?"

"I'm not at liberty to say." Tonks made a small circular motion with her wand. "Draco Snape, then. Get up."

Draco rose, but slowly. "I . . . what's this about, then?"

"The Express is leaving in twelve minutes," said Hermione. "He's due at school. Be reasonable, Tonks!"

Tonks' hair abruptly turned a fiery orange. "You don't know why he's needed, so stay out of it."

"I don't know what it's about either!" cried Draco.

"Come alone peacefully or I'll have to use a binding spell," ordered Tonks in a booming voice. "Wouldn't that be humiliating? Bound and dragged away in front of all your classmates." Tonks leaned a little closer, clearly peering at Draco's robes. "And you a prefect, too!"

"Can't you tell us what this is about?" asked Hermione in a pleading voice.

Ron, Harry noticed, wasn't protesting the situation at all.

"I can't, no."

"Why not?"

That was Harry and Hermione speaking as one.

Tonks popped her gum. "I'm sworn to secrecy, why else?"

Harry did a double take then, because he could almost swear that Tonks had just winked at him. Maybe it was just some kind of metamorphmagus twitch, though. She certainly looked serious otherwise. "Come along now, Snape!"

Draco raised his shoulders in a helpless shrug, and started to follow her, though he motioned for Ron and Hermione to be certain to stay with Harry.

The hell with that, thought Harry. He jumped up to go with them, so he could find out what Tonks thought she was playing at.
"Draco's not going to want you to see this," said Tonks in a dark voice.

"Stay, Harry," urged Hermione, grabbing him by the sleeve when he ignored her.

"I'm not letting her haul my brother away to-- to-- I don't know where!"

"Oh yes, you are," snapped Tonks.

"You can't leave the train," added Ron. "Snape'll have our heads."

"But--"

"Quite right," said a new voice that seemed to appear from nowhere. Snape stepped past Tonks and entered the compartment, taking a seat and pulling Harry down next to him. He motioned for Tonks to go, and then flicked his wand to close and ward the door. That done, he turned to Harry and quirked an eyebrow. "You really are a fierce lion, aren't you?"

His voice was so full of good humour that Harry felt staggered. "I . . . what the hell are you on about? I can't believe you . . . you just let her take him away like that!"

"Five past eleven, remember?"

Harry blinked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"What are the two of you talking about?" asked Hermione.

Snape sat back, keeping one hand in the pocket of his robes as a slight smile played about his features. "I let her take him away because the time was running short, Harry. And trust me, Draco would not thank you for delaying him further."

"Could you please stop speaking in code?" demanded Hermione.

"Something your lauded wit can't unravel, Miss Granger?"

Snape was enjoying this far too much, Harry thought. "Dad, what did Tonks want with Draco?"

"Oh, very little." Snape began to look even more smug. "I dare say that Draco's petite amie will be another story."

Harry gaped, but retained enough presence of mind to avoid Rhiannon's name. "She's here?"

"In a manner of speaking. She's in disguise, of course, but Tonks will remove the glamour and give the little love-birds seven minutes alone," said Snape, checking his watch. "It would have been longer if you hadn't insisted on fighting her to the death, Harry."

"I didn't know--" Harry narrowed his eyes. "How could I have known? Tonks was being horrible to him!"

"Well, she couldn't announce what she really had in mind," said Snape reasonably. "She's not aware that your friends are cognizant of the situation."

"She still didn't have to act like she was arresting Draco!"

"She may have been having a bit of fun at his expense," admitted Snape. "Think back to last year and you'll realise that there's more than a fair bit of tension between Draco and his cousin. I'd planned to be here with you when she arrived, but your own cousin scuppered that plan."
"Dudley's all right?"

"I saw him safely to the individual responsible for keeping him hidden." Snape's dark eyes went completely black. "We had words. To say the least."

"You and Dudley?" Harry gulped.

"Of course not. He wouldn't react well to that. No . . . I had words with his keeper, who was decidedly lax this morning. I warrant he'll be kept under closer scrutiny, now."

Interesting that Snape should be so convinced that Dudley should stay away from King's Cross, thought Harry. "Draco was just calling Ron a hypocrite, but he's got nothing on you! How could you have brought her here like this, after Draco and Hermione worked it all out to keep her well away from danger?"

All of Snape's humour abruptly died. "Because it's the lesser of two evils. As much as I'd like Draco to behave as an adult wizard, it's not lost on me that he's merely seventeen. He needed to see her."

"Even if it gets her killed?"

"If Draco becomes desperate enough to see her that he sneaks away from Hogwarts, he could get them both killed."

"Draco wouldn't--"

"Wouldn't he? This is the same boy who six months ago let love cloud his judgment so much that he left my rooms even though his seer-dreaming brother told him that it would get him thrown from a tower."

That was a good point, Harry thought. And just last night, Snape had been worried that Draco had snapped and gone to Exeter--

"This is what you meant!" he exclaimed. "When you said you'd regret what you'd done for Draco, you were talking about this, not the whole adoption! Why didn't you just tell him that?"

Snape took a moment to reply, but it wasn't as though he had to carefully consider his answer. Harry thought he seemed distracted . . . like he was checking on something. "Think strategically. What would it have done to Draco if I'd promised him this, and something had prevented Tonks from fetching the girl? She is an Auror, you understand, with a wide range of responsibilities."

"That wouldn't have been good, no," said Hermione. "But I do agree with Harry, Professor Snape. It was very risky to bring her into the station, even in disguise."

Harry frowned. He thought so too; of course he did. But still . . . Harry had always appreciated Sirius coming to the station to see him, no matter how dangerous a stunt it had been.

"I didn't survive years as a spy by taking foolish chances. The young lady is nowhere near King's Cross. You have heard of Apparition, I trust?" Snape looked down his nose at Hermione.

Harry jumped as the train whistle sounded.

"Maybe he'll return a couple of minutes late," said Ron, sounding almost hopeful.

"If he does, Mr Weasley, I imagine he'll have better judgement than to steal a flying car with faulty
invisibility charms."

That shut Ron's mouth.

Another whistle, and the train began slowly chugging its way forward.

"Oh, my God," breathed Harry.

The only thing that kept Harry from lunging to his feet was Snape’s strong arm, tight across his chest. "Your brother just leapt aboard. Literally."

Hermione stared. "Are you omniscient, now, sir?"

"Something like that."

Harry hid a smile as he suddenly figured it out. Snape had been keeping one hand in his pocket this entire time, which wasn't much like him. Harry thought he must be using that spy-glass again, the one he'd once used to keep tabs on Draco in Devon. He'd probably charmed the flat glass disk to warm when Draco was back on board the train. Or vibrate, something like that.

At least he hadn't had it out to actually watch Draco with Rhiannon. But no, Snape wouldn't do a thing like that.

It would lack decorum.

"I'll take my leave now," said Snape, rising to his feet. "I've no wish to embarrass Draco by being here when he returns from his affaire de coeur."

"We'll be here," said Harry.

Snape paused with his fingers on the compartment door. "Ah, but you aren't the one he was refusing to speak to, this morning."

The man hurried out, his robes billowing so much they nearly got caught in the door as it slid closed.

"Why was that prat refusing to talk to your father?" asked Ron.

"Long story," said Harry.

Hermione flashed him an understanding smile. She'd obviously picked up on the remarks from before and had figured things out. Harry wasn't surprised that it had gone over Ron's head, though. He'd still been fuming over the way Draco had been playing with him.

The train was clattering away at full speed by the time Draco slid the door to the compartment open. "No other prefects, yet?"

His voice was casual, which was a misstep in itself; if Tonks had almost arrested him, he wouldn't be so calm about the matter. On the other hand, perhaps he assumed that Snape had told everyone the truth, decorum or no.

"The new ones are meeting with Ernie and Padma," said Ron, crossing his arms. "Head Girl and Boy. I suppose that Hannah and Anthony are there too, basking in the reflected glory. The sixth-years were told to patrol the train. Ernie tried to tell me to do the same, but I told him that Hermione and I would have to stay with you. Snape's standing orders from last year." Ron's smile grew a little bit malicious. "Head Boy or not, he wasn't about to go against Snape."
"Ernie and Padma, eh?" asked Draco as he began to unfasten his cloak.

Hermione stifled a laugh, and Harry managed to look quickly away, but Ron never had been very circumspect. He snorted.

Loudly.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," said Ron, grinning. "Don't mind me."

Draco glanced down and swore, then hurriedly began doing up his buttons again. This time, in the right order.

Hermione glanced at him just once. Too soon, obviously, since she said in a slightly faint voice. "Er... you might also want to charm away the lipstick."

"I thought I had--"

"On your...er, chest."

Harry pressed his lips together to keep from laughing at Draco's blush as he cast a quick spell to take care of it. Ironing charms followed, until he looked as crisp and presentable as if he hadn't just been snogging his girlfriend.

Now that his secret was out, though, his expression became less guarded. If anything, he began to look positively rapturous.

Harry cast a strong silencing charm on the door to the compartment, just in case.

That was all Hermione needed; she leaned forward avidly. "She's well, I take it?"

"Oh, yes." Draco licked his lips like he wished he could still be with Rhiannon. "She...well, I don't kiss and tell, but let's just say that she was very pleased to see me."

"Yeah, we got that much from the way she ripped your shirt off," said Ron sourly.

Huh... Harry would have expected Ron to be delighted that Draco had a girlfriend willing to do that, since he was so paranoid about Draco and Hermione. On the other hand, Ron was paranoid enough to see boggarts everywhere; maybe he thought that Rhiannon's interest in Draco might make Hermione wonder what she was missing, or something.

Not that Ron had thought it all out; he was reacting on instinct alone.

"She's got more class than to rip my shirt off," retorted Draco.

Hermione sighed with pleasure. "Oh, that's so wonderful to hear."

Draco laughed. "That she knows how to use buttons?"

"No, that you can so easily attribute good breeding to a Muggle," said Hermione softly.

"Not only can he do that," said Harry teasingly, "but he's almost ready to admit that Muggle brilliance includes more than classical music and opera. He couldn't listen to the Beatles CD I got him for his birthday, but Miss Burbage's been playing him Revolver on her gramophone. Draco loves it."
"She had to explain what a submarine was, and then why it would be odd to have a yellow one," said Draco, laughing.

Hermione actually clapped her hands. "I can't tell you how lovely it is to see you so open to new ideas--"

"That's it," said Ron, jumping to his feet, the set of his shoulders stiff with resentment. "I'm not staying here to listen to the Draco Snape admiration society. I'll go patrol the train like Ernie asked."

Hermione waited until the door was closed behind him, then gestured to Harry. "Check the warding, would you?"

Harry kept his wand out as usual, but couldn't stop himself from blowing on his fingers as though they were red-hot. "Still stout and strong."

"So then . . ." Hermione rubbed her hands together. "Tell us everything, Draco."

"A gentleman never tells."

"Tell us what you can, then."

Draco nodded and sat back, his eyes glowing. "Well, she's wonderful. More than I ever knew. She . . ." He cleared his throat.

"Hmm?" Hermione's gentle prodding was all Draco needed.

"She saw my scar," he murmured. "I kept it hidden from her all summer long, you see. It's splotchy and ugly and I thought it would put her off. But . . . it didn't."

Hermione gently smiled. "Of course it didn't. She left lipstick all over it."

Draco blushed again, the colour more pronounced than before. "Well, she's wonderful. More than I ever knew. She . . ." He cleared his throat.

" Hmm? " Hermione's gentle prodding was all Draco needed.

"She saw my scar," he murmured. "I kept it hidden from her all summer long, you see. It's splotchy and ugly and I thought it would put her off. But . . . it didn't."

Hermione gently smiled. "Of course it didn't. She left lipstick all over it."

Draco blushed again, the colour more pronounced than before. "I just wish we'd had more time."

"Probably best you didn't," said Harry with a straight face. "You're a bit young to be a father."

Draco raised his chin. "You have to admit, we'd have beautiful children together."

"You would," agreed Hermione. "You will."

"Not until the war's over," said Draco, suddenly grim. He actually scowled. "I can't believe Severus took such a risk. What if somebody who saw me leaving figures things out?"

"They'd just think that Tonks had to question you about something." Harry had had similar thoughts earlier, of course, but since then, he'd had time to relax. "Dad planned the whole thing really well. Nobody will suspect a thing."

"Seeing her today was marvellous but now the school year ahead seems even longer," said Draco, a little petulantly.

"Time flies when there's a lot to learn," said Hermione, moving to sit beside Draco. "Let's get back to your studies. Tell me what else you've discovered in the past month. Or what's still confusing you."

Harry listened to them chatter on for a while, but the whole topic got boring fast. He already understood the things Hermione was explaining, and Draco's bizarre misunderstandings were only
amusing the first five or ten times they happened. After that, they were just predictable.

After a while, he remembered to cancel the spells on the door. When the trolley witch came around, he bought sweets for everyone, and propped the door open as he ate his share. That way, he could have a bit of conversation with the people who were wandering to and fro as the countryside slipped past.

Just as well to have a distraction. He was starting to wish he hadn't hit Piers at all, since by now, his hand was starting to throb badly. Maybe he could nip off before the Welcoming Feast and ask Madame Pomfrey for some kind of salve.

Maybe not, though. Now that he had a father living in the castle, she'd probably report all injuries to him, and then Snape would want to know how he'd hurt his hand.

Best not to ask for help, he decided, turning away from Draco and Hermione so that he could spell a flap on his rucksack to be freezing cold. There, that was better. All he had to do was rest his hand across the cloth, and it would be feeling better in no time at all.

His hand wasn't even cold yet when he began to hear a consistent refrain from the students who'd been to the carriages near the back of the train. Have you seen her? Have you seen her?

"Who?" Harry finally asked a pair of goggle-eyed fifth years loitering near the loo.

"The new Defence instructor. She's amazing--"

"Amazing that you can know that without having had a single lesson," said Hermione crisply. "You know you're not supposed to wander this far forward. Back to your compartments."

"We wanted Anthony to get a look at her!"

"Well, he's busy with prefect duties. I'm sure he'll manage to catch sight of her in class. Now, off with you!"

When they were gone, Hermione leaned back with a huff. "Boys. Honestly."

"What?"

She glared briefly at Harry. "Isn't it obvious? She's 'amazing' and they want Goldstein to have a 'look' at her? She must be something to look at, that's all. And those two are Ravenclaws! I expect more."

"They're Ravenclaw males," said Draco dryly. "If the shepherdess is something amazing to look at, they're going to notice."

"Hannah!" called Hermione to the girl walking past. "Come and sit with us. Have you seen this new teacher everybody's talking about?"

Hannah flounced in, crossing her arms as she sat across from Hermione. As far from Harry as possible, Harry noticed. Well, Hannah never had really got used to Parseltongue, and she'd been one of the students most alarmed by it last year. The look she gave his prefect's badge said that she'd noticed it, and didn't necessarily approve.

Harry bitterly thought that she ought to approve, given that it bore a snake!

"Oh yes, I've seen her," Hannah practically growled. "Not that it was easy, what with all the boys
falling dead at her feet. I can't imagine how that woman's going to teach anyone. But then, perhaps she'll figure out how to put on some clothes!"

"Do tell, do tell," said Draco, leaning forward.

Harry gave him a reproving look, thinking that Draco shouldn't be so avid, seeing as he was supposedly going to marry Rhiannon. Draco just stared back as if to say, *I'm in love, Harry. I'm not dead.*

"Clothes?" gasped Hermione. "You don't mean she's--"

"Going about completely indecent!" said Hannah, nodding.

"She's naked?" Draco started to get to his feet.

"She might as well be, the way that doe hide is clinging to her skin," retorted Hannah. "And really, is it so hard to tie your hair back? Hers is hanging loose to her hips, and it's got feathers and bits of things woven into it, and as if that isn't enough, she's stalking back and forth, making sure everybody sees her!"

"Well, she is supposed to be on patrol," said Harry reasonably.

At least, *he* thought the comment was reasonable. Both girls glared daggers at him.

"She sounds rather exotic," commented Draco.

"She could at least put on some robes!" exclaimed Hannah. "Or wear a dress instead of leathers that show her every curve!"

"Does she have many of those?" asked Draco. "Curves?"

"Boys," muttered Hermione.

"I don't think she has any dresses," said Harry thoughtfully. "Severus said she might not."

"Your father knows her?"

Harry shrugged as he glanced at Hermione. "I'm not sure. It sounded like he might."

Draco grinned. "She really doesn't sound at all like this Bo Peep character--"

Ron stumbled into the compartment, red-faced and panting.

"Don't tell me," drawled Draco. "You met the new Defence instructor."

Ron cast a guilty look towards Hermione in the instant before he nodded.

"Well?" asked Draco. "All we've had is a feminine perspective. Tell us all about her."

"Yes, do tell us, Ronald," said Hermione in a tone that could have frozen hot coals.

It was a clear warning, but clearly, thoughts of Maura Morrighan wiped all caution from Ron's answer. "She's amazing," he groaned. "Worse than Fleur, Harry!"

"We heard she was practically naked," added Draco in a prompting voice.

"No, she's covered from neck to toe," said Ron, starting to pant again. "But... but, she's wearing
clothes made of deerskin or something. From a distance you wonder if she's wearing much at all, since it's close to flesh-coloured. But when you get close, her blouse and trousers look . . . really soft. All you want to do is stare, and stroke your hand down them--"

"She's evil," said Hannah, clenching her fists. "She's bewitched every boy aboard!"

"It does sound like a spell might be at work--"

"Oh, it does not," said Draco, shaking his head at Hermione. "Though to be quite certain, I suppose I should go have a look for myself--"

"You sit back down, Draco Snape, or I'll never again believe a word you say!" snapped Hermione.

"What is she on about?" asked Hannah, speaking to Harry. "Oh, congratulations on making prefect, by the way."

Harry was grateful for a way to change the subject away from Hermione's oblique reference to Rhiannon. "I think she's just upset that Ron's being an arse--"

"Easy for you to say that. You haven't seen her!" retorted Ron.

"Ronald Weasley--"

"I'm really happy to be a prefect," Harry quickly continued. At least he knew a guaranteed way to get everybody's attention, he thought. "But being a prefect for Slytherin is going to mean some changes. I lived in Gryffindor last year, once I got back into classes, but this year I'm going to have to live in both my houses."

Harry would have thought that Ron would the one to be appalled. Instead, it was Hermione whose mouth dropped open in obvious horror. "Oh, Harry!" she exclaimed. "Is that wise? Some of them might have warmed to you last year, but some of them still want you dead!"

Harry pushed down his annoyance at the implication that he couldn't take care of himself. "Draco'll keep me safe."

"Yes . . . well . . ." Hermione cast Draco an imploring look. "See that you do."

Draco patted her on the hand and smiled. "I will, Hermione. You know I will."

Harry waited, but no explosion was forthcoming from Ron. "Well?" he finally asked.

"Well, what?"

"You're not going to yell?"

"Why would I yell?"

"Because I'm turning into a Slytherin, maybe? Because Severus and Draco have had me all to themselves all summer long and it shows?"

"You love your father and you want him to be proud of you," said Ron, shrugging. "That's not exactly a Slytherin-only trait, Harry. And anyway, the minute I saw that prefect's badge I knew you'd have duties."

"You--" Harry blinked. "I can't believe this. I thought you'd have a problem with me rooming with Draco half the time."
"Well, speaking as someone with brothers coming out of his ears . . ." Ron's grin that time was lopsided. "It boggles the mind that you'd want to room with yours."

Harry laughed, relieved. When had Ron got so mature? Last year, he'd really hated the idea that Harry and Draco were brothers.

Last year, though, Ron hadn't yet had one of his own brothers die. Maybe that had something to do with it.

"Just one thing," added Ron in a voice that was entirely too casual for Harry's liking.

_Uh-oh . . ._

"You are Seeking again, aren't you? For Gryffindor alone?"

Harry thought of Ginny, and then he thought of his birthday gift from Draco -- the upgrade to his Firebolt, bringing it to XL status. And then he thought of how this was his last year at Hogwarts . . .

But really, he'd made up his mind about this a while ago. He couldn't wait to play against Draco in real competition again, this time as rivals but not enemies. "Yeah, I am."

"No playing for Slytherin?"

"No playing for Slytherin."

"Good enough for me," said Ron brightly, though his eyes were glittering darkly as he stared across the compartment at Draco. "One thing for you, too. One thing I'll swear by Merlin's beard. You let Harry get hurt, and I'll kill you."

Last year, Draco would have scoffed at that, mocking Ron's ability to do him any damage. Or he'd have reminded Ron of his own failure to protect Harry that day in Hogsmeade.

This year's Draco, though, merely inclined his head in a nod.

Harry thought that was about as good a response as anyone could expect, given the personalities involved.

Hermione left Draco's side and went to sit by Ron then, leaning her cheek against his shoulder, her head lightly bouncing against him as the train rumbled down the tracks.

They sat that way until Ernie came in and told them all to come along for the full prefects' meeting.

First, though, he asked the same thing everyone else was asking:

"Have you seen her?"

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Coming soon in_A Family Like None Other:_
Chapter Nine: "Maura Morrighan"

~

Comments very welcome,

Aspen in the Sunlight

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"I can't believe this," said Hermione, scowling as she entered the Great Hall alongside Harry and Draco. "That woman still isn't wearing robes!"

Draco began craning his neck to see. A moment later, he stopped dead in his tracks, a low whistling noise emerging from between his teeth.

Harry spotted the new teacher then. She would be hard to miss, since she was the only person in the room wearing . . . well, not wearing robes, at any rate. He could hardly say that she was wearing Muggle clothing. Her doe hide trousers and blouse were as form-fitting as Ron had claimed, and both were decorated with beads and fringes. Her hair, a light chestnut brown, was long enough to hang past her hips, and strands of it were woven with what looked like primitive amulets: small stones, feathers, bits of shell.

"She looks like . . . like . . . a barbarian!" erupted Hermione.

"Now, now, we mustn't be culturally insensitive, Hermione," said Draco. "Just as Muggles have different traditions to wizards -- that's different, not inferior, mind -- the new Defence teacher no doubt has traditions different to your own. Being dressed according to her own cultural norms hardly makes her a barbarian."

"She's Irish!"

"So?"

"So she's dressed like . . . like . . . Pocahontas in drag, or something!" Hermione suddenly clouted Ron on the shoulder. "Stop staring!"

"Can't blame a bloke," muttered Ron under his breath.

Hermione turned a glare on all three young men with her, only to nod when her gaze slid across Harry. "Of course I can. You could both take a lesson from Harry. He's got better manners than the two of you combined!"

It was true that Harry wasn't staring at Maura Morrighan, let alone drooling like some of the other male students beginning to drift into the hall. He'd spotted her, and while her appearance was certainly exotic, he really couldn't be arsed to care about her looks; by then, his hand was hurting too damned much. It was starting to feel like a thestral had stamped on a couple of his knuckles. Probably, he should have renewed his cooling spell on the way up to the castle, or better yet, cast a bit of a wanded magic so he could ice his hand properly.

How a simple punch to Piers' face could cause so much pain was beyond Harry, but he was starting to revise his plan to keep the injury strictly to himself. He needed to go to the hospital wing, even if Madam Pomfrey did end up informing his father.
So unfair . . . if Ron were knocked unconscious, his parents might be notified, but Harry didn't think Madam Pomfrey would report a little mishap with his hand.

Harry, though, whose father lived right there in the castle?

Sometimes having a parent on staff really ronked.

"One," Draco was saying in a snooty voice, "I have perfect manners, thank you very much. And two, if Harry isn't staring it's probably because he has more important things on his mind. All of Slytherin is about to find out that he's a prefect."

Hermione's pursed lips immediately lifted in a warm smile. "It'll be all right, Harry," she said, briefly patting his wrist.

His right wrist, unfortunately.

Harry went pale and yanked it away.

"You're really nervous, mate?" asked Ron. "Well, don't be. You ate with Slytherin quite a few times last year and lived to tell the tale."

"Draco'll keep me safe." Just as well that his friends had misunderstood. He didn't really want to talk about what had made him hit Piers, and besides, pretending that he needed protection could only bolster the "helpless Harry" story that Snape and Dumbledore insisted on.

Draco gave him an odd look, maybe because the comment was largely wasted; nobody much had been around to overhear him.

"Well, see you after dinner, Harry," said Hermione in a tone of forced brightness.

"I'm sleeping in Slytherin tonight. We've got a full-house meeting scheduled and it'd look a bit weird for me to leave for Gryffindor afterwards."

"Oh." Hermione swallowed, but it didn't take long for her insatiable curiosity to overcome her fears for Harry's safety. "Why do you need a full-house meeting?"

Draco gave her a pitying look. "We have a proper Head of House; that's why. Not my fault if Gryffindors hardly know what a house is for. And now, I'm afraid you must excuse us. Slytherin awaits!"

"I'll see you later," called Harry before turning to catch up to Draco. He'd sort of hoped he could sneak off before the feast -- Madam Pomfrey probably only needed a couple of minutes to heal his hand -- but there was no chance he could get away. Draco was showing off his own prefect's badge and making sure that everyone knew that Harry had one as well. The moment that was finished, it was time to sit down.

"Seventh year prefects with the seventh-years, of course," announced Draco when Harry started for the end of the table nearest the teachers. "The first-years sit there, Harry."

"I thought they might like someone to welcome them into Slytherin, chat them up a bit--"

"You know we're going to do that once we're all in the common room." When Harry hesitated, Draco rolled his eyes. "Show some respect for Slytherin traditions, would you?"

By then, Harry had noticed that Snape was watching them, so he gave in without further argument
and took a seat between Crabbe and Goyle. It was the only place left, really, but it was a pretty bad choice since it meant he was facing Blaise Zabini.

Zabini, not too surprisingly, was a horse's arse, making snide comments about how expulsion should permanently disqualify a student from prefect status. After that, he started in on Harry.

"Bit surprised you'd accept that badge, Potter."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"You're taking Parkinson's place."

"I'm sorry she's dead," said Harry levelly. "But she was plotting with Nott to get my brother killed, so I'm hardly likely to get sentimental about her prefect's slot."

Zabini's laugh was an ugly sound. "So it's true: Gryffindors are as dense as the castle walls. You're in the girl slot, Potter. Does that clear it up for you?"

Draco folded his hands together and leaned slightly back in his chair. "Such a shame when Slytherins know so little about the history of the house," he said calmly. "It's become somewhat of a pattern to have one male and one female prefect in each year, fifth year onward, of course, but it's hardly written in stone. Anthony Digglesworth and Stanley Stoveblack were prefects together from their fifth year on, just twenty years ago. Not quite ten years ago, Nora Spelunker and Heidi Heidelburger did the same. I can cite a wealth of other examples if you're too slow to have got the point, Zabini. Or perhaps you need Professor Snape to speak with you about the matter."

Zabini didn't say anything to that, but what was there to say? Everybody in the vicinity knew about his ten thousand lines. It only stood to reason that he'd be cautious after that.

As Zabini started talking across the table at Crabbe, Harry turned to Goyle. "So I heard that those exercises of Hermione's were really helpful this summer."

"Who?"

Harry stared. "Hermione."

"Granger," corrected Draco.

"Oh, her." Goyle looked like he didn't quite know what to do with his hands, considering there was nothing to eat yet. "Yeah."

_Yeah?_ Harry tried again. "You sent her a book to thank her, she told us."

Goyle shrugged, clearly defensive. "Well, she likes to read, doesn't she?"

"She does," said Draco. "And that was a good choice of book for her, Greg. She learned all sorts of old-fashioned spells from it."

"So it was all right?" Goyle worried his lower lip with his teeth. "She's a Gryffindor--"

"Well, the Sorting Hat keeps telling us we have to get along with the other houses. I'm doing my part by putting up with Harry. See?"

Harry stuck out his tongue, only to have Draco narrow his eyes in a glare that was all too real. "Decorum, Harry. You're representing Slytherin now, not that rabble at the other table."
If the food had been served, Harry would have thrown some at him, decorum or no. Or maybe not, since even thinking about it made his hand ache worse.

"You work with Hermione all you like," Draco said to Goyle, ignoring Zabini's snort. "She's a good sort. Helped me over the summer, too."

"Oh yeah? How'd she help you?" snarled Zabini, turning away from Crabbe. He'd probably been eavesdropping the entire time.

_Uh-oh_ . . . Draco was quick, though. He answered the question without reference to Rhiannon. "She gave me a head start toward catching up in Muggle Studies. I'm joining the N.E.W.T. class, you see."

"Muggle Studies!"

"Of course," said Draco placidly. "I want to be an Auror. What better way to demonstrate that I've grown past the immature _us-versus-them_ mentality that I was unfortunately raised to believe?"

"You've lost your fucking mind," said Zabini viciously. "You're a pureblooded wizard, not one of these--"

"I'm not going to argue with someone whose best shot at me last year was Malshite," mocked Draco.

Zabini opened his mouth to answer, but whatever he was going to say was cut short by the Sorting Hat, which began another one of its sing-song chants about togetherness and brotherhood. Harry didn't even bother trying to listen. He'd heard it all before, and besides, his hand was hurting like the very devil by then. For a while there he'd started to think he'd fractured a knuckle, but now the pain was radiating through what felt like all the bones in his hand.

"Allenhamper, Nella!" called Professor McGonagall.

"Slytherin!"

A loud cry went up, the sound resonating along the entire length of the table.

The sound brought Harry out of his haze.

Draco's eyes narrowed as he studied the slight red-haired girl who approached the table and timidly took a seat at the very end. "Looks like a scrawny Weasley."

Harry carefully laid his injured hand on his knee under the table and tried to hold it perfectly still. That was easier contemplated than done, though. Harry ended up using his other hand to brace his right elbow. "It looks as though Larissa's taking Nella in hand," he said, trying to distract himself. It was true, though. The little second-year who had been so interested in Sals was waving for the newest Slytherin to move over and sit by her. After a moment of indecision, Nella slid down the bench.

As the Sorting Hat called out "Ravenclaw!" for a little boy who looked closer to nine than eleven, Draco leaned forward over the table, his grey eyes piercing. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, fine," said Harry, trying not to wince. Now it didn't even matter if he held his hand still. It was throbbing no matter what he did.

Draco lowered his voice. "You look like your arms might be . . . itchy."
Hiding them under the table evidently had some drawbacks. "It's not that," said Harry, giving up on secrecy. "I'm trying to hold still. I . . . uh, I think I might have cracked a bone in my hand."

"You're joking-- oh, you're not." Draco looked down the length of the table. "Back in a moment."

It was no longer than that until he returned. "I've told Jeffries and Zimmery to take over for us. Come with me."

Harry recognised the names of the Slytherin sixth-year prefects from the meeting earlier in the train. "Come with you where?"

"Infirmary," snapped Draco.

"Madam Pomfrey might not even be there," said Harry, peering toward the head table. "Isn't she at the feast?"

"Then we'll ring the bell to summon her." Draco sighed. "Didn't McGonagall explain all this when you were a first year?"

Harry shook his head. Not for the first time, he wondered how different Hogwarts would seem to him if he'd had Snape as Head of House all along. Of course, Snape had hated him back then. Strange to think of that now . . . but on balance, he'd been better off in Gryffindor, even if McGonagall had a different style of dealing with her house.

"I'll just nip up to the head table to let Severus know where we're going."

"We'll be there and back before he misses us," argued Harry. "Let's just go."

Draco thought about that for a moment, then shrugged. "All right."

There was a bell, just as Draco had said. Almost as soon as Draco reached up to ring it, the Floo flared to life and Madam Pomfrey stepped out, her pinafore and apron as starched and stiff as ever. Harry had resented her bossiness the year before, but now that he was in such pain, she was a welcome sight.

He held out his injured hand, which was beginning to swell by then. "Thanks for coming so quickly. I've hurt my hand."

"Sit here," she said, indicating the bed nearest her office. She used a spell to levitate his hand. It felt like it was resting on a cushion of soft, velvety air. Harry sighed with relief.

"How did this happen?" she asked as she waved her wand three times over his hand, coming closer to the skin each time.

"Uh . . ."

"You don't need to know that," said Draco quickly. He'd come to stand near Harry.

"I didn't know you'd qualified as a medi-wizard," said Pomfrey. "Where did you train? Nowhere? Then kindly allow me to continue my examination. Now, Potter, how did this happen?"
"I hit someone, all right?"

The medi-witch made a *tsking* sound under her breath. "Fisticuffs, Potter? You shouldn't get caught up in such shenanigans. After everything that happened last year, you're delicate, and--"

"I am not!"

"You should have seen the other bloke," added Draco.

"Oh, hush, both of you," snapped Pomfrey. "This will sting a bit."

It did, but that only lasted a second. When she was through, the pain in his hand had vanished. He flexed his fingers and wrist. "Feels a bit stiff--"

"You'd fractured two knuckles and strained the tendons in your wrist. Of course it feels a bit stiff!" Pomfrey shook a finger at him. "Use it normally, but I'd advise you to avoid acting the hooligan in future!"

"Yes, ma'am," muttered Harry. Then, realising how ungrateful that had sounded, he cleared his throat. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey. It feels much better now."

"I should think so. Your father will have to be informed, of course--"

"That's not necessary--"

"Indeed, it is not," said a deep voice from the doorway. Harry didn't need to turn to know who was there, but he turned anyway and saw Snape striding forward into the hospital wing. *Great.*

"But the boy was in a *fight*, Severus!"

"I've been aware of that for hours."

Harry swallowed, wondering what his father meant. "It wasn't anything very important," he rushed to say. "I ended up with a bit of a sore hand, that's all."

Severus flicked his gaze sideways.

"All healed," said Pomfrey. "The details will be added to his student file, if you have any questions."

Severus nodded. "That's in order, then. We'll return to the Welcoming Feast. Thank you, Poppy."

That was it? No lecture? Harry hopped off the bed and followed his father and brother out into the hall. "How did you know where to find us, Severus?" asked Draco.

Harry thought of the scrying glass Snape had used while on board the train, but quickly discounted that idea. The castle was supposed to have protections against things like that; Snape hadn't even known how the Marauder's Map could monitor what went on inside the castle walls.

"I noticed my sons leaving unexpectedly, and Poppy Pomfrey five minutes later, just the amount of time needed to walk to the hospital wing. I'm capable of simple deduction."

"What did you mean, that you already knew about Harry's fight?" asked Draco.

Harry could have clouted him for that. Hard.
"I'd hardly call a single punch a fight. An unprovoked punch, at that. I must say, I'm surprised at you, Harry."

"Sorry," muttered Harry. "But he . . . never mind." What was he going to say, that Piers had made a pass at him? That excuse sounded stupid even to him. "How do you know so much?" he asked, exasperated.

"Haven't you heard the old adage that fathers have eyes in the back of their heads? It's quite true."

"Dad--"

"Kingsley mentioned the incident. He was in disguise in the station, looking out for signs of trouble. We never expected those signs to come from you, Harry."

"Sorry," said Harry again, feeling even more miserable than before. He didn't like the feeling that he'd let people down.

"Kingsley took care of Mr Polkiss before the Muggle authorities could become involved," added Snape. "Harry, I'll expect you in my office directly after classes tomorrow. We need to talk."

"Yes, sir. Er . . . Dad."

Snape looked like he might say more, but they were at the open doors of the Great Hall by then.

" . . . where she has concentrated on developing means of communications among various types of magical creatures," Dumbledore's voice boomed out. "We are very pleased to welcome Professor Morrighan to Hogwarts!"

Applause erupted throughout the hall, interspersed with wolf-whistles.

All at once, the headmaster swept his wand over his head. "Professor Morrighan will be accorded all the respect she is due!" he roared.

A choking noise echoed through the hall as several young men lifted their hands to their mouths, bubbles oozing out from between their fingers.

"Bocalavare," said Draco gleefully. "Look! Zabini got hit!"

Ron was in the same state, Harry noticed as he made his way to his seat. Hermione -- along with a good number of other girls -- had been sitting with her arms crossed, but now she was looking satisfied.

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore, but I can shift for myself," said Maura Morrighan, her Irish accent making the words sound musical. Lifting her own wand, which looked more like a branch, since it was covered in moss and sprouting leaves in several places, she cancelled the spell. The fringe on her sleeve swayed as she waved her wand.

"She really is beautiful," said Draco, sighing.

"Eh," said Harry. What did things like that matter? He was too worried about the coming "talk" with Snape to care about Maura Morrighan. All that mattered was whether she could teach Defence. All in all, it struck him as unlikely. She didn't even use a proper wand!

As Harry and Draco sat down, Snape swept past them, continuing up to the head table. Huh. Harry hadn't thought about it before, but he was sitting alongside the new teacher. Since he hadn't sat
next to Aran the year before, Harry didn't know what to make of it.

Dumbledore gave the usual warnings about the Dark Forest and the dangers of trying to feed centaurs, and then clapped his hands for the feast to begin. Food bloomed all over the tables. Roast chicken, heaps of mashed potatoes with gravy, and at least twelve different kinds of rolls.

As Harry started to help himself, Stephanie Zimmery appeared at Draco's side. She stood at attention to report, "Ten new students were sorted into Slytherin. I've recorded their names for you."

She passed over a parchment and returned to her seat.

Draco glanced at the list. "No names I really recognise, except that I think the Notts might have had some cousins named Leighton. We've got an Amanda Leighton on the list."

"Another Nott," said Harry heavily. "Wonderful."

"Well, she's just eleven," said Draco, tucking the parchment away in a cloak pocket as soon as Harry had had a good look. "I'm not even certain that she's related to Theodore." He turned his attention to Zabini. "So, what did we miss?"

"Where did you go?" returned Zabini, very coolly.

"I needed the loo," said Harry. "Couldn't wait."

"And you needed company?" Zabini guffawed.

Well, that was proof that he wasn't as observant as Snape. Which was a good thing, so for once Harry didn't mind saying, "I'm not supposed to wander the halls alone. Not with Voldemort out for my blood."

He was rather pleased to see Zabini flinching at the name.

"His own house isn't turning on him this year," added Draco. "That was absolutely disgraceful."

"Even for Slytherins," added Harry.

_Oops_. Not the best way to put things. Harry knew that even before Draco narrowed his eyes in a glare.

But then the other boy turned his attention back to Zabini. "Tell us what we missed. I'm not just asking you, Blaise. I'm telling you as a Slytherin prefect."

Surprisingly enough, that worked. Draco definitely knew how to manage his housemates. Harry reminded himself to pay better attention to his methods.

Though perhaps that technique from Harry Potter would be less than effective.

"Morrighan's apparently some sort of polymath," said Zabini.

"Her best subject is maths?" Harry gulped.

"That means she's an expert in several different fields," said Draco impatiently. "Which ones, then?"

"Well, for starters, she's a fully qualified Auror. Five years in the field, too."
Oh. That certainly sounded promising.

"When the Dark Lord fell when we were children, though, she left the Ministry and sort of drifted from one thing to another."

Perhaps not so promising, after all.

"Dumbledore claimed that she could teach Charms, Potions, or Arithmancy just as readily as Defence," continued Zabini. "But in the last few years she's been running a magical creature preserve in Ireland. Working on interspecies languages, it sounded like."

"So perhaps she's as competent and skilled as she is . . . ooh, la, la."

"That's what got me in trouble," said Zabini wryly. "I'd watch it if I were you."

Harry could hardly believe his ears; it sounded like Draco and Zabini were on good terms again, just like that. It was probably all a front, each boy playing the scene for his own advantage, but only one thing was certain: Harry really, really didn't understand Slytherins.

The full-house meeting consisted of the Slytherins standing in neat ranks, first-years in front, while Snape went over the rules and expectations for the house. All the prefects were introduced, even the ones who had served the year before, but of course, the new students wouldn't know them.

To Harry's surprise, the house cheered for all their prefects, even him.

To his even greater surprise, they booed and hissed when Snape announced that Ernie and Padma were Head Girl and Boy. Actually, that wasn't so surprising, but the fact that Snape didn't reprimand them was.

"The password to your common room is to be held in strictest confidence," said Snape finally. "Woe betide the Slytherin who shares it with a student from another house. I do not tolerate insubordination."

All of the first-years widened their eyes, looking terrified; even Zabini shuddered slightly.

To Harry's utter shock, Snape crouched down on one knee and beckoned the youngest students closer. "But Slytherin is more than a list of requirements, as you will soon learn. We are a brotherhood, and you will find many here who will help you settle into classes and the castle's social life. When you have a question or concern, you should bring it to an older Slytherin. If you feel you need an adult, I am at your disposal. Tonight we will begin your orientation to Hogwarts. One of the prefects will meet with you to discuss the school schedule and other basic information so that when you begin classes tomorrow, you will not wander the halls in confusion."

He began calling out assignments; Harry was paired with Amanda Leighton.

With that, Snape sat down in the chair he usually used when in the common room, and crossed one leg over the other.

After a brief moment, the students broke ranks. Most headed for their rooms, but a few wandered
over to speak with their Head of House.

The first-years milled about, looking like they didn't know quite what to do. Harry could sympathise with that; he remembered his first days at Hogwarts, when everything had been so new and strange.

He began to make his way over to the first-years, but before he could reach them, Larissa was tugging on his sleeve. "Harry!"

"Hallo--"

"Where's Sals? Where's Sals?"

"Up in my room, I think." Harry shrugged. "She wanders a bit, you know that. Oh-- did you know that Draco got a ferret for his birthday? Maybe he'll let you play with Loki if you ask nice."

"Drakey has a ferret?" Larissa's eyes shone, but only for a moment. "Snakes are better, though."

Harry had to laugh. Draco hated being called "Drakey." It made him want to encourage Larissa in the habit. "I have to talk with my first-year," he said. "I'll see you later."

"Will you be around the common room more this year?" asked Larissa, clearly hopeful.

"Yes," said Harry firmly.

"Sals too?"

"Sals too."

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Amanda Leighton found Harry rather than the other way around. "You're Harry Potter," she said, thrusting out a small hand. "Mandy Leighton."

She looked impossibly young. Harry searched her face for any trace of resemblance to Nott, but didn't find any. As he shook her hand, he wondered how he could politely inquire about her relations. Are you cousins with the creep who tried to hand me over to Voldemort? seemed like a poor way to begin, considering that in his role as prefect, he was supposed to be making her feel welcome in Slytherin.

"I've read about you," said Amanda as Harry led her over to a vacant corner of the common room. He had a list of things to cover with her, but hoped he wouldn't need to look at it too often. He'd rather look like he knew what he was about.

"In the Prophet?"

Amanda shook her head. "That's boring. You were in my Wee Wizarding Wonders book."

Oh. "You're a pureblood, then?"

Once, he would have thought that a stupid question, but now he knew that there actually were some Muggleborns and such in Slytherin.
"Half-blood," she corrected. "Like you."

So maybe she wouldn't be out to kill him, even if she turned out to be related to Nott.

"My real dad died when I was little, though," she went on. "He was a Muggleborn. Then my mum married Nicholas Leighton and he adopted me."

So she wasn't related to Nott by blood, regardless. Harry knew he shouldn't feel better about that, but he did.

"Like me."

Her brow furrowed. "I thought your mum and dad both died when you were little."

"I meant the part about being adopted. Though I didn't change my name."

Amanda lowered her voice. "Snape is an ugly-sounding name, though."

Harry could remember a time when he would have agreed with her. "Is not."

"Is so."

"Is not."

"Is everything going well, Mr Potter?"

Harry glanced up at his father, who had begun circulating the room, checking on the prefects' progress with their charges. The name threw him for a moment, but then he decided that Snape was dealing with him on a prefect-rather-than-son basis.

"Yes, Professor Snape," he answered dutifully. "This is Amanda Leighton. She's been telling me a bit about her background."

"Mandy, I told you," the little girl said, looking exasperated.

"A pleasure, Miss Leighton," said Snape, holding out his hand. "Welcome to Slytherin."

She shook it a little timidly, but then, Snape cut an imposing figure, towering over the first-years in his billowing black robes.

"See to it that you cover all particulars, Mr Potter," admonished Snape before moving toward another part of the common room.

"I already know the timetable and where the different classes are. In theory, at least. Theo used to tell me all about Hogwarts."

Harry managed not to visibly gulp. "Those Leightons, eh?"

"My step-father is cousins with Theo's father. I used to see him at Christmas and several times a summer, but . . . not this summer, of course."

Because Nott was in Azkaban. Harry did gulp, then. "Were you close?"

Amanda shrugged. "I don't know. He was six years older than me and liked to brag. I'm sorry he tried to turn you over to the Dark Lord. My step-father was really upset about it."
"He wasn't a Slytherin?"

Amanda's mouth twisted like she didn't understand the question. "No, he was. That's the point."

So it would have been all right to hand Harry over if Harry was in Gryffindor alone? Was that what she meant?

"And I told you, you were in my books when I was little. Giving you to the Dark Lord would be like handing over Hercules!"

"I'm not Hercules," said Harry, trying not to think about his dark powers. "And you should try to call him Voldemort."

"He shouldn't be after you now that you're a Slytherin," said Amanda, acting like she hadn't heard what Harry had just said.

"Why don't you tell me about the classes first-years take and where you expect to find them," suggested Harry, since he seemed to be getting nowhere in the other conversation. "And what you know about the teachers. Don't worry. I won't repeat anything you say to Professor Snape."

Amanda tilted her head to one side and looked at Harry curiously. "He adopted you. Are you always so formal with him?"

"In class or while doing prefect duties, I am." Harry smiled. "Otherwise, not so much."

"Oh. All right." Amanda started listing classes, counting on her fingers as she spoke. "Defence Against the Dark Arts, Charms, Transfiguration, Potions . . ."

Harry's first night in Slytherin went about as well as could be expected. Zabini gave a long-suffering sigh when he saw Harry's trunk in the seventh-years' dormitory -- though actually it was Snape's old school chest. Now that he was sharing a room with Slytherins, Harry thought that the extra warding might prove useful.

Zabini was ridiculous enough to complain about the "extra bed" even though with Nott gone, the room held the usual number.

Then he started in on the new furniture that Draco had owl-ordered for all the seventh-years.

"A pity prefects don't get private rooms," said Draco.

Goyle, Harry found out, had an annoying habit of bouncing on his bed. Draco just shrugged. "Reinforced," he mouthed to Harry.

"Physically or magically?" Harry mouthed back.

"Both."

"What are you two saying about me over there?"

Draco flashed Zabini a wicked smile. "Just prefects' business, Blaise. You wouldn't understand."
The face Zabini made lasted only an instant, but that was long enough for Harry to understand. Of course . . . with Draco having been expelled, Nott in Azkaban, and Crabbe and Goyle obvious non-starters, Zabini had expected to become a prefect, himself.

Even after Snape had assigned him ten thousand lines?

Hope springs eternal, Harry told himself.

"She's not a Weasley, by the way," said Draco out of the blue as he stretched a bit, yawning. "Nella Allenhamper. I had her and David Hanson."

"Dad gave you two?"

Draco's fingers were sure as he unfastened his tie. "I've done it twice before, Harry. Of course he gave me two. How did you get on with the Leighton girl?"

Mindful of Zabini listening in, Harry ignored the question. "Let's go and find Sals and Loki."

Once they were on the far side of the common room -- largely empty at this late hour -- Harry told him in a quiet voice. "She is related to Nott. Sort of a step-cousin, but still. She said she'd missed seeing him this summer."

Draco tensed, but asked, "Well, what can a first-year really do?"

"I don't know that she wants to do anything," added Harry. "She . . . I don't know. She didn't bat her eyes at me like Ginny used to, but she was kind of . . . I don't know."

"You have an ickle fan, you mean?"

"Well, she did talk about how I was in her books when she was little."

"Perils of being Harry Potter. Just don't forget that she might be a Nott at heart. Now, where the deuce is Loki?"

"At least I might know where to look for Sals," Harry hesitated. "Er . . . can boys here go into the girls' rooms?"

"Best if we don't. We'll get a lecture on decorum--" Draco broke off to stride toward a group of girls giggling as they came down the stairs into the common room. "I need one of you to go and fetch Kent."

"Kent?" asked Harry.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Larissa Kent. You're a fine one to lecture me about not knowing my housemates' names."

"You didn't know it last year."

"Let's just say that I'm taking my prefects' duties more seriously this time around."

Harry could understand that. There was a lot of difference between being given responsibility because your Head of House was pretending to toady to your father, and because your real father was trusting you to handle it well.

Larissa came skipping down the stairs, taking them two at a time, though she had one hand clutched to her neck to cradle Sals, who was wrapped there and looked to be asleep.
Draco shuddered. For all he'd got over his phobia about snakes, he was never going to be fond of them. The image of one looped about a little girl's neck was a sight that clearly, he could do without.

"Larissa," said Harry, leaning down to ease Sals off her, "I know you want a snake of your own, but it's really not right for you to take mine off to your room."

She started blinking rapidly, looking like she was about to burst into tears. "But Sals was so lonely, and besides, that big bad ferret looked about to eat her, and--"

Draco tensed and took a step closer to Larissa. "What did you do to Loki?"

"Nothing . . . well, nothing much . . ."

"What, Larissa?" asked Draco in a dangerously quiet tone.

The second-year retreated until her back was against a wall. "I couldn't let Sals get bit in half!"

"Just tell us what you did with Draco's ferret," said Harry.

"I . . . I trapped her in a box--"

"Him," snapped Draco. "And where's this box, eh?"

"In-- in--" Larissa winced. "In the corridor, just a few feet from the common room door. I was going to let her . . . er, him, out in the morning, Drakey, I swear--"

Draco ignored her completely, returning in a few moments with a white ferret cradled in his arms. He looked to be cooing to it as he came back, but stopped the moment he was within range of Larissa. "I should take a hundred points, you snot-nosed little prat. What if Filch had found him? Loki would have been thrown out of the castle to fend for himself in the Dark Forest!"

"Oh, he'd have found Hagrid's hut first, I'm sure--"

Draco glared. "That's even worse, Harry." He returned his attention to Larissa, who was gnawing on her lower lip by then. "Don't you dare lay a finger on my ferret, ever again."

Just like that, Larissa burst into tears.

"What? What?" asked Draco impatiently.

"H-- h-- he was going to eat S-- S-- Sals!"

"No, he wasn't," said Harry.

"He was, he was, he was!" Larissa started gulping as she cried, clearly inconsolable.

Harry didn’t know what to do, but ignoring her misery seemed cruel, so he pulled her over to a nearby chair. It was really too small for two, but he managed to wedge the little girl in beside him. "Loki's pretty used to Sals by now, honest. They've learnt to get along, and you know, if Sals was really scared, she does know how to slither into cracks, or get to her charmed box where she's safe. I'll even ask her, all right?"

One Parseltongue exchange later, and Larissa was fascinated instead of wracked with tears, though her face was still splotchy and damp.
"She says that Loki was just looking at her, Larissa."

"Looking at her funny--"

"Leave my ferret alone," said Draco sternly, though he was using one hand to stroke Loki's back, slowly and gently. "And don't call me Drakey."

Larissa nodded and got up off Harry's lap. How she'd got there to begin with, Harry wasn't quite sure. She'd been awful squirmly while he was hissing at Sals . . . probably trying to get closer to the conversation.

"Apparently you have two ickle fans," said Draco dryly once Larissa had gone bounding up the stairs again, all her upset forgotten. "But you'd be wise not to let her play you like that again. Those were thestral's tears if ever I've seen them."

"Thestral's tears?"

"Well, thestrals don't cry, do they?" Draco sighed. "Why is it that Hogwarts has added that ethics class to the curriculum, but the idea of Wizard Studies got left behind? You ought to know that phrase by now."

The comment was an echo of a lot of things Draco had said before, but this time, it wasn't offered snidely. "I didn't read things like *Wee Wizarding Wonders* when I was growing up."

Draco chuckled. "Don't read that one now, either. It's full of lies about you. How you were born in a moonlit grove with a herd of unicorns looking on, that sort of thing. Almost like this Muggle mythos I've been studying, the immaculate conception."

"No, my parents definitely had sex," said Harry, grimacing as he remembered how a younger version of Severus had talked about James Potter and Lily Evans sneaking off together to . . . *ugh*. Rut.

"And there I thought you *were* pure of soul." Draco made a face. "About parents, though. I know what you mean. Best not to think about it."

"That explains why you keep trying to arrange something for Dad!"

"Oh, that?" Draco shrugged. "That's different."

"How is it different?"

"It just is," Draco lifted his shoulders. "We should be getting to bed. First day of classes, tomorrow."

Harry looked around the deserted common room and suddenly realised how quiet everything was. "But . . . doesn't Slytherin go a bit wild? First night back in the castle?"

"We save it for the weekend. We're ambitious, you see. It's for Gryffindors to throw caution to the winds and go without sleep when they should be resting up so they can impress their instructors."

There might not be much of a party tonight in Gryffindor, though, thought Harry as he followed Draco up the stairs to the boys' dormitories. Not when just a month ago, so many had been killed in the destruction of the Ministry. A lot of students probably had relatives who'd been working late that night.
Like Ron.

Instead of passing out timetables in the Great Hall after breakfast, Snape had the prefects distribute them in the privacy of the common room, so any confusion or complaints could be dealt with out of the public eye. Slytherin, Harry was learning, had a reputation to maintain.

Zabini was predictably boorish about the contents of his card. "Ethics," he read, staring at his timetable like wishing alone could change it. "What's this rot?"

"New required class for all seventh-years," breezed Draco, clearly loving being in the know. "Professor Snape will be teaching it."

"Professor Snape teaching ethics, really!"

Draco's tone went dark. "Are you saying he doesn't have any? Because belittling your Head of House right in front of a prefect is a poor way to begin the term, Zabini."

"I . . . I just meant that his real expertise is Potions."

"Did you, now? He did rather well with Defence last year, I thought," said Draco crisply. Looking over the milling students, Draco raised his voice slightly. "Ready, then? Neat ranks, first-years in front and so forth. And mind, don't run like children when you enter the Great Hall. You're Slytherins!"

"They're Slytherin children," said Harry under his breath as he and Draco took up their positions at the end of the line streaming out the common room door.

"And I'm the head Slytherin prefect--"

"Who said that?"

"I thought I just did. Weren't you listening?" Draco lightly touched Harry on the hand. "Don't get in a froth over it. You don't know the traditions of the house. It really does fall to me."

"Yeah, well--" Harry knew that his brother was right, so he busied himself looking over his timetable. In the rush of passing them out, he'd barely glanced at his own. Hmm. Ethics was Tuesdays and Thursdays directly after Transfiguration, which followed lunch. It seemed like a lot of time for ethics, but at least the sessions were only an hour each.

He wasn't sure what to think about Defence Against the Dark Arts. Three double sessions every week would be all right if they had a professor worth her salt, but with Maura Morrighan, the leather-wearing shepherdess, there was no telling.

Well, he'd find out soon; his first Defence class was directly after breakfast.

He also had three double sessions of Potions each week, which was a lot more than last year. At least he didn't dread spending time with Snape any longer, but six hours a week devoted to Potions? Any normal person would be depressed!

Draco, he thought as they entered the Hall, was far from normal. "Finally. A decent allotment for
Potions."

"N.E.W.T. year, I suppose."

"I think it also has to do with combining the sixth and seventh years of the course. It's our N.E.W.T. year in everything else and the schedule isn't so intense. Except for Defence. But I can hardly complain about hours and hours in such luscious company--"  

Harry certainly could. If she didn't know anything useful, he was going to complain, loud and long. He was through putting up with Defence teachers who were utterly useless when it came to teaching the real skills that he was going to need to keep him alive.

"Oh, Harry, let me see your timetable," said Hermione, waylaying him on his way to the Slytherin table. "Let's see . . . Potions together, and Defence, and Transfigurations, and of course Ethics . . . shame about Charms, though. And I've got Arithmancy instead of Magical Creatures--"

"I've got Arithmancy instead of Magical Creatures and I'm taking Muggle Studies, of course," drawled Draco. "And good morning to you as well, Hermione."

She pinked a little, but rallied soon enough. "Well, I learned my lesson a while back about trying to do it all. Let me see your timetable, then?" It only took her a moment to scan it. "You've got more classes with Harry than I do!"

"Of course. He's a Slytherin."

"He's also a Gryffindor--"

"You got him for six straight years in all the Gryffindor sections and you begrudge me one?"

"Hey, no need to fight over me," said Harry, though he was secretly flattered that they would.

"Just be grateful there are so many Slytherin-Gryffindor paired classes," said Draco to Hermione.

Harry laughed. It was so good to be back at school. Properly back, with everybody around. "Imagine that, Hermione. Being grateful to be grouped with Slytherin."

"Quite an odd feeling, yes." Hermione was smiling as she said it. A moment later, though, her eyebrows drew together. "There she is, flaunting herself again. What is that woman's problem?"

Harry glanced at the head table and saw Maura Morrighan sliding into the seat next to Severus. "I suppose we'll find out soon," he said, since Draco was looking a little glassy-eyed as he stared at her. "See you in Defence, first thing."

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The Defence classroom was stripped of the tapestries and such that Aran had hung on the walls. It was mostly bare of ornamentation now, though Harry did spot a St. Brigid's cross hanging over one window, and what looked like pine boughs resting on the railing of the stairs leading to Morrighan's private office.

The professor herself was nowhere to be seen.
"Perhaps she's changing into her robes," said Hermione in a catty tone. "Otherwise how will Ron and Draco pay attention to a word she says?"

"I don't see how judging by clothing is so acceptable when judging by blood isn't." Draco shot back.

"She has a choice in how she's dressed, that's how--"

Harry kept them from arguing further by sitting down at the nearest desk and patting the chair next to him.

To his amusement, Draco and Hermione both tried to take it.

Draco was a gentleman, though, and conceded before it came to actual shoving. He found a place two rows closer to the front, which probably suited him more in any case. Better viewing angle.

Harry almost snickered.

Ron was nearly late, but then he never had liked to leave breakfast on time. He slid into a seat in the very back, just a few seconds before the door at the top of the stairs opened and Maura Morrighan emerged.

She said nothing for a few seconds, but just looked out at the assembled students.

"I swear she's wearing contact lenses," said Hermione in an almost inaudible whisper. "Or a spell. Nobody's eyes glow that much on their own."

Harry hadn't noticed her eyes until then. They were a warm brown, but why did people care so bloody much? Could she teach her subject? That was the only question in his mind.

Though he was still a bit worried about the "talk" he had to have with his father.

"Welcome to seventh-year Defence Against the Dark Arts," said Morrighan in her lilting Irish accent. "As you all know, I am Professor Morrighan, and--"

"If we all know it, why did she say so?"

"Shh," said Harry, nudging Hermione under the desk.

It felt strange for him to be the one telling her to shut up during a lecture.

"... this is a pivotal year in your studies, and not merely because you will be taking N.E.W.T. examinations this spring. With the Ministry so recently destroyed and still in the process of being rebuilt, there can be no doubt that troubled times lie ahead. What you learn here will not simply make the difference in your choice of career. It might quite literally save your life not too many days hence. As such, we have no time to waste."

Harry nodded. So far he was in full agreement with every word she'd said.

Hermione looked like she was, as well. Biting back a sigh, she dug in the bag at her feet and drew out the assigned textbook. Several other students, including Draco, were doing the same. Harry hurriedly followed suit.

He was still fishing for his book when the professor's voice interrupted him. "What is this?" she asked, plucking Hermione's book from the desktop.
Hermione, for once, looked like she didn't know how to answer a teacher's question. But then, it was a very odd question. "It's the Defence text, Professor Morrighan."

"Oh, no, no," she said, shaking her hand. "No, absolutely not."

"But it's the one on the supplies list," protested Hermione, grabbing a slip of parchment and two more books from her bag. "Along with these ones. See? Here are the instructions seventh-years were sent."

She all but thrust them in Morrighan's face.

The professor glanced once at the parchment, her brown eyes scathing. "Three books, is it?"
Looking up at the other students, she spoke in a firm, no-arguments tone. "Put them away, all of them. You're quite free to read them as you wish on your own time, but my personal philosophy is that Defence is not something one learns from books. We'll be doing practical work in here, each session, and your homework in every case will be to master the skills I've taught. Nobody ever bested a dark wizard by quoting him a passage from literature, Miss . . ."

"Granger," said Hermione tightly.

More than tightly; she looked like she might burst a blood vessel, any instant.

Professor Morrighan crossed her arms over her chest, the fringe on her sleeves swaying as she moved. "Well, Miss Granger? Put those books away."

Hermione did, though she asked, "Why did you put them on the textbook list if you had no intention of using them?"

"I should think the answer to that is obvious. I didn't."

Hermione looked like she had more to say on that topic, but Morrighan had turned away to call on Dean, whose hand was in the air. "Yes, Mr . . ."

"Thomas. About the homework you mentioned. Did you mean there'll be no essays assigned? No three feet on this, two feet on that?"

"Of course not. No essays whatsoever, and no assigned readings. Defence is something we do, ladies and gentlemen, not something we study. Not if we wish to stay alive."

A whoop went up in the classroom. From half the students, anyway. The male half. The girls were still too upset by the effect Morrighan had on the boys to celebrate anything she said.

Harry sure felt like celebrating, though. "She's the anti-Umbridge," he whispered gleefully to Hermione once Morrighan was out of earshot. "Nothing but practicals!"

Hermione just scowled.

"Wands out, then," announced Morrighan. "That's the first rule in my classroom. Wands out at all times. When you know more, I'll be attacking you without warning. Structured duels are fine learning exercises but you must be ready for the real world out there. A world at war, and my job here is to make sure you don't forget it."

"Brilliant!" said Harry under his breath.

"You can pick up a lot of useful spells from books, Harry--"
"And we've been doing it for years, Hermione--"

"Stand up and assemble along the walls," instructed Morrighan. She gave them only a few seconds to move, and then her strange, leaf-ridden wand flashed through the air.

Instantly, every desk and chair in the room was transformed into a green crablike creature with huge serrated pincers.

Students who hadn't been fast enough to follow her directions scrambled away from the animals, which moved so quickly that the floor almost seemed to be alive with them.

"Well?" asked Morrighan, hopping up onto the railing on the stairs behind her. Pine needles showered down. She crossed her legs, looking perfectly at ease as she perched there. "Are you simply going to stand there goggle-eyed? The Norse Pinching Crab may not look like much, but it can do you a world of harm if you let it."

_May not look like much?_ Harry thought they looked vicious. And hungry.

"*Finite Incantatem,*" called Parvati, but nothing happened.

"*Impedimenta!*" tried Hermione.

The crabs didn't even slow.

"Either they're magical creatures somehow resistant to our spellwork, or she created them to ignore student spells--""

"*Arresto Momentum!*" tried Harry, careful to keep the magic wandless. He wasn't about to reveal his powers before the Order was ready.

His spell, like all the others -- dozens of others he could hear students yelling out -- proved useless.

"*Gigt,*" said Draco in a calm, clear voice.

The crabs did slow then, beginning to move in almost a creaking fashion, like they were in pain.

All the other students stopped their frantic casting and looked over at Draco, who murmured something else, waving his wand in little loops as he peered closely at the air in front of him.

Then his pointed his wand at the crabs again. "*Fangelsi,*" he ordered, this time with more force.

A wire mesh cage sprang up, trapping all the crabs inside it except for a stray few. Morrighan went to pick them up and stroked them gently before setting them on top of the cage.

"Well done. Well done indeed," she said to Draco, smiling in a way that made the boys in the class stare. Of course, it made the girls seethe. "Would you care to explain to the class how you solved the problem?"

Draco kept his wand at the ready as he spoke, though Harry doubted that Morrighan was going to attack him on the first day of term. "The professor mentioned that the crabs were Norse in origin. I thought perhaps that was a clue. They didn't respond to Latin, so I wondered if she'd transfigured them to react only to native magic. While the rest of you were banging away at them with spells that bounced off, I was trying to cast in Old Norse."

"And you speak old Norse, of course," said Ron, narrowing his gaze. "Then what took you so long?"
"Did you hear the word *trying*, Weasley? My translation charm couldn't handle Norse, so then I tried modern Icelandic, and even then, precious few spells produced any translation at all. I finally got something in reply to a Jelly-Legs Jinx, though."

"Basic translation charms are very limited and are notoriously difficult to combine with wandwork. You did well to find one spell that worked, let alone two," said Morrighan. "*Gigt* is Icelandic for gout, by the way. And your second spell?"

"*Incarcerous.*"

"That one was closer, as *fangelsi* refers to a prison."

Parvati raised her hand. "Why don't the crabs snap at you, Professor?"

"Because I created them not to, of course. Now, who can tell me what you learned from this exercise?"

"Know a translation charm," called out Zabini.

"Study in advance so you know one," said Hermione pertly.

"Avoid the seashore!"

Harry didn't know who had said that last bit, but it made Morrighan narrow her gaze. "Those are but details particular to this one situation. What did you really learn?"

"Keep track of what your enemy reveals," said Harry quietly. "He . . . or she . . . might use magic you don't know how to counter, but if you pay close attention, there might be a clue you can exploit to your advantage."

"Yes, exactly. Very good, Mr . . ."

Harry had a feeling that she knew his name already, but he liked the way she was treating him exactly as she'd treated the other students. He liked it a lot. "Potter."

"Very good, Mr Potter." She swivelled gracefully on one foot -- huh, she was wearing some sort of beaded leather shoe -- and gave Draco her full attention. "And your name?"

"Snape."

Zabini made a scoffing sound.

Morrighan raised both her eyebrows. "Really. Would you be some relation to Potions Master Snape?"

"I'm his son." When her eyebrows only went up further, Draco went on, "So is Harry. He adopted both of us. Last year. It was in all the papers."

"Apparently she doesn't read those, either," whispered Hermione.

Draco cast a sidelong glance in Ron's direction. "Some people have a hard time calling me Snape, Professor. If you prefer, you can call me Draco."

Her gaze went positively beady. "Did you say Draco?"

"Told you it was a weird name," scoffed Ron in Harry's other ear.
"Shut up, you two," hissed Harry. He didn't know what was wrong, but something definitely was. Morrighan suddenly looked furious.

In the space of one word, Draco had gone from being a particularly promising student to someone she clearly didn't want in her class at all.

Not that she kicked him out as Aran had tried to do to Harry.

She did, however, spend the rest of the session pointing out all his mistakes and ignoring the times he succeeded in the tasks she assigned. When she critiqued him, she was brutal.

And not just brutally honest. She seemed to enjoy cutting him down to size. At one point, she even declared that he shouldn't be a seventh-year yet, as he clearly wasn't intellectually ready to understand a word of the new Ethics curriculum.

The comment, coming as it did during a demonstration of powerful shielding spells, seemed to come completely out of the blue.

Ron thought the whole thing was wonderful, of course.

Hermione had to admit that she was deeply puzzled.

Harry, though, was furious. He knew what it was like to have a teacher out for his blood. But why would she be out for Draco's?

Was this another case of Lucius Malfoy incurring a woman's wrath at some point in the past? But Draco wasn't his father; even Harry knew that these days.

Maura Morrighan, it seemed, had yet to learn.

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"She does seem to know her subject," said Hermione as they left the Defence classroom. "But the way she treated you, Draco! And the prohibition on books--"

Ron clumsily grabbed Hermione's school bag and hefted it over his own shoulder. "Oh, come on. Harry didn't set us essays in D.A., and look how that worked out."

"That was an after-hours club designed to make up for the lack of practicals in our core instruction. And now we're to have core instruction bereft of book-learning at all? It's outrageous -- you can pick up so many useful spells by reading about them!"

"You can, Hermione," said Harry. "But some of us do a lot better learning by experience, as my dad likes to call it."

"Yes, but a balanced approach, surely--"

"You can do all the reading you like," interrupted Ron. "You can even set yourself essays, all right? But it's fine with the rest of us if we have a Defence class that's centred on practical knowledge."

Draco, Harry suddenly noticed, was being conspicuously silent. He increased his stride a little so he could walk alongside his brother. "Are you all right?"

Draco's features were tense, and the shrug he gave looked suspiciously like a twitch. "Yes, of course."

Harry wasn't fooled. "What do you want to do about Morrighan?"

Draco's shoulders twitched again. "Do, Harry? There's nothing to be done. It's not the first time someone has heard my name or noticed my resemblance to Lucius, and decided to dislike me."

"A teacher, though?"

"Among others."

"Bye, Harry," called Ron and Hermione as they took a turning to head to another class.

Draco and Harry continued on to Charms, which they would take with Ravenclaw this year.

"But she's being blatantly unfair, Draco."

"True."

"We have to make her stop."

"Good luck with that one."

Harry fell silent until they slid into a pair of seats near the back of Flitwick's classroom. "I think we should tell Dad."

Draco sat back and crossed his arms, a bored look on his face. "Of course you do. How strange to recall that you weren't nearly so eager last year to tell Severus about your troubles with Aran."

Harry ignored the sarcasm. "I had my reasons for that--"
"As I have mine."

"What reasons?"

"Not the same as yours, I'd imagine," said Draco vaguely. "Can you be quiet, now? I can't hear the professor, and this is our N.E.W.T. year, you know."

That was a bit unfair as Flitwick had only that moment begun to speak. Harry clamped his lips together and tried to listen, but he only lasted a few minutes before he was dragging a parchment out of his school bag so he could write a note to Draco.

What reasons, then?

Draco scowled at the messy scrawl and looked set to ignore it, but perhaps he realised that Harry would keep pestering him. Sighing, he pulled the parchment over to his half of the desk, shaking his head as he wrote on it for what seemed like a long time.

\textit{I used to run to Lucius to complain about every last thing}, Draco had written, twice underlining the word 'every.' \textit{I want a different sort of relationship with Severus. A healthier one, as Marsha would say. And she's right; looking back I can see that the way Lucius and I dealt with one another was almost pathological.}

Harry mulled that over for a minute while Flitwick droned on about the value of proper spell classification during the written portion of the N.E.W.T. \textit{Draco is trying to distance himself from Lucius}, he remembered Severus telling him. This sounded like more of the same, which made Harry think he ought to promote it. At the same time, though, he didn't want Draco to suffer under Morrighan the way Harry had under Aran. He should have gone to his father a lot sooner.

\textit{But Dad would want to help you}, he finally wrote back. \textit{He wouldn't think less of you for asking for help. He wouldn't think you were treating him like Lucius. I mean, like you treated Lucius.}

\textit{I don't think we should encourage Dad to duel with every teacher who annoys us}, Draco wrote back. \textit{Though that would have its benefits, I must admit.}

\textit{He wouldn't duel her. He only did that with Aran because the man ran to the newspapers!}

\textit{Oh, honestly. Don't you know a joke when you see one? I was thinking of Divestio, and how luscious Maura Morrighan would look standing starkers out on the pitch. She probably wouldn't even mind the exposure, seeing as her usual clothing is so very revealing. I don't think anybody could pay attention in Defence after that!}

Harry hurriedly destroyed the parchment before anybody else could see it. That was all they needed -- for word to get back to Morrighan that Draco was gossiping about seeing her naked!

"Problem, Mr Potter?" asked Flitwick from the front of the class, his voice squeaky but sincere. "It looks like your desk is smouldering."

"Uh, just practising my fire charms, Professor."

"During lecture? You know better. I think that you and Mr Snape should move closer to the front."

Harry ignored the chortles of the Ravenclaws as he did as the teacher had said.
Harry's last class of the day was double Potions. Since enrolment had fallen so drastically after the Ministry's decision that five years of Snape's instruction equalled seven years of Potions at Beauxbatons or Durmstrang, the sixth and seventh year classes had been combined into one group representing all four houses.

Even then, the number of students in class was small. The only seventh-years were Harry, Draco, Hermione, Neville, Ernie, Padma, and Terry.

The fall-off in sixth-year participation was even more drastic: Ginny and two other girls that Harry didn't recognise. Nobody else at all.

For once, Harry could understand why Snape spoke so harshly as he started the session. Though really, it was rather unfair to be upset with the students who were present rather than the ones who had dropped the subject.

Snape was half-way through discussing the syllabus when the classroom door opened with a loud creaking noise. Luna came dancing down the aisle. Literally. She even twirled like a ballerina as she came to a halt before Snape.

"You are interrupting, Miss Lovegood," said Snape, almost barking. "I told you last year that I wouldn't tolerate this habit of yours of flitting in and out of classes as you see fit. Are you unable to consult your course programme to find out where you should be?"

Ouch. Harry knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of one of Snape's withering lectures.

Luna didn't seem perturbed. "Oh! Don't move, sir," she called out, standing on tip-toe. "I think there might be a whirlygiggle, just there--"

"Out!"

That time, Snape was definitely barking.

Luna's only reply was a dreamy smile.

Instead of getting angrier, Snape apparently decided to get even. "Detention," he drawled, his voice silky with unmistakable delight. "With Mr Filch, every evening this week. Shall we start with two hours a night? After all, I can always add more if you don't absent yourself from my presence this instant."

"Oh, but I'm assigned to your class," said Luna, blinking. "Didn't I mention?"

"Hand me your course programme." Snape narrowed his eyes as he examined it. "Very well, though in future you are advised to arrive on time, Miss Lovegood. Take your seat and don't disrupt us further!"

Draco gave Harry an incredulous glance that needed no interpretation; Harry was thinking the same thing. Snape wasn't going to take points from Ravenclaw for lateness?

He didn't get a chance to talk to Luna until about an hour later, when they started to brew. He caught up to her on the way to the supply closet, tapping her on the shoulder when she didn't seem to notice him whispering her name. "He means it. Don't show up late again."

Luna beamed. "Oh, but I wasn't late, Harry. I'd only just got my schedule changed back."

"Back?"
"Mmm. Potions isn't really required, you know. But then I saw your father this morning."

Now it was Harry's turn to blink. "You had a conference with Snape?"

"Oh, no." Luna scanned a row of pickled frog's eyes, and selected a jar apparently at random. "But I saw him, Harry. Sitting at the head table." She sighed, her eyes almost drifting closed. "He is a bit dishy, isn't he? I don't know why I never noticed that before. His hair reminds me of the sleek, dark coat of a panther cat, and his nose, why in the right light, it's positively regal--"

Without meaning to, Harry shoved her deeper into the supply closet. "You can't mean that you've signed up for Potions because you're-- you're--" He dropped his voice to a bare whisper. "Attracted to my father!"

Luna twirled again, her radish earrings swinging madly when she stopped. "Oh, I wouldn't put it that way."

"Then how would you put it?"

"He's got a lovely, deep voice." Luna's dreamy smile widened. "Especially when he's assigning detentions."

Harry shook his head, bemused, and quickly left the supply closet. It didn't help his mood that when he got back to his work group -- Draco and Hermione, of course -- Draco waggled his eyebrows up and down. "Took your time, didn't you? And returned without the yeti hair we sent you to fetch. Could it be that a certain blonde has caught his eye?"

"Don't be stupid!" said Harry, more loudly than he'd intended.

He sensed rather than saw Snape's dark gaze on him. "Stupid, Mr Potter? Is there a problem?"

"No, Professor," said Harry, scowling as he got up to get that yeti hair, after all.

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"Stay behind, please, Mr Potter," called Snape as the class began to drift out.

Bugger. Not that Harry would really have expected his father to forget about their promised "talk," but he could hope, couldn't he?

Well, things could be worse. At least he'd got high marks on this afternoon's potion, even if he had Draco and Hermione to thank for that. They'd kept him from stirring in the wrong direction halfway through, and when it came to N.E.W.T.-level potions, one wrong stir could wreak disaster.

"I'll see you at dinner," Harry said to Draco and Hermione, waving them off. "Or . . . er, in the Tower if Dad wants us to eat in his office."

Draco gave him a rather fearsome glare. "You can't be serious. You're a Slytherin prefect and you're going to sleep in Gryffindor every other night?"

"I don't have it all planned out," said Harry crossly. "All I know is I'm sleeping in Gryffindor tonight and that I don't need you to remind me which house made me a prefect, all right?"

Draco leaned closer. "Fine. But I don't need to remind you about our talk earlier, do I?"

What talk earlier? Oh . . . he must mean the bit about how he didn't want to whinge to Snape about Morrighan. Obviously he didn't want Harry to do it for him, either. "Fine," Harry said. He could
see Draco's point.

Maybe the thing with Morrighan would blow over. She might look at him and think of Lucius right now, but with time, she'd probably come to see Draco for himself. It would probably help that he wanted to be an Auror. That wasn't very Lucius-like, was it?

"How was your day?" asked Snape, waving Harry into his office once the other students had left.

The small talk wasn't much like him, Harry thought. He wondered what it might mean. Had Snape already heard some rumours about how Maura Morrighan had treated Draco? Harry sank down into a chair. "Eh . . . all right, I suppose. It's good to have school back in session."

Snape sat in another chair rather than behind his desk, and tapped his fingertips together. He looked to be deep in thought, like he wasn't sure how to begin. "No urges to strike out at anyone else?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "Sir?"

"Not that again."

Oh, right. They weren't in class any longer. It felt like he was going to get lectured, though. Somehow, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that a "sir" at such a time should be all right. But his father hated it, so enough said. "Dad. Of course. But I don't know why you think I'd want to hit anybody here." He ignored the fact that he'd wanted to thump Draco a couple of times recently. "There's nobody at Hogwarts who's like Piers."

"You can't be serious--"

"Of course I'm serious."

Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I saw how that young man behaved toward you during the summer, Harry. I've no doubt you had cause to strike him, though considering the circumstances it could have ended badly. The Order would rather not have to intervene with the Muggle government to have you released from gaol. But Harry . . . there are students here who are indeed just like Mr Polkiss."

Harry thought of Blaise Zabini and grimaced. Perhaps he wasn't as bad as Piers; to Harry's knowledge, he'd never helped beat up younger children the way Piers had. In his own way, though, Blaise was just as obnoxious. In fact, it might be that Blaise was even worse, since unlike Piers, he was intelligent enough to find barbs that really hurt.

For all Draco had made a point of laughing off the "Malshite" rubbish, it had bothered him while it was going on. A lot.

"Yeah, all right," he conceded, grimacing again. "There are. I won't hit them. I have better control of myself than that."

Snape's eyes darkened with some emotion that Harry couldn't identify. Harry would almost have thought it was intense sadness, but that wouldn't make much sense in context, so Harry discounted it.

Or perhaps it did make sense.

"Harry," said Snape softly, "as much as I deplored your lack of discretion at King's Cross, I didn't want to talk with you about that matter at all."
"What, then?"

Snape swallowed, obviously finding it difficult to speak. "This isn't the sort of talk I ever had with my own father, Harry. Obviously. I feel rather at a loss."

It was rare for Snape to allude to Hostilian in any way. Now that Harry knew the reasons for Snape's reluctance, he felt awkward that he'd ever pressed him. Guilt reared up inside him. He didn't mean to be flippant when he replied; it was just that he didn't have any idea what to say. "Uh, well, before you I didn't have any talks with my father, you know. I couldn't talk yet."

The moment he'd said it, Harry wished he could crawl in a hole. He hadn't meant that an abusive father was better than a dead one, even if it had come out sounding that way. Harry quickly did his best to cover his gaffe. "What sort of talk is this, Dad? I haven't caught on, yet."

"Some tea, perhaps," Snape said, going to his office Floo to request some.

It looked more like high tea when it arrived, all sorts of sandwiches and pastries laid out on little plates, which made Harry wonder just what Snape had said to the elves. It seemed odd to ask for that instead of dinner, but Harry was hungry enough not to give the matter much thought. He helped himself to some watercress sandwiches and a thin wedge of shortbread and started eating.

Meanwhile, Snape had seemed to recover his composure. He began speaking as he poured tea for them both, adding milk and sugar to Harry's cup but not his own. "This habit you have of holding yourself apart from others," he began. "I have to think it's not healthy--"

Harry held up a hand to stop him. "I don't do that. I can't believe you'd claim I do, Severus. I've always had friends. Well, here, at least. And now I've got you and Draco as well. Not to mention, I even sort of have Sirius back."

"But no special someone." Snape leaned forward.

"Is that what this is about? My love life?"

"You have no love life. You won't let yourself have one."

"That's right, I won't." Harry set his tea down. He'd probably drunk some, but he couldn't recall so much as tasting it. "And nothing you can say will change my mind. I'm sure you mean well, but it's not really your business, is it?"

Snape ignored the question. "You're seventeen years old, Harry, with all the usual urges, I'm certain--"

Hearing his father talk about urges was almost more than Harry could bear. Yeah, he had them. Who didn't? It didn't mean he wanted to talk about them out loud, especially not with his father! "Those aren't your business either," he said faintly, positive that he was red in the face. "Look, I did have a bit of a problem today that I'd like to talk with you about. Uh, Flitwick's class. I think my burn-and-scatter spell needs some work; I got awfully smoky results--"

"Don't think you can change the subject," interrupted Snape. "We need to address this. It's long overdue."

Why was it, that when you really wished the floor would swallow you up, it never did?

"Now, you are a normal young man, and--"
"Nothing's normal for me. You know that!" Harry suddenly felt savage. "Look, a lot of children are orphaned. I'm not so special, but from the first time the Dursleys called me a freak, nothing was normal for me. Except yeah, all right, I do have urges. I'm not going to talk about them, though, and guess what else? I'm not going to do anything about them. I can't."

Still that same, soft tone. "Why not?"

"Because it would be wrong!" exclaimed Harry, jumping to his feet. He'd probably feel bad later about knocking his tea cup to shatter on the floor, but at the moment, he didn't care. "Isn't that obvious? I can't just . . . betray everyone like that, Severus. How can you ask me to? Thanks to that damned prophecy, the whole world is depending on me."

"That doesn't mean--"

Harry hated what he'd just said, even if it was true. "Oh, wonderful. Now you'll go back to thinking I'm arrogant and full of myself!"

Severus raised his voice a fraction. "The world depending on you does not mean that you cannot be yourself, Harry!"

"It means I have to be the kind of person they can depend on," said Harry, snorting. "How else am I going to succeed at the only thing that matters?"

At least Snape didn't say that Harry killing Voldemort wasn't the only thing that mattered. It was, at least for now, and they all knew it. Perhaps that was why Snape spoke so stiffly when he replied. He'd like to say that it didn't matter, but it wasn't very Slytherin to tell a lie that nobody would believe. "You should nevertheless allow yourself the freedom to explore your own . . . your own sexuality, Harry. What you are feeling is natural for a young man your age, and--"

"There's nothing natural about it," said Harry, shaking his head. For somebody else, sure. But not for him. What was natural about going out on dates, going steady, exploring his urges when it could end up with his "someone special" being hit with a green light? Or being tortured to death? He'd taken enough of a risk when he'd allowed himself to love Severus and Draco. They could be used against him. If he'd had more foresight, he'd have kept his distance from both of them.

But Snape and Draco . . . that had just happened. Harry hadn't planned it; it had been like fate had taken pity on him for once and had given him what he wanted. What he needed. And of course he loved Ron and Hermione too, but that had happened before he'd found out how careful he ought to be about things like that.

But nobody else, Harry vowed. Nobody else, not until Voldemort was cold and dead, and all his Death Eaters were the same, or Kissed, or at the very least, securely locked away. Then and only then would it be safe for him to fall in love.

Really, he couldn't even understand why Draco didn't see things the same way. Being crazy about Rhiannon was no excuse, not unless he was also just plain crazy.

Not that Harry was going to die on that hill. He'd already fought that battle and lost.

"Is that all?" asked Harry, making his voice cold so Severus would take him seriously. "I don't want to talk about this again. You aren't going to change my mind, and if you really want the truth, I'm angry that you'd even try. Are you trying to drive me insane? Because that's all that's going to happen, listening to how I ought to have what I want, when I know I can't because it's actually indecent to do that to another person!"
"Don't say that--"

Time to pull out the big guns, Harry thought, a kind of grim desperation coursing through him. No choice. He respected Snape's opinion a lot, which was why this conversation was so dangerous. Too much more of this and Harry might be swayed into letting himself try to have it all. Not just a family, which was bad enough in a way, but a love-life as well. He couldn't let that happen. He absolutely couldn't.

"Why would I listen to you, anyway?" he asked, not caring that he was snarling. "What would you know about it? Nothing, that's what. I live with you, Severus! Did you think I wouldn't notice that you've never-- never--"

Suddenly aware of how cruel he was being, Harry gulped. He didn't want to hurt his father, and comments about how Snape had no love-life to speak of were out of line. They'd be that even if Harry knew nothing about Hostilian, but considering what Harry **did** know?

"I'm sorry," he said, more quietly. "I love you, Severus. Father. Dad. But I can't talk about this again. Please . . . don't ask me to."

Snape looked shaken, his hand less than steady when he used it to push at the hair that had fallen into his eyes. "We can't leave it at that, Harry. I don't think you understand what you're doing, denying yourself like this."

"We're going to leave it at that." Harry backed toward the door. "I'm an adult and I can choose what I'll discuss and what I won't. This is off limits."

For a long, tense moment, silence reigned in the small room, no sound to break it except their harsh breathing.

Until Snape spoke.

"Would you . . . would you perhaps consider . . ." He actually bit his own lip, like what he was going to ask was painful to contemplate. In the end, he didn't ask it. Harry had no doubt of that, because whatever Snape had been going to say, it wasn't:

"Would you perhaps consider a game of chess?"

"No, I don't think so," said Harry gently. "Not just now. We'll end up arguing. You can see that, I think."

Snape nodded, letting his hair fall over his face again, his expression shuttered when he asked, "This went badly, for which I am sorry, Harry. I don't know how . . . my own father never spoke to me about such things. You'll come to me at once if you start thinking about finding a needle, won't you?"

Harry hugged himself with both arms. "You can't believe I'm as weak as that. A little dispute with you isn't going to send me 'round the bend."

"I think . . ." Snape was obviously choosing his words with great care. "I think that what you are choosing to do to yourself can have repercussions you're scarcely aware of at the moment."

That sounded a lot like **You'll understand when you're older.** Which was probably true, so Harry decided not to resent it. "I don't have any desire for a needle, Severus. And I can't promise to come to you at once just because I start thinking about finding one. But I do promise to come for help if I actually have one in my hand."
"Before you use it."

"Yes, before," said Harry, tempted to smile even though the subject was so grim. "You know what, though? I know you'll still love me even if I show up bleeding from both arms. And isn't that progress? I don't worry any longer about being unadopted."

"No child should have to worry about a thing like that. No grown child, either," added Snape, even though Harry hadn't been about to protest that he was an adult. "Come. I'll walk you to dinner."

Of course he would. He had to keep up the pretence that Harry's magic was still a little bit wonky and undependable. Harry sighed. It was a bit much that he couldn't even walk to dinner on his own.

No help for it, though.

He sat at the Gryffindor table, but he didn't eat, even though Snape was watching him, clearly concerned.

The next couple of weeks were largely uneventful. At first Harry was wary that his father would want to have another "talk," but Snape appeared to have taken him at his word that he was old enough to decide what he would and would not discuss. He didn't even attempt to broach the subject of Harry's love-life -- or lack of one, rather -- when Harry went home to the dungeons for dinner one Saturday evening.

Snape had him to himself for the better part of an hour while they waited for Draco. They talked about Harry's classes and Snape's frustrations with the newest batch of first-years, who were apparently even greater dunderheads than usual. They spent a little while deciding the menu together, and Harry admitted that being a prefect wasn't quite what he'd expected.

But one subject, to Harry's relief, remained completely off-limits.

When Draco finally arrived, he was full of news about Rhiannon. She'd written that she absolutely loved Uni, that the music programme she'd enrolled in was brilliant, and that she'd even auditioned for a professional group known as the New London Singers, who went about singing in churches and such.

Harry looked up from his steak. "That doesn't sound right. I don't think churches usually pay choirs--"

"I said that wrong," said Draco easily. "They perform evening concerts, sometimes in churches. Ticketed affairs. She mentioned St Martin's in the Fields, which apparently is nowhere near a single field."

"It's in Trafalgar Square," said Harry. He'd never been in the church, but when he was younger he'd been dragged to the National Gallery a couple of times when Aunt Petunia couldn't get Mrs Figg to watch him. Harry hadn't really enjoyed those trips; art was pretty boring to an eight-year-old, no matter how magnificent it was supposed to be. Even at that young age, however, he'd been aware of two things: that Dudley, not him, was the one who was supposed to end up "cultured," and that the effort was an even bigger waste on Dudley than it was on him.

One time, Dudley had even bit a guide who'd told him to stop running his smudgy fingers along the walls. Aunt Petunia had been horrified, but at Harry, not Dudley.

Harry never had been quite able to work out how she'd managed to blame that one on him.
"That's in the heart of the city," he explained, since Draco was looking rather blank. "London."

"Of course London," said Draco scathingly. "I did call them the New London Singers, didn't I? And it might surprise you to know that I've heard of Trafalgar Square. I was just trying to picture it. I don't think the operas I attended were near there. Anyway, Rhiannon wrote that she sang Handel for her audition. He's never been my favourite."

"Or mine," said Harry dryly. The most he could say about Handel was that he'd heard the name before. Probably.

"Your petite amie sounds as though she's doing well for herself," said Snape in a neutral tone. "She's careful about contacting you, I trust?"

"Yes. All letters back and forth go through Hermione's parents. Nobody even knows I have a girlfriend, let alone a Muggle one." Draco speared a sautéed mushroom as he spoke. "I shall have to get the Grangers something very nice for Christmas to thank them. I wonder what they'd like. Perhaps Hermione will have an idea."

"Just avoid diamond pendants," said Harry, trying not to grin.

"When you're a celebrated Auror mixing in pureblood society, I'll avoid dwelling on your mistakes, which I'm certain will be at least as bad as mine in the Muggle world," retorted Draco.

Snape seemed to think they were squabbling, from the way he changed the subject. "What do you think of the new Ethics course?"

"I like the discussion-based format," said Harry. "Talking about the text together is loads better than repeating what it says in essay after essay."

"Assuming one has read the text before class."

"I have," protested Harry. "Every single time, Dad!"

"I wasn't thinking of you. Mr Finnigan, rather."

"Set him an essay, then," suggested Draco.

"Already done."

"Excellent."

"Be nice," said Harry, keeping his tone chiding even though their general dislike for Gryffindors still bothered him on occasion. There were some Slytherins who obviously hadn't done the readings either: Millicent and Vincent came to mind. Harry had no doubt that Snape hadn't set either of them an extra assignment.

Bit disturbing that he thought of those two by first name so readily, he abruptly realised. But then, he was a full Slytherin, so he probably shouldn't be finding that alarming.

"I also like having all the seventh-years together," said Harry. "And the fact that you haven't been telling us what you think is right and wrong, but encouraging us to think about the issues for ourselves."

"The situational ethics approach has its flaws, though," Draco put in. "Your illustration of whether it's right to return a lost vault draft to the rightful owner, for example. The students saying it was
right to keep it would feel otherwise if they were the owner."

"Of course. That's the point."

"But you never once mentioned that only a nitwit would carry a bearer draft in the first place. The responsible way to handle one's money is to have the draft made out to a specific recipient."

"It's not a course in banking practices."

"But students should be taught that they can never rely on goblins to look out for their best interests--""

Harry sighed. "Again with the racism, Draco?"

"I suppose you'll be offended if I mention that vampires tend to like blood!"

"Innate characteristics versus group stereotyping could be an interesting topic to explore," said Snape. "Perhaps I'll set an essay. For the entire class."

Harry wasn't sure if he was serious or just objecting to the bickering. "No, no essays. I was looking forward to having a few classes that didn't pile on the homework."

"You may rest assured that Care of Magical Creatures as taught by Hagrid has very little chance of developing an academic strand," drawled Snape.

Draco laughed. "I think he meant Defence."

How he could laugh at anything connected to Morrighan, Harry didn't know. The Defence professor was continuing to be an absolute bitch to Draco. Harry would never say so out loud in front of his father, but it was nothing but the truth.

Snape went still, and then, very slowly, he set his fork down alongside his plate. "Explain."

For a moment, Harry was relieved. About time Morrighan got a piece of Snape's mind!

But no . . . Snape was still talking about homework.

"We don't do essays for that class. Nor readings," explained Harry once he understood. "It's entirely practical."

"Thus far, you mean."

"No, Morrighan told us there wouldn't be any homework except to master the spells we learn during class."

"I knew it," muttered Snape. "I knew it!"

Draco and Harry glanced at each other, but it was Draco who spoke. "You knew what, Severus?"

Unbelievably, Snape actually coloured. "I shouldn't gossip about a colleague."

Draco laughed again. "I've heard you say no end of insulting things about Trelawney, fraud that she is. What is it?"

"You can trust us," added Harry. "We understand the difference, Severus. Here, we're your sons. When we go back out into the castle, we're students again. We won't repeat as students the things
we only heard because we're your sons."

"Well said, well said," added Draco, nodding.

Snape appeared to be trying to force his complexion back to its usual sallow state. Either that, or he was developing a tic. "It's nothing, really. But when I heard that she'd been engaged to teach, I told Albus I wasn't entirely certain she was literate."

Draco grinned, a tiny bit of viciousness in the expression. Not that Harry could blame him, considering what he put up with every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. "Wouldn't that be rich, if she avoided assigning written work for the simple reason that she can't read!"

Harry was focussed on something else. He kept his voice as casual as he could make it. "You already knew her, then. I thought as much when you claimed she didn't own any dresses. Why didn't you say anything?"

The tic in Snape's jaw sped up. "We . . . it's a long story, Harry."

Draco's innocent tone didn't fool anyone, Harry felt sure. "Oh, but we're prefects, Harry and I. We can break curfew. Why, I do believe we could even spend the night here if the story takes that long."

"Whelp," muttered Snape. "Very well, then. Maura worked with the Order during the first war, though thinking back, I'm not sure I'd go so far as to call her a member. She was always too much of a loner for that."

"Maura," said Draco. "It sounds as though you were . . . close."

Harry almost hit him, and then wondered if he was developing a bit of a violent streak.

"How close is not your concern," retorted Snape. "The only relevant piece of information is that we parted on bad terms."

Harry didn't agree. He was starting to think that other things were relevant. The way Snape was trying so hard not to blush again, for example. The fact that he had washed his hair before boarding the Hogwarts Express. It would have been the first time he'd seen Maura Morrighan in years, probably.

In retrospect, it seemed obvious that Snape had wanted to look his best.

Actually, he was keeping his hair clean nearly all the time, Harry realised. It wasn't always as sleek as it had been on that first day, but it was a marked improvement over his usual appearance.

How terrible to think that he might be trying to attract Maura Morrighan, and he'd ended up catching Luna instead!

That thought was nothing to the one that followed, though. What chance was there of things working out once Snape found out that Maura Morrighan hated Draco's guts?

Startled by a sudden thought, Harry peered across the table at his brother. Was this the real reason Draco had refused to complain about Morrighan? Had he somehow figured out that Snape was interested in the woman? Was he trying to avoid jinxing it?

Draco stared back, then glanced down at himself as though looking for a dollop of sauce that might have stained his shirt.
But he was impeccable as always, of course.

"I'm sorry," Harry announced, swallowing as he turned his attention to his father. "I'm sorry I said that thing about your love-life. I . . . uh, that was very wrong of me, no matter how annoyed I was at the time. I didn't know you'd . . . uh, loved and lost."

Draco drained his wine glass. "That's a fine development. You pour out your broken-hearted woes to Harry, do you? I feel rather extraneous."

"Don't be absurd. There was no pouring out," said Snape, glaring at Harry. "And no broken heart. The matter is hardly worth mentioning."

His gleaming hair told another story, but Harry nodded as though he believed his father, and watched as his brother did the same.

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The term was truly under way; Quidditch try-out schedules were posted outside the Great Hall the following Monday. Harry noticed them as he was going in to breakfast. He couldn't help but sigh a bit. Ever since he'd seen Ginny in Potions, he'd been reminding himself that he had to talk to her about his intention to resume as Seeker. No matter that Ron, as Quidditch captain (not to mention her brother) had already broached the topic. Harry owed it to Ginny to speak to her personally.

She was every bit as gracious as he'd expected. She'd told him the year before that she'd move aside for him whenever he was ready to come back, and Ginny Weasley was as good as her word.

"Thanks," Harry said warmly, leaning over to peck her cheek. "You're the best, Ginny. You really are."

When the catcalls started, he thought he shouldn't have done something like that in the Great Hall. They weren't the real problem, though; Snape was. He was glaring from the head table like Harry had tried to bite Ginny's head off.

Harry shrugged, trying to say that Snape didn't understand.

Then he wondered if maybe Snape understood too well. Had he deduced that Harry was talking to Ginny in response to the Quidditch postings? It was too far for him to have heard their words, surely?

But he'd said, over and over, that he understood about Harry playing for Gryffindor but not Slytherin! Why would he get so annoyed about it now?

Harry turned his back on his father and walked out of the Great Hall.

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"We're working on Animagus transformations this year," said Harry as he sat in front of the Mirror of All Souls. He felt busier every day, but he still found time at least once each week to have a long talk with Sirius. It wasn't quite like having him back, since Harry never forgot for an instant that his godfather wasn't really a part of this world any longer, but it was better than nothing. A lot better. "Though I don't really like how McGonagall's going about it. The whole first week was on theory, and a lot of that was basically propaganda to convince us that we really do have to register if we manage to find a form."

"Our fault, most likely," said Sirius, grinning. "James and Peter and I. Before our time, it was rather
assumed that the transformation couldn't be mastered much before the age of twenty, so of course they didn't emphasise registration to students. That's obviously changed."

"But the whole thing is so stupid when it comes to me," complained Harry. "Even public lessons are rather brainless, don't you think? If I can become a stag or something, shouldn't that be kept a secret?"

"It would cause more comment to exclude you from the lessons, if that's what everyone else is doing in class. People would assume you had a form already."

"Well, that's true." Harry sighed, wishing he could tell Sirius about all the secrets already whirling around him, like his supposedly weak magic and the way he had to hide his wandless talent. No hope for it, though; Harry couldn't chance that Voldemort might have a way to steal secrets from the dead.

Sirius leaned forward, almost looking like he was going to fall through the mirror. "So, how is it going? Any sign yet?"

"No, but McGonagall says it usually takes much longer. We're doing visualizations. Hour after hour of it. The whole thing's dull," complained Harry. "No matter how I try, I just can't see my feet and hands as hooves."

"Why assume you'll be a stag?"

"Well, you know." Harry made a vague gesture. "My dad."

"That's got very little to do with anything."

"Not true. Severus said that I might very well have inherited the ability to do the Animagus transformation."

If mention of Snape annoyed Sirius, he didn't show it any longer, maybe because Harry mentioned him so often. He wasn't going to hide who he really was, or what he really felt and thought. Sirius acted like Snape was a distant relative, more or less. Not one important to him, but not one he hated, either.

"The ability, possibly. But not necessarily the form." Sirius' hand made a swirling motion which imitated the way Harry was moving as he played with Sals. "You have an amazing affinity for snakes, Harry. You speak their language. You're mates with one. There's no earthly reason why that shouldn't be your form."

"Oh, I'm added to Slytherin and then my Animagus form turns out to be a snake? No thanks. I don't want to be a walking cliché."

"Technically, you'd be a slithering cliché."

Harry chuckled. "You have me there. That wouldn't bother you, Sirius? If I turned out to be a snake?"

"I've nothing against actual snakes." Sirius sat back a bit and sighed. "I won't say I adore the idea that you're in Slytherin, but you know about the history of my family and that house. And Snape . . ." His voice was grudging, yet sincere. "You're certainly happier than I've ever seen you."

"And you don't fancy getting thrashed by your best friend again," teased Harry.
"There is that. But no . . . it's clear that Severus and you truly do get on. It boggles the mind."

"You mean that damnable cur has a mind to boggle?" drawled Harry, in a passable imitation of his father's deep voice.

Sirius chuckled. "You have him dead right."

"He also says that apparently an old dog can learn new tricks."

"As long as he doesn't expect me to play dead."

Harry grinned. "Oh, that's one worthy of Fred and George." His smile abruptly died. "I wish the Ministry attack hadn't hit so close to home for them. Or Ron. He's holding up all right, I guess. I mean, he doesn't talk about it, but that's probably because there's nothing to be said."

Sirius cocked his head. "They lost someone?"

"Yeah. Percy."

"I didn't know." Sirius sighed. "No reason why I would. We weren't particularly close. Well, tell Ron that he has my sympathies, I suppose."

"I think I'd better not. He's already jealous. Of me having the mirror." Harry shifted to wrap his arms around himself, unaware that his voice had dropped to a whisper. "I told him it hadn't worked for anybody else, but he wouldn't really believe me until I brought him down here to try it. And then . . . well, I don't think he blamed me. He's not such a great prat as that. But he's upset that he never got to work things out with Percy before he died, and not being able to reach him the way I can reach you . . . that made it worse."

Harry shivered, hating the fact that he'd been relieved at the time. All he'd been able to think about, that afternoon when Ron had earnestly called for Percy, was that if it worked, he'd lose a precious shard. Or more than one, since how could he refuse if Ron wanted to talk to Percy again and again? Harry didn't miss Percy, but the man had been Ron's brother.

But it hadn't worked -- of course it hadn't. Harry had expected that.

Expecting it didn't make him feel less guilty over his selfish desire to keep the mirror all to himself.

"Harry?"


"I'll have a look about for Percy Weasley, if you like. I'll tell him Ron's thinking of him. How's that?"

Harry wasn't too keen on that idea, but he nodded. It was the least he owed Ron, and if some of his time with Sirius had to be used up passing messages back and forth between Percy and Ron, then so be it.

Pity that the same method wouldn't work with Harry's parents. Sirius had tried and tried for ways around the ban, but nothing had worked. If James told his wife something on purpose so that Sirius could report it to Harry, Sirius went mute trying to deliver the message.

If James said it for real, for no other motive than the desire to tell his wife, then Sirius was allowed
to repeat it.

The whole thing was annoying, but at least there was nothing to stop Harry from passing messages to his parents. He did a lot of that. He wanted them to know that as much as he was Snape's son, he was theirs too, and he hadn't forgotten it.

He wanted them to know that he loved them and he was sorry he'd ever believed they'd been the kind of people who would drink and drive and get themselves killed. The kind that would be selfish enough to do that when it meant leaving their baby son without a single person he could really call family.

"You still look upset," said Sirius. "Didn't you believe me before, about your form? Harry, you could turn out to be a rat and it wouldn't bother me."

Harry made an effort to smile. "Thanks, Sirius. But, uh, I hope I don't end up an evil rat."

"It's the intent that is evil, never the animal."

"Just coincidence that the rat was a rat, then?" Harry found that kind of hard to believe, even though he knew that Sirius was right. Real rats weren't terrible creatures. Ron had loved Scabbers a lot before he'd found out that his pet was a wizard in disguise.

For just a moment, Harry gave the snake in his hands a suspicious look, then dismissed the idea as nonsense. Sals couldn't be a repeat of Scabbers. He'd know.

Wouldn't he?

"Enough about Transfiguration. We're supposed to start another topic next month, anyway, right alongside the Animagus studies, so students who clearly aren't going to transform have something to do in class. Can you tell me what you know about Maura Morrighan?"

"She teaches Defence and doesn't like Draco Malfoy."

"I told you that much! And his name these days is Draco Snape."

"Of course it is," said Sirius dryly. "Which reminds me. James and Lily didn't say this, but they're clearly delighted that you have a brother. They'd always planned on more children."

"You're not delighted, though. I can tell." Harry swallowed. "Well, to be honest, I wasn't at first, either. I wanted Snape all to myself."

Sirius made a face, but instead of getting upset, Harry chuckled. "I know. It sounds a bit odd. But I was really enjoying having a grown-up care about me, and I didn't want to share."

"Oh, Harry--"

"It's all right," said Harry quickly. "After a while I figured out that I was gaining a brother instead of losing a father. And since then it's been brilliant. Well, mostly. Um, what about Maura Morrighan, then?"

"The name rings a bell. I think Albus mentioned her, years ago. During the war, most likely. But I don't recall anything more specific. Oh . . . wait. Lily said something once about a Maura, didn't she?" Sirius sounded like he was talking to himself. "Severus had done some work with her, I think. He told Lily that she was interested in . . . totemic magic, that was it. She'd talked about studying it in earnest if the war ever ended."
"What's totemic magic?"

"A good deal of Native American magic is based on it." Sirius shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't know much about it, other than it involves animals."

That explained some things, like Morrighan's constant use of animals in class. Not to mention the peculiar way she dressed. Hermione had spotted it right off with her "Pocahontas" comment, though actually, Harry had had to ask her later who Pocahontas was.

Harry was itching to ask if Sirius knew anything about Snape and Morrighan being a couple, but he knew he had to respect his father's privacy, so he said nothing.

A knock at the door made him glad he'd resisted.

"Come in," he called, knowing that only Snape or Draco could make it through the heavy wards Snape had established on the room.

It was Draco, right on time to walk him to the Slytherin dormitories for the night. Harry wished he didn't have to go. Time with Sirius was precious.

But Snape would have a fit if Harry did nothing but stare into a mirror, ignoring his studies and his other responsibilities. Not to mention that he couldn't function well in class if he wasn't properly rested. Last year had proven that beyond a doubt.

"Good night, Sirius," he said, his muscles aching a little as he stood up from the floor. "I'll be back soon."

Sirius nodded as he jumped to his feet. "I'll count the days."

"Really?"

"No, not really. I told you that time here isn't the same. Keep working hard on your transformation. And Draco? You take Transfiguration, don't you? You keep working hard on your own."

Draco paused in mid-stride, obviously surprised. Sirius usually ignored him, even though they were related. "I will, sir."

"Have you had any luck?"

"I haven't, not yet."

"Well, keep at it. It's not an easy thing to accomplish." Sirius paused, his hands moving restlessly. "How is your mother?"

"As well as--" Draco broke off, a little sigh escaping his lips. Harry wasn't sure why he had started to lie to Sirius, but he was happy that Draco couldn't go through with it. "I don't know," he said baldly. "The last I'd heard, she'd gone to stay with relatives on the Continent. France, I think."

Sirius took a step forward. "Narcissa has left her husband?"

"I . . ." Draco clearly didn't know how to answer that, since he wasn't supposed to reveal that the "Lucius" living in Malfoy Manor wasn't Narcissa's husband at all. "I don't know. She hasn't written to explain." Draco's voice was bleak as he finished. "She could be dead for all I know."

"Oh, no, I don't think she's here," said Sirius.
Draco started; he’d evidently forgotten that he was speaking to someone who was dead.

"I was very fond of Narcissa when we were young," added Sirius in a warm tone. "I’d sense her arrival, Draco. No, she’s still in your realm. I hope she gets in touch soon."

"Thank you," whispered Draco. Clearly, his mother’s neglect was a sore spot. Harry couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have a mother like that. But that wasn’t surprising, since he had a hard time imagining a mother at all. Petunia had never even tried to be one for him, or to let him believe she was trying.

"Sir, if you don't mind, the headmaster is waiting for us."

"Sirius, please. But yes, I understand. Good night to you both. It is night there, I think Harry said?"

"It is."

Harry splayed a hand out on the mirror by way of saying good-bye, watching as Sirius vanished. Then he did the usual, and searched for the shard he’d used, but it was gone. He hadn't really expected anything else.

"Where’s your mirror?" asked Draco. "We'll return it to Dad's safe-keeping before we go up to see Dumbledore."

"Oh, that bit was true?" Harry had thought it was just an excuse to end a painful conversation.

"No, I lie to the people you love all day long. The mirror, Harry?"

"I only took the shard with me this time." That way, Harry didn't have to try so hard not to count the pieces that were left. "If the headmaster is really waiting for us, we could floo up to his office."

"Of course we'll floo. Seventh-year prefects are entitled."

If they were, it was news to Harry. But Draco often said things like that. He liked the privileges of rank so much that he made up new ones all the time.

As long as they didn't get in trouble, Harry didn't let it bother him.

"How was your godfather?" asked Snape when they let themselves in the door.

"Fine." Harry glanced around for the square mirror, but his father must have already put it away. "He’s more or less reconciled to the Slytherin thing, by the way. Sirius even told me that if my Animagus form turns out to be a snake, he won't care at all."

"Ah, a rational comment from Sirius Black. Wonders never cease."

"It's not so very rational," said Draco. "Slytherin doesn't mean we're actually snakes."

"You say that because you don't care for snakes."

"Snakes are just an emblem," argued Draco. "At the most they represent a historical connection with Salazar Slytherin's Parseltongue talent."

"It means more than that. After all, snakes can wriggle out of tight places." Harry smiled widely. "That's a Slytherin trait, don't you think?"

"What I think is that your snake won't want to go through the Floo. Set her down. Not on my feet,
Harry chuckled and moved back to lower Sals to the floor.

"I don't know why you couldn't have left her in our dormitory--"

"Yes you do. Larissa would have nabbed him again." Harry sighed. "I can't stand much more of this. I'm getting her a snake of her own for Christmas."

"And what are you getting for the rest of the lower forms?" Draco raised both eyebrows as if in challenge. "Nothing? You're not just a student now, Harry. You're a prefect, and you can't play favourites like that."

"You're just annoyed with her because she likes my pet better than yours."

Snape began shaking his head. "Draco is correct; you should give Yuletide gifts to all the younger students, or to none at all."

"Fine," snapped Harry. "Every last one of them can have a snake, for all I care. Larissa will have plenty to keep her busy then."

"And I'll have heart failure living in a snake pit," retorted Draco. "Once was enough. Trust me on that."

"There is, however," continued Snape in a silky voice, "no reason not to find some pretext for singling out Miss Kent."

"Even better." Harry smiled with relief as he glanced at his dad. "I won't have to wait for Christmas in that case. Any idea of what might make a good pretext?"

Snape stroked his chin as he considered it. "I would say... catch her being good."

"Get her a snake if she goes a week without harassing Loki," suggested Draco.

"Not much chance of that happening--"

"Then bribe the silly child! Promise her you'll get her a snake as soon as she goes a week without harassing Loki!"

"Oh, that might work." Harry beamed. "So now that that's settled, I don't suppose you know what the headmaster wants to see us about?"

"D.A.," said Draco before their father could answer.

"And he may mention tomorrow's meeting of the Board of Governors," added Snape. "'Lucius' will be coming to the castle, Harry."

"Oh," said Harry lamely. It would be great to see Remus, but he knew how Snape felt about Harry seeing him looking like Lucius. Harry had thought sometimes that it wouldn't bother him so much, but now, just the thought of it gave him the creeps. "Are the Governors meeting in the same room as last time? I'll steer clear of that hall. What time, then?"

"Actually, I'd like you to meet with him once the other Governors have left the castle."

"Really?" Harry gave his father a close look.
"Yes. He has a few things to discuss with you." Snape looked almost set to say more on that topic, but he cleared his throat instead. "Albus will arrange it once the board meeting has ended. I've given him a vial of counter-potion to pass along."

That sounded good to Harry.

"Ready?" asked Draco.

Harry nodded and stepped into the Floo. "Together?"

"You go ahead."

Harry didn't know if that meant that Draco was nervous to show up first at Dumbledore's office or if Draco wanted to talk with Snape alone. He'd had plenty of time to do that while Harry had been with Sirius, hadn't he?

Shrugging off the question, Harry took a pinch of powder from the box his father held out, and threw it down as he announced his destination.

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"Harry, my boy!" said Dumbledore in a jovial tone as Harry stepped out of the Floo. For once he hadn't stumbled. Maybe he was finally getting the hang of it. "We haven't had much of a chance to talk in the past few weeks. Is everything going well? Your Occlumency is holding steady?"

Harry tried not to stare. "Why wouldn't it?"

"Merely asking, my boy, merely asking." Dumbledore's eyes lost a little bit of their twinkle. "With Voldemort on the move, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Harry nodded. "Right, of course. Severus taught me really well, Professor, and after what happened at my birthday party, I Occlude almost all the time. I was doing that last year too, but I got a bit careless over the summer. It won't happen again."

"Thank you, Harry. It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of an adequate defence."

_Speaking of Defence..._

Harry decided he'd better not speak of it. Draco might arrive at any time, and he wouldn't appreciate Harry whinging on his behalf. Besides, there was something else Harry had been meaning to tell the headmaster.

"Thank you," he said, leaning forward in his chair to take a sherbet lemon from the dish Dumbledore was extending. "I don't mean for the sweet. I mean... I found some things out recently. About Severus... things you know about."

"Ah." Dumbledore sat back, an unreadable expression on his wrinkled features. "You have questions about what he told you?"

"If I did, I'd ask him. I don't want to violate his privacy."

"My sentiments exactly." Dumbledore peered over the top of his spectacles. "So then, you haven't any questions?"

"No. I just wanted to thank you." Harry took a moment to arrange his thoughts. "I know you could have told Wizard Family Services some things about Snape that would concern them. Things that
aren't his fault, but that might not matter to them. And well, you didn't, even though you were worried that the adoption might er, I don't know. Reduce your influence with me, I guess. So thank you."

Dumbledore regarded Harry gravely. "I didn't have much influence with you at the time. You're right to think that it concerned me. And too, I didn't know how you and Severus could have reached a true accord. After all that had passed, it seemed unlikely." His fingers stroked the rim of his sweet dish. "But what you're suggesting I don't like to think that I could have done a thing like that to Severus. Told his private matters to strangers he's already been betrayed far too many times by those he should have been able to trust."

The words like his father seemed to hang in the air between them. Neither Harry nor Dumbledore would say them out loud, out of respect for Snape. But they each knew what the other one was thinking.

"Well, you could have stopped the adoption another way, I'm sure," said Harry when the moment had passed. "If you'd really wanted to. And you didn't, even though you were worried I was making a mistake. So thank you. I'm really happy now."

"It warms my heart to hear that."

"And uh, I know I've said this before, but I really am sorry I was so angry with you after Sirius died."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "You speak with him often, do you?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. I'm careful not to get obsessive about it."

"Good, good." The headmaster popped a sweet into his mouth. "Have you learnt anything interesting about the afterlife?"

"Just that time's very strange there. Oh, and it seems like there are a lot of places in the one place, if that makes sense. There are Death Eaters there, but they seem to be a long journey from Sirius and my parents."

Dumbledore's gaze grew distant. "Ah. Of course. My father's house has many mansions."

"Huh?"

The headmaster returned his attention to Harry. "Ancient philosophy can have great merit at times. I don't suppose you would allow me some time to speak with Sirius? I'd like to learn more, if I may."

Harry tried not to think of his steadily decreasing supply of shards. "All right. But you have to remember that he's dead. I mean, I think that's affected the way he sees things. He told he he'd have slipped in the bath and died anyway if he hadn't followed me to the Ministry."

"Fatalism, of course." Dumbledore stroked his beard. "I can see why that might be a comforting idea to those already passed on."

A sudden flare of fire announced Draco's arrival. "Headmaster," he said formally as he took a seat. "Good evening. You wanted to see me about Dumbledore's Army, I believe?"

Harry knew he'd put Draco in charge, but he thought that was a bit much. Dumbledore had asked to see both of them, after all. "We also called it the Defence Association--"
"Hermione told me the whole story. This year it's going to be called Dumbledore's Army, full stop," said Draco firmly. "That's a much more psychologically powerful name."

"Yeah, it is," said Harry. "But you should at least consult me about things like that, don't you think?"

"Oh, lovely. You're going to undermine my authority before we've even begun."

"I am not! I just mean--"

"It's going to be difficult enough convincing your followers that I'm heading up the group this year. It will be impossible if the Boy-Who-Lived gives me a script to follow."

"Don't call me that!"

Draco just stared at him. "I'm either the leader of the D.A. or I'm not, Harry. Decide."

Harry balled his fists in frustration. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course you're the leader. How can I be when I have to pretend all the time that I've never recovered from last year? It doesn't mean you can't consult me on things now and again!"

"You don't understand how authority works, clearly."

"I understand you," snapped Harry. "When it comes to prefect duties you lord it over me like you're the god of all creation, on the miserable excuse that you've been a prefect before. Never mind that you lost the position. Well, you can listen to me when it comes to Dumbledore's Army!"

"So you do agree it should be called that."

"Of course I do!"

Draco lifted a single eyebrow. "Then why are we arguing the point?"

"We're not. We're--"

"Now, now, boys," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling so madly that Harry almost scoffed. This was amusing, was it?

Actually, he supposed it probably was. He and Draco probably looked like a pair of idiots instead of young adults.

"It's good to see that you've been forming some definite plans, Draco," the headmaster continued. "But just as you have prefect experience, Harry has some background in organising and teaching his peers. It wouldn't be very Slytherin to ignore his expertise, would it? We must all use the tools we have to hand."

Harry wasn't so sure he liked being cast as a tool, but he could see what Dumbledore was doing, so he let it go.

"Yes, sir," said Draco, scowling a little.

"Good. Now, have you thought about a time and place for your first meeting?"

"Not as yet, no. I haven't decided if we'll use some version of those charmed Galleons. The subterfuge shouldn't be needed this year, but it has a certain flair, I have to admit."

Draco turned in his chair to face Harry, presenting a bland face to the other boy. "And your view would be?"
Harry didn't know how Draco could manage to be so completely sarcastic while keeping his voice and features devoid of any expression. "Ditch the Galleons, I guess."

"I shall inform Hermione."

God, but Draco could be a pompous arse when he set his mind to it.

Dumbledore smiled, the expression gentle, though Harry knew he noticed more than he let on. "You've thought about the membership, I assume?"

Draco folded his hands together. "I'm not sure what you mean, sir."

"Will Slytherins be permitted to join?"

Harry made a pointing motion that encompassed both himself and Draco. "We're Slytherins." He managed not to add *duh* to the end of the comment.

"Yes, you are. But I meant other Slytherins. Now that this will be a sanctioned school activity, it must be open to all the houses. You see that, I think?"

Harry did, but he didn't know what to say.

Draco swallowed. "Headmaster . . . I told Harry that there were Slytherins worth saving, and I meant it, but the simple truth is that not even Severus knows for certain which ones can be trusted. What if one of them passes word along to Death Eater parents about what we're learning? It's best not to hand your enemy a compendium of the spells you know."

"We don't know for certain which Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs can be trusted, either," said Harry, thinking of Marietta Edgecombe.

"Or Gryffindors," said Draco. Then he sighed. "But as much as I might like to think well of my house, it is statistically more likely that a Slytherin will come from a family allied with the Dark Lord . . . er, Voldemort."

"Oh, do keep that up," said Dumbledore. "I heartily approve, and nothing could more clearly reinforce your mindset to your housemates than a refusal to call Voldemort by the title he prefers."

Draco seemed to be trying for a blasé tone. "I tell myself it can't hurt since I've signed my own death warrant several times over by now."

"Oh, not to worry. Right makes might, you know."

"That's not the way I've heard the saying."

"I know," said Dumbledore gently. "You may think that I don't understand what you've had to surmount to turn away from your past allegiances . . . well, perhaps I don't understand it fully. It would be rather arrogant to claim I do. But I appreciate your hard work for us more than you think. You put me in mind of another Slytherin who fought a battle with his own conscience and turned to the Light. A man who has my deepest respect."

At that, Harry felt a complete prat for fussing over who would make the decisions for the D.A.

"Mine, too," whispered Draco.

Dumbledore's gaze cleared. "I won't dispute your opinion of Slytherin, but my earlier concern stands."
"Sir? I don't want to exclude them--"

"Oh, I know," said Harry, trying not to sound like he was taking over. "How about we make everybody sign a charmed paper again? If Zabini joins and then talks about what we're learning, he can go around with 'lying no-good sneak' plastered across his face."

"So what?" Draco looked bleak, like his earlier "death warrant" comment was still on his mind. "You can't unring a bell, Harry."

"No, and for that reason I have an additional suggestion to offer," said Dumbledore. "If you decide to teach anything that you feel must remain a secret from the Death Eaters, Draco, announce a special advanced meeting. Naturally, only students who were in the D.A. last year could be considered for inclusion. The others are beginners."

"Except you, Draco," said Harry, hoping to jolt Draco out of his dark mood. "You were at every meeting last time, weren't you?"

It worked. "You're really quite annoying sometimes, Potter."

"That's settled, then," said Dumbledore gaily, rubbing his hands together. "Thank you for coming to see me, my boys. Oh, and Harry? You can expect a summons from me sometime tomorrow. Probably near the end of classes. It should be safe enough for you to visit with Remus Lupin here in the privacy of my office."

"My dad mentioned it. Thanks."

"My pleasure, my very great pleasure indeed. Good night, then."

"Good night," echoed Draco and Harry before they stepped into the Floo.

When they arrived back home, Snape was sitting in a wing-backed chair in the living room, frowning as he perused a potions journal.

"I don't suppose you've reconsidered," Draco said to him, a little stiffly.

"No."

"She's not going to like it."

Snape set his journal aside. "That's not a primary concern."

"What?" asked Harry.

Draco sighed. "Rhiannon wants me to visit her at Uni. She thinks I should be able to come down for a weekend."

Harry tried, he really did. It wouldn't help things to call Rhiannon an imbecile. But he had to say something. "She doesn't understand about the war?"

"How could she?"

"Draco," said Severus, "I can't believe that a weekend in London is a wise idea."

"But Harry can chat with his werewolf friend, who, I'm sure you'll agree, has much more important
"things to be doing?"

"Don't speak as though I've done nothing for you," said Snape in a low voice. "You have no idea how difficult it was to arrange your last meeting with the young lady."

"I know, but--"

"You will write and tell her no. That is an end to the matter."

"I wouldn't go as myself," protested Draco. "But with Polyjuice whenever we're out of doors--"

"No."

Draco seemed to slump as he finally nodded. "All right. I understand the logic, truly I do. It's just--" He groaned, ducking his head so that his hair hid his face.

"You miss her. Of course."

Snape's voice wasn't exactly warm, but it somehow thrummed as though he knew what Draco suffered. Had he missed Maura Morrighan when she'd gone off after the war to learn about totemic magic?

Harry thought he'd better not ask.

"To bed with you both," Snape said gruffly. "Good night."

Harry and Draco echoed the sentiment before letting themselves out into the cold, dark corridors of Slytherin.

---------------------------------------------------

Harry was in Ethics class when the message came.

An owl flew into the classroom, circling several times before swooping down to land on Harry's desk. Please come to my office at once, the scroll simply read. A.D.

"Sir?" said Harry, raising his hand and waiting until Hermione paused in her explanation of Machiavelli. "I'm wanted in the headmaster's office."

"Very well. I'll walk you up," said Snape. "Miss Granger, please continue until I return."

It was less than a hundred yards, if that, between the light, airy classroom being used for Ethics and the headmaster's office. "I'm sure I'd be safe on my own," Harry whispered furiously the moment they were clear of the classroom.

Snape didn't reply until they were riding the enchanted staircase upward. "I'd like to see for myself that my instructions have been followed."

"Instructions?"

"Potions instructions."

Oh. He meant that he wanted to make sure that Harry wouldn't be stuck talking to "Lucius Malfoy" instead of Remus Lupin. Harry supposed that was good of him.

Actually, it was good of him to let him chat with Remus at all. For all he'd said that Remus was
more worthy of respect than he'd thought, Harry didn't kid himself. Snape still could barely stand
the man and he didn't like letting Harry have a chat with him. That much was obvious from Snape's
terse voice and the stiff set of his shoulders.

Snape knocked on the office door at the top of the stairs, his fist banging into it with a lot more
force than was necessary.

The door swung open with a creak and the familiar features of Remus Lupin came into view.
"Hallo Harry, Severus. Come in, come in."

Harry glanced about for Dumbledore, but didn't see him anywhere.

Snape stepped over the threshold but came no further inside the room. "I've a class in session," he
said, his voice so harsh it grated on Harry's nerves.

Remus nodded. "Of course. Er . . . are you sure you wouldn't like to stay for a few moments?
While we get our feet wet, as it were?"

"No, I'm sure I wouldn't like to stay for a few moments," said Snape viciously, his tone mocking
the concerned one Remus had used. "My feet are already soaked, little good that it's done me."

Harry was growing more confused by the second. "What are you on about?"

"It's fine, Harry, it's fine," said Remus in a soothing voice. "Perhaps you can join your father later
for dinner in his quarters. You'll probably have a bit to discuss with him."

"I don't understand--"

"My students are waiting," Snape bit out. "Six minutes of Hermione Granger pontificating on any
subject is probably five too many. Harry . . ." He glanced at Harry, his dark eyes turbulent.

In the end, he didn't say anything more.

He slammed the door on his way out, though.

"I don't know what's got into him," said Harry, genuinely puzzled. "Unless he's addicted to purple
loosestrife again-- oh. Um, forget I said that."

He suddenly felt a bit like Hagrid saying I shouldn't 'a said tha--

"Don't worry, Harry." Remus made a motion as though to zip his mouth closed. "Mum's the word."

"It was only because he was working so hard for the Order-- yeah, all right." Harry flopped into a
chair and helped himself to a sweet from a dish. "So, how have you been? I don't suppose you can
give me much detail, huh?"

"Probably not, no."

Harry sighed. "We can't even speak freely?"

Remus cast a series of shimmering wards. "Oh, we can. I highly doubt those were even necessary.
If anyone would know how to protect his own office, it would be Albus."

"Well, in that case, Draco wanted me to ask if you'd had any word from his mother."

"Two letters a month, delivered like clockwork on the first and the fifteenth. They never say
anything at all, though. Unless you count the weather in France and stilted inquiries about my health."

Harry sighed. "Maybe it's good that she doesn't write to Draco. Although, when she did . . . the parchment was almost gooey with affection."

"I wonder if she's expecting me to demand her return," admitted Remus. "It may be out of character for me to allow her to stay away. But frankly, things are simpler without her here, and the only person who might know what Lucius would do is Draco."

"Who has a strong motive to keep his mother away from you," said Harry, nodding. "Even if it means she's away from him, too."

"Perhaps I should simply tell him the truth."

"You did, and it didn't make any difference." Harry sighed. "I don't know why it's so hard for him to believe that you won't infect her, but that's prejudice for you, I suppose."

"I was speaking of a different truth," said Remus.

"Oh?"

The man relaxed in his chair, crossing one leg over the other, but it looked strangely like a pose to Harry. Which was odd, as Remus almost never posed. "Do you recall, Harry, when Draco became almost hysterical at the prospect of my sleeping with his mother?"

"Yeah. You tried to tell him that she wasn't attractive, not to you."

Remus narrowed his eyes, just slightly. "You've never wondered why that is?"

Harry shrugged. "I just assumed it's because she's the worst kind of pureblood fanatic, not to mention a terrible person. You couldn't possibly approve of a woman who sides with her husband when he puts out a death warrant on her own son."

"Of course I couldn't." Remus sat up straight and leaned forward in his chair. He no longer looked posed in the least. Urgent, rather. "But Harry, Narcissa Malfoy could be Britain's most compassionate witch as well as the loveliest, and I still wouldn't find myself attracted to her. I'm not drawn to women, you see. I never have been. I'm only attracted to men."

"Really?" Harry would never have guessed that. But then, he'd never spent much time thinking about Remus' love life, except to agree with Snape that he wouldn't find Draco's mother appealing in the least. "Oh. All right."

Harry shrugged again, a little confused as to why Remus was telling him this, when surely it was Draco who needed to hear it. "Um, why didn't you just say that when Draco was throwing his fit, instead of making vague allusions to roses and such?"

Remus sighed. "I should have, of course. I know I should have. But keeping my personal life private is a long-standing habit of mine."

Harry understood at once. "The werewolf thing."

A smile barely touched Remus' mouth. "Exactly. I was quite annoyed when Severus broke his silence."
"But my dad . . . uh, he knows that you prefer blokes? Oh, wait. He must. That's why he kept telling Draco over and over that there was nothing to worry about."

"I'm sorry to hear that's been necessary," murmured Remus. "Poor Draco."

Harry tried not to scoff. It wouldn't be kind to remind Remus that Draco regarded him as a slavering beast who might force himself on Narcissa Malfoy. "Why do you suppose he outed you for being a werewolf but never breathed a word about your liking blokes, though?"

"Because there's nothing particularly remarkable about the latter."

That made sense, Harry supposed, and it went along with Snape's sense of decorum. Warning people that Remus was a werewolf was one thing; Snape could tell himself that he was thinking of the students' safety, even if his real reason had been something much uglier. He wouldn't have any justification for talking about Remus' sex life. "How did he find out, anyway?"

"With the way he followed me about trying to discover where I vanished to each month? Let's just say that he got an eyeful a couple of times." Remus snorted slightly. "Come to think of it, it seemed to set him on edge."

That last bit startled Harry until he thought about it for a moment. Yeah, of course it would upset a younger Snape to see two blokes in the throes of . . . whatever. It probably just reminded him of the things his father had forced on him.

"Is that why he--" Harry cleared his throat and started over. "You think maybe this is why my dad took such a strong dislike to you, Remus? Because, you know, he saw things that . . . er, set him on edge?"

Remus shrugged. "I doubt that mattered in the long run. More important to Severus would be the way I stood by while James and Sirius played their pranks on him."

That still bothered Harry whenever he thought about it.

"And me a prefect," continued Remus softly. "Just as you are, now. I hope you make a better choice than I did, if you face the same sort of situation."

Harry didn't know what to say, since I hope so too would sound like he condemned Remus for his inaction all those years ago. Which he did . . . but he didn't want to say so.

"Can I tell Draco that you're gay?"

Remus sighed. "I suppose you should. But . . . only if Narcissa returns. As long as she's in France, Draco has no cause for worry."

Harry nodded. That seemed a fair compromise.

"You don't seem troubled by my news," said Remus in a probing tone.

"Were you expecting me to be?"

"I don't know what I expected."

"Wait," said Harry, something not sitting right with him. "You mean . . . you mean you came here today intending to tell me this? I thought we had just kind of drifted into it."

"No, this is what I came to tell you."
"Why?"

"Because . . ." Remus paused, sighing even more deeply than before. "It's come to my attention that quite likely, the only person you've known to be an acknowledged gay man is . . . well, a right prat."

Harry thought of Piers and winced. "Worse than a prat. He's a complete arsehole." He stopped to think. "This still doesn't explain why you'd suddenly tell me this, Remus. Or did you think I'd lump you in with Piers if I ever found out?"

"I'm not too concerned over what you might think of me. My concern is much more centred on . . . well, on you, Harry."

"Me? But why would anybody be worried about me?"

"Your father and I are both worried, actually." Remus glanced out the window, then looked back at Harry. "In the circumstances, he thought it best that I be the one to speak with you."

"What circumstances?"

Remus sighed. "I hardly know where to begin, Harry. If you'd been raised by your father -- by James, that is -- this wouldn't even be an issue. But based on some things that you've said to Severus, I have to think that your aunt and uncle have passed on some values that are . . . less than tolerant."

Harry stared. "Yeah, they hated magic. Didn't we talk about that enough last year when I was holed up in Grimmauld Place with you? You tried to tell me that I might have lost my magic because after Petunia died, I hated the magical part of myself just as she'd always wanted."

"A lot of my conclusions last autumn were wrong. But I wasn't talking about hating magic, Harry. Your relatives also hated gay people, I think?"

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with me?" asked Harry, genuinely confused. "I don't care that you're gay, Remus, and I really don't care what Uncle Vernon would have thought. The man was an idiot. Don't you . . . don't you believe me?"

"I can believe that you don't care who I sleep with," said Remus slowly. "But there must be some vestige of their attitudes in you. Otherwise, why would you fight so hard against your own natural inclinations?"

Harry gaped. "What do you mean, my natural inclinations?"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," said Remus gently. "You're shocked at the mere idea that you might want to snog another boy."

Harry was shocked, all right. "Yeah, because I don't!"

"You've been taught that such a desire is wrong--"

"No, I haven't!" Harry coloured and backed up. "All right, fine. I suppose I have. But I know that was just Uncle Vernon being his own gitty self. Really, I do know that!"

"Then why did you tell Severus that it would be indecent for you to go on a date with a boy or two?"
Harry gnashed his teeth. It was bad enough to hear that Snape and Remus were gossiping about him, but to find out that they'd got it all wrong like this? And why in the bloody hell hadn't Snape just said he was worried Harry might be gay? Harry would have set him straight!

"What I said," he gritted, "was that it would be indecent for me to get involved with anyone while the war was on. But believe me, when I said it, I was thinking of girls!"

"You're awfully defensive."

"Of course I'm fucking well defensive! I'm not gay!"

"Just as well I cast those extra wards," said Remus, wincing a little.

That made Harry lower his voice, but it didn't make him any less vehement. "What am I supposed to say, Remus? I wouldn't have a problem liking blokes, but the fact is that I only like them as mates."

"So Severus is simply mistaken?"

"Yeah. Hell of a mistake, if you ask me." Harry leaned far forward, trying to pierce Remus with his gaze. Wouldn't it be nice to know a bit of Legilimency just now? "What gave my dad an idea like this? Do you know?"

"Not in detail--"

"Well, he must have said something about it!"

"He mentioned that he'd witnessed an ugly incident between yourself and your cousin's flatmate over the summer, and said he feared from your reaction to him that you might have got the idea that relations between men are dirty, disgusting."

"Relations with Piers certainly would be," said Harry, shuddering. "But come on, Remus, that's just bloody ridiculous. Snape shouldn't assume that I'm gay just because he sees some other bloke come on to me. For God's sake, couldn't he tell I wasn't interested?"

"Well . . ."

"Out with it," said Harry in a warning tone.

He knew he shouldn't speak to Remus that way, but it did work.

"Severus thought you might be interested in your swimming instructor, and unwilling to act on it."

"Roger?" Harry gaped. "I was interested in learning to swim! And he was a nice enough bloke, but what on earth would make Snape think that he might be gay?"

"The two of you apparently smiled at one another quite a bit, and got on well, and . . ." Remus swallowed. "Well, if you must know, Severus overheard the two of you commiserating that you both hated the breast-stroke."

If Harry hadn't been so annoyed with his father, he'd have burst out laughing. "Snape's brilliant analytical mind is going down in my estimation, just so you know."

"I admit, it does sound a bit thin." Remus gave a slight smile. "But he thought it was a sort of . . . code, I suppose."
"You mean he thought I was flirting? He must also think I'm pants at it." Harry shook his head. "I can't believe he got such a stupid idea in his head in the first place."

"To be fair to him, Harry, you are seventeen and you've never had any interest in the opposite sex--"

"Not true! I had a crush on Cho Chang for a solid year! I even snogged her!"

"Oh." Remus tugged at his collar. "I don't think Severus realises that."

"It was all over a long time before I got adopted," said Harry shortly. "But I'm pretty sure he must know about it. I can't believe I never mentioned it to him. Well, I can believe I didn't mention the snogging bit, but I think I've said I used to like her."

Remus winced. "He may have thought that you were younger then, and exploring the idea of girls. In which case, it makes sense for him to conclude that they weren't your preference. After all, there hasn't been anybody since, has there?"

"No, and it's not too hard to figure out why. Voldemort found out that I cared about Sirius and look how that turned out! I knew then that it was just as well Cho had sided with that sneak Marietta . . . long story, but if we weren't already on the outs, I'd have broken up with her anyway." Harry's voice broke. "I can't have anybody. I just can't, Remus." 

Remus gave him an understanding smile, no censure in it. "You didn't let that stop you from loving Severus."

"I would have," said Harry stubbornly. "That . . . that just happened. I was scared to death of the bone marrow procedure and he was there, and then I was blind and missing my magic, and then we needed those wards, and it all just got away from me. And Draco got caught up in it, but if either one of them dies because they're my family, it'll be Sirius all over again. And I don't know that I can take that again. So I don't."

"Don't?"

"Date."

"Don't you miss it?"

Harry shrugged. "I swear, Remus, I'm not gay. But I'm also kind of . . . I'm not smooth like Draco, all right? I get nervous and tongue-tied when I like a girl that way."

Remus, to Harry's disgust, looked like he found that admission rather endearing, though his voice was serious when he replied. "You didn't answer my question, Harry. Don't you miss it?"

This time, Harry gave his answer more thought. "I didn't think about it much last year, to be honest. Too much else on my mind, getting used to a father and brother, and an entirely new way of casting magic, and all the rest."

"And this year?"

Harry blinked, feeling like he was coming out of a rainstorm to see the clear blue sky. Maybe this explained why he'd been so resentful of Rhiannon, so dead-set against Draco's romance: because it had made him start thinking about his own bleak prospects again.

It had made him remember that resolve he'd formed during that lonely summer after Sirius died.
That decision that he could never have anyone of his own.

Or not at least until the war was finally over.

Remus didn't know about Rhiannon, so Harry just shrugged again. "There isn't anyone. There can't be."

"You know, Harry, love has a way of making itself felt whether it's convenient or not."

"If it tries, I'll Occlude it away," said Harry stubbornly. "Is that it, then? I have a lack of girlfriends and a couple of friendly conversations with my swimming coach, and Snape assumes I'm gay? And then instead of talking to me about it himself, he foists me off onto you? What sort of father does that?"

"He doesn't have much experience at being a father--"

"Well, that's bloody obvious, isn't it?"

"Be fair, Harry. He tried to talk with you and you refused to discuss it."

Harry thought back and groaned. "I didn't know we were discussing this. I thought he was just bugging me to ask some girls on dates. It never crossed my mind that he had boys in mind." An even worse thought occurred to him. "Oh, no. Does Draco also think I'm gay? Wait, how could he? We used to lie awake at night and trade stories about girls last year!"

"It's possible that your brother might have believed that was a cover," said Remus carefully. "I have no idea what Draco thinks."

"A cover! I'm not the kind of person who would--"

At that precise instant, a recent memory burst forth in Harry's mind. He was kissing Ginny on the cheek after getting her blessing, more or less, to resume as Seeker, and Snape was sitting at the head table, scowling at the pair of them.

Harry suddenly felt sick. Snape had thought he was covering, hadn't he? He'd thought that Harry had kissed Ginny in public in some kind of sick bid to pretend that he liked girls. He believed that Harry was the sort of young man who would toy with her like that? Use her like that, when he wasn't attracted to her at all?

He must, Harry thought with despair. He must, because the only other explanation that made sense at all was even worse. It wasn't lost on Harry that he looked a lot like James, and Ginny looked a lot like Lily Evans, and Snape had been disgusted, while at school, with the fact that James and Lily had been "rutting" with each other--

But if he'd seen Harry peck Ginny on the cheek and been reminded of that in some kind of déjà vu moment, it would mean that he did still look at Harry and see James.

Probably it was better for him to think that Harry was an inconsiderate berk willing to hurt his friends so he could pretend to be something he wasn't.

But how could he think that Harry would do a thing like that? And to Ginny, of all people?

Didn't Snape know him at all?

Maybe he just knew one thing: that Harry was supposedly gay.
And after what Snape had suffered at the hands of his father, he didn't like gay people very much, did he? He probably assumed that being gay was what had made Remus ignore his prefect duties while in school! He probably thought that gay people were all close to toe-rags in how they treated others, and Harry was no exception!

"I have to go," said Harry, his legs feeling stiff as he yanked himself to his feet. "Thanks for talking with me, Remus, even if there was actually nothing to talk about."

"You look upset--"

"Wouldn't you be annoyed if your father sent you to someone else to talk about something like this?"

"But you wouldn't talk to him!"

"I know that," gritted Harry. "But don't worry, Remus. I'm definitely going to talk to him now!"

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Eleven

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

Note: "Right makes might" is a quotation from the American president Abraham Lincoln, ca. 1860.
The minute Harry closed the door to the headmaster's office, he almost groaned out loud. So much for a dramatic exit! He wasn't supposed to walk the hallways alone, and he certainly couldn't ask Remus to accompany him. Everyone knew that Lucius Malfoy was present at Hogwarts today. It wouldn't be a huge risk for Remus Lupin to be seen at the castle on the same day, but when it came to Remus' life, Harry wasn't about to take any risks at all.

Speaking of risk, though . . . it would almost serve Snape right if Harry ignored his stupid rules about not being alone in the halls. They weren't needed; Harry could take care of himself.

Nodding fiercely, Harry headed toward the revolving staircase.

He was just about to step onto it when another thought stopped him.

*To bring the Dark Lord down will require cunning, something you'd have mastered by now if you'd been placed in my house . . .*

Harry stopped walking and ground his teeth together. Damn and blast. Snape was right and Harry knew it. The precautions about not walking alone weren't for Harry's protection; they were part of a plan. A good plan, and one to which Harry had agreed.

The fact that it was an irritating plan was beside the point, he supposed. Being narked by his father was no reason to ditch it.

There was nothing for it but to whirl around and head back the way he'd just come. He decided not to knock this time, but thrust the headmaster's door open and strode straight in.

"Harry?" Remus had sunk into a chair and looked to be holding his head in his hands.

"Don't mind me," said Harry through his teeth. "Just passing through."

"Wait." Remus jumped up. "I don't think you understand, Harry--"

"Oh, I understand." Harry's nostrils flared. "Did I ever mention that Snape can be a bit overbearing? I can't even walk home on my own without breaking one of his rules, so I came in here to use the Floo."

"You know why those precautions were put in place--"

"Even so, I'm sick of them." When Harry reached for some Floo powder, he saw that his own arm was shaking. "It's a wonder Snape agreed I could play Quidditch. But then, there haven't been any matches yet. When there are, he'll probably want me to take a Bludger hit just to keep up appearances!"
"Oh, Harry."

"Don't sound so appalled." Harry raised his chin, aware that he was imitating Draco's habitual snootiness. At the moment, though, he didn't care. "I'm sure he'll have only my very best interests at heart!"

Remus grabbed for Harry's wrist. "But he does! Why else would he ask for me to speak with you? I don't think you know what it cost Severus to admit to me that he needed help with his son."

Harry jerked his wrist out of Remus' grasp. "A lot, I'm sure. But not as much as you might think, Remus. Snape was saying even before this whole... romance issue came up that he'd misjudged you. Whatever you did the night the Ministry was destroyed... well, it raised you several notches in his estimation, even if he was rude as hell today." Harry narrowed his eyes. "What did you do, anyway?"

"Nothing that bears repeating," said Remus, his whole expression taut. "Harry... don't be too hard on your father. He does have your best interests at heart."

Harry sighed. "I just... I can't believe that Severus could be so... so bloody brainless. It's not like him."

"He hasn't been a father for very long. He's bound to make mistakes."

"This was one hell of a mistake!"

"But you contributed to it. Severus wouldn't have got hold of the wrong end of the wand if you'd been willing to talk to him when he asked."

"I was willing to talk about this," said Harry. "I just didn't know it was about this!"

"You would have known if you hadn't refused to continue the discussion."

Harry sighed. "He tells you everything, is that it?"

"Not normally, no. Of course not. But this... Harry, your father was truly worried about you."

Yeah, worried I'd turn out to be like you, thought Harry. Part of him knew that he was being unfair; after all, Snape had made it clear enough that he wanted Harry to start dating. And if he'd believed Harry to be gay, that must mean that he'd been encouraging Harry to date another boy.

The fact that he hadn't said so in so many words, though? It could only mean one thing: that deep down, Snape really hated the idea, even if he was willing to tolerate it.

"It was good to see you, Remus," Harry said, trying to end their conversation on a more positive note this time. "Stay safe, all right? When I heard that Draco's mum had gone to the Continent, I thought it was a good thing for you. She can't notice that something about you is off if she's not around. Which reminds me -- Draco will throw a fit if he finds out I saw you and didn't ask after his mum. And trust me, Draco knows how to throw one hell of a fit. So... any news?"

"Narcissa has perfected the art of saying nothing at all even though she owls me every other week. I can tell you all about the newest fashions in ladies' robes, but as to how she is truly doing?"

Remus shook his head.

"Do you think she suspects you're not yourself?"
Remus shrugged. "I don't know. A better question in that case is why hasn't she denounced me."

Harry didn't know. But that was just as well. Narcissa Malfoy was a woman who had killed her own rich relative so her son could inherit his money. Harry had no real desire to be able to think like that sort of person.

"One more thing," said Harry, clearing his throat. He wasn't sure how to bring this up, so he'd avoided thinking about it for the most part. Anyway, it hadn't mattered as long as Remus had been unreachable; it wouldn't do for Harry Potter to be seen owling Lucius Malfoy, after all.

But now that Remus was here in the castle, Harry was out of excuses.

"Um . . . maybe you should sit down for this."

Remus sank into a chair and regarded him with a puzzled air. "Harry?"

"I found a mirror," Harry blurted. "It was broken but I got it working again. Um, but it only works for me, but there's no reason why you couldn't tag along, if you'd like. Well, of course you would. I know how well you got on with Sirius."

"Sirius?"

Gah, Harry hadn't even explained the most important part. "Yeah. The mirror lets you talk to the dead. It's called the Mirror of All Souls. I've been talking with Sirius a lot lately."

Remus' face paled. "You're joking." Before Harry could reply he was speaking again. "No, of course you're not joking. You wouldn't, not on a subject like this."

"You can't let on that you're impersonating Malfoy," warned Harry. "There are Death Eaters not too far from where Sirius is, and Snape is worried that I might not be the only person with some kind of access to that place. In fact, I can't talk to my parents because Voldemort managed to curse them so they can't come when I call. So I don't tell Sirius anything that could be considered Order business."

Remus sucked in a huge breath and blew it out again, very slowly. "I . . . I've no idea what to say."

"To Sirius?"

"About any of this."

"Don't you want to talk with him again?"

"Yes, I do." Remus' face, Harry saw, was still very pale. "But it was difficult arranging this 'free time' to be myself today, Harry. A board meeting gave me perfect cover, but I've already stayed longer than I should have. You-Know-Who considers me his right-hand man these days. I'm always at his beck and call."

"Sneak out of the Manor in the middle of the night and come to Snape's rooms," suggested Harry. "Voldemort will never know."

"He's a frequent visitor to the manor. There's no telling what sort of spells he's cast on it. I wouldn't be surprised to find he tracks my comings and goings."

Harry went still. "What if he's cast a spell on you?"

"Very good thinking, Harry. Albus checked thoroughly for that when we were trading insults after
the board meeting. But I can hardly have him come check through the manor."

"You and Dumbledore were trading insults?"

"Lucius and he were, yes."

"Oh. Right."

"I don't know when I'll be able to speak with Sirius, Harry," said Remus, clearly regretful. "But I would like the opportunity. Very much."

"I'll save you a shard."

"Pardon?"

Harry waved a hand and stepped closer to the fire. "I'll explain when it matters. Thanks for coming to talk with me, Remus."

"Don't be too hard on your father--"

"I'll do my best," said Harry dryly, throwing the powder down as he said the rest. "Harry Potter's home!"

Snape wasn't there, but that made sense. When Harry checked his watch, he saw that Ethics was still in session. He was surprised, as it seemed to him that he'd spent a long while talking to Remus.

He wondered for a moment what the ethics of this situation might be.

Then he sighed, long and loud. Snape had been mistaken, true. Foolishly mistaken, but he hadn't intended to hurt Harry. He'd intended the opposite, in fact, and if he had a hard time bringing up the subject of sexuality in a way Harry could actually recognise, that wasn't too hard to understand. All Harry had to do was think about the kind of abuse Snape had suffered at the hands of his own father.

All right, fine. Harry didn't like the way his father had misread him, but he decided then and there to deal with it like an adult.

Kneeling before the Floo, Harry ordered dinner for two and ignored his childish impulse to pick something Snape disliked. Whatever was being served in the Great Hall would do.

Harry wasn't going to be pleased, however, if Snape went to the Great Hall for his dinner. He wouldn't do that, though. He'd know he had to talk with Harry, and he'd definitely know that Harry had no way to get from the headmaster's office to the Great Hall without breaking the don't-walk-alone rule. Well, unless Snape thought that Harry was going to wait around until Dumbledore could walk him there--
Harry gave up on thinking then, and flopped onto the couch, his eyes sort of stinging. He wasn't crying, or at least he didn't think he was. He must have got a flake of ash in them or something, because he didn't have any reason to cry.

It wasn't that big of a deal if Snape thought he was gay, was it?

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By the time Harry heard the door latch click, he'd got himself more in hand. Washing his face had helped. Well, some.

He was standing at the table, wand out per Snape's rules, casting a wandless re-heating charm on the roast beef which had been sitting for about ten minutes by then. He didn't turn to greet his father. Honestly, he wasn't sure what to say.

That problem didn't last long.

"Two place settings? Why thank you, Harry," said Draco, his voice dripping disdain.

Harry whirled around to glare at his father, his resolve to be mature vanishing. "What's wrong with you, bringing him along?"

"He's a part of this family," said Snape in a level voice. "How was your talk with Lupin?"

"Informative," snapped Harry. So he was supposed to discuss his supposed gayness in front of Draco, was he?

"This happens to be my home too," snapped Draco. "But don't get your wand in a twist. I'll leave if you need me to. Just tell me first if you asked about my mother?"

"Yes, of course I asked about your mother!" Harry gnashed his teeth, growing more annoyed by the second. "In fact, she's the only thing on my mind. Remus and I talked of nothing but your mother, from start to finish, since she's all that matters to any of us!"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" asked Draco, stepping up to Harry. "Did you have a fight with the werewolf or something?"

"How could I? We were too busy rhapsodising over your mother!"

"Rhapsodising!" Draco's eyes glittered. "Are you trying to tell me that he's fallen for her? That's probably why she fled the country, because he couldn't keep his nasty paws off of her, and he's not her husband, and she knew, she could tell it was some horrid inhuman beast slavering over her--"

"Oh, for God's sake! He's gay, Draco! Remus Lupin is gay!"

"I see you did get somewhere in your conversation," murmured Snape.

"Yeah, no thanks to you," said Harry, almost snorting.
"What does Dad have to do with it?"

"Oh, just that he wants me to come out, too!"

"Come out where?"

Harry rolled his eyes. "Come out as gay, Draco."

Draco burst out laughing. "What? Why? You're not gay!"

Finally, somebody with a brain in his head, thought Harry viciously as he rounded on his father. "That's right, I'm not! I'm not at all, and I'd like to know what you thought you were playing at, getting such an idiotic idea in your head and telling Remus it was true!"

Draco abruptly stopped laughing. "You mean you're serious? Severus actually believed you were gay?"

Harry crossed his arms and nodded, a single angry snap of his head.

"I could have told you that he wasn't," said Draco to their father.

"How do you know he isn't?"

"I am actually here in the room, you know!" said Harry loudly.

"Frankly, you sound like you're in denial. A fact that doesn't surprise me after the way you reacted when I so much as mentioned the matter."

"Look, I thought you were talking about something else--"

"Let your brother answer the question."

Draco chuckled, the humour of the situation obviously catching up with him again. Not that Harry saw anything remotely funny.

"I know because Harry likes girls, Severus. He dated that Ravenclaw seeker, for Merlin's sake, and took one of the Patil girls to the Yule Ball. Besides, I can't tell you how many times we've stayed up late discussing girls. You should have seen him preen when I told him how the girls in Slytherin go on about him."

Harry scowled. "Oh, but that means nothing, Draco. Snape there thinks I'm covering!"

"Covering?"

"Faking it! Pretending to like girls because he thinks there's something twisted about liking boys!"

"I do not think there is something twisted about it," interrupted Snape.

Sure.

"And if I suspected you were 'covering,' it was because you told me you were. You said that you had to be the kind of person the wizarding world could respect."

"Ha!" shouted Harry. "You think a gay man's not worthy of respect!"

"I do not think that. It seemed to me that you thought it, and who could blame you when your only
Draco stepped between them. "I can settle this. There's a very simple way to prove that Harry's not gay, Severus."

"What?" asked Harry and Snape at the same time, both of them turning narrowed eyes on Draco.

"Well... the fact that he's been rooming with me for almost an entire year, now." Draco smiled widely, his eyes gleaming. "Think about it. He's seen me in a state of *deshabillé* more times than I can count. And we all know I'm drop dead gorgeous. If Harry were gay in the least, we'd never have been able to become brothers. There would be too much baggage in the way, you see? In fact, he'd definitely have made a move by now."

Harry's anger didn't exactly evaporate, but all at once there was less of it, and what was left felt... squishy, he decided as he tried not to grin. "Has anyone mentioned how conceited you can be?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Well, are you attracted to me?"

"Of course I'm not!"

"Not even a little bit?"

"No!"

"Case closed," announced Draco. "He hasn't got a gay bone in his body."

Harry wasn't sure why he was arguing, since Draco's position supported his own, but his logic was so ridiculous that Harry couldn't help himself. "Hermione's interested in the male gender, and she's not attracted to you."

"Oh, I think I could sweet-talk her into something interesting," murmured Draco. "The way she looks at me, I can tell she's not entirely immune to the possibilities. But that's neither here nor there since I've got Rhiannon."

"You're impossible."

"Shall we eat?" asked Snape, his voice sounding almost faint for once. Well, good. Maybe it was finally dawning on him that he'd stuck his foot in it this time. All the way to the kneecap.

"You two shall, apparently," said Draco. "And it seems you have things to discuss, so perhaps a table for two is just as well."

"Oh, just stay. You know it all now--" Harry gulped. "I mean, you know too much. That bit about Remus... I wasn't actually supposed to mention that to anyone. It just slipped out."

"See that it doesn't 'slip out' again," said Snape sternly. "I already asked a great deal of Lupin in this matter."

"You mean he didn't want to tell me?" That hurt a little.

"He considers the matter a very private one and would prefer not to discuss it with anyone. Draco, are you staying?"

"I don't know. Am I?" Draco directed the question to Harry, even though Harry had already answered that. Well, maybe he needed to really feel welcome.
"Yes, you're staying. Do you want what we're having?"

Draco gave their roast beef and Yorkshire pudding a dubious glance. "Whatever suits, I think."

Harry tried not to feel awkward as he sat down across from his father, but it was a near thing. He could still hardly credit that Snape had believed him gay, when Harry had never once thought about a boy that way. "You don't still think I'm in denial, do you?"

Severus salted his beef even though he'd yet to taste it, which showed how off-kilter he must be feeling. "I don't know what to think at this point."

Great.

Well, at least it was honest.

"Why don't you start by telling me how you got such a crazy idea. Just because I smiled at Roger and disliked the breast stroke?"

"No, not just that," murmured Snape, lifting a hand to his temple and rubbing. "Are you quite certain that you understand your preferences?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"How sure?"

Oh, God, they were going to have to talk about urges again. And this time, he couldn't really refuse. Not after what had happened last time.

Harry cleared his throat. "Well, you're the one who said I'm a normal young man. I am, honestly. Including . . . uh . . ." He felt himself blushing crimson, and clenched his eyes shut. "Uh, you know, all the usual things. I think about things and . . . and . . . I er . . . well, there are these urges and I . . . er . . . er . . ."

"You relieve your tension, I think you mean," murmured Snape.

Harry had never in his life been so grateful for decorum. "Yeah. I relieve my tension. That's it. And it's thinking about girls that gets me . . . um, tense."

"You've never once thought about a boy while you . . ." Snape made a vague gesture.

Harry snorted and opened his eyes to look straight at his father. "No, I haven't. And what's more, it's never even occurred to me to think about blokes when I . . . you know."

"You do realise, Harry, that wanking isn't really polite dinnertime conversation," said Draco as he came back over.

"Like you don't do exactly the same thing." Harry almost snorted again, wondering how Draco could manage it while he was loudly singing opera.

"I don't talk about it at the table, though."

"I wouldn't either, if Dad hadn't got such a bloody stupid idea in his head."

Severus sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Accio headache potion," said Draco instantly, flicking his wand. "Here you are, Severus."
"And you claim I play the good son," muttered Harry.

"Stop. I can't deal with sibling rivalry, not just now. Not on top of everything else." With that, Snape downed the potion and sighed in relief.

A plate of grilled fish on a bed of fluffy amber-coloured rice winked into existence on the table. Nodding in obvious approval, Draco pulled out his chair and rather ostentatiously fluttered a linen napkin onto his lap. "Shall we?"

Instead of complaining that it was tiresome having a stuck-up prat for a brother, Harry started cutting his meat. He let a few minutes elapse before he went back to the subject still on his mind. Finally, though, he couldn't bear the waiting. "Well? Where did you come up with the insane idea that I could be gay?"

Snape abruptly slapped his fork down to the table. "It grew over time, and it didn't seem daft to me."

"How much time?"

"I suppose I first began to wonder about the matter last year when Lupin vowed his lack of interest in Narcissa. It suddenly struck me that you had, all year long, evinced a similar lack of interest in the opposite sex."

"Because of course last year I had nothing else to do. It's not as though my house was crushed into a tiny ball, or I lost my magic or was kidnapped, tortured, and blinded, or ended up getting a father and brother I'd never expected or ended up in Slytherin for that matter--"

"Granted, last year was certainly one like none other," said Snape quietly. "But still, the situation struck me as odd. And then in the summer when you were clearly resentful of Draco acquiring a girlfriend and so uninterested in going on the double-date he proposed--" Snape shrugged.

"The war takes priority for me and I thought Draco ought to feel the same. And anyway, why would me having doubts about Rhiannon make me gay? That doesn't make sense!"

"It does if one assumes that you were deeply ashamed to find yourself attracted to young men. You wished you could be like Draco, but you couldn't, so you were taking your ill humour out on him. It made more sense the longer I thought on it, especially after I'd met Mr Polkiss. He clearly made you uneasy."

"Not because he's gay--"

"Don't lie to me," said Snape sternly. "I saw the way you reacted when he suggested some sort of liaison. Your flesh crawled."

"Because he's a disgusting bully who used to help Dudley hunt me down and beat me up! Years ago, yeah, but seeing him again brought it all back."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh," said Harry scornfully. "Trust me, Piers would give me the creeps even if I were gay. Which I'm not. Which you could have discovered if you'd only asked."

Snape peered closely at him. "I tried to address the matter with you during the summer. It seemed to me that you had confirmed my hypothesis, and that you were determined to live without any romantic attachments because you were ashamed of your orientation and wished to keep it hidden."
"Romantic attachments." Harry scoffed. "Yeah, I don't want any. You have that right. I have to stay focussed on the war, not get all gooey-eyed over some girl. I told you that, over and over, plain as day."

"You said that you couldn't have what you wanted, that it wouldn't be right."

Huh. Harry supposed that really could be read two ways. It didn't matter, though. Snape was still to blame for this misunderstanding.

"Look, the real problem is that whenever you tried to talk to me, you used words so neutral that your real meaning got lost. Like 'love interest.' Or 'romantic attachment.' Why don't you say 'boy' if you mean 'boy?'"

A muscle in Severus' cheek twitched. "Because you were so obviously uncomfortable with the entire subject. I was trying to respect your sensibilities."

"I don't think so." Harry tried to take another bite but gave it up as a bad job. He wasn't hungry. "It goes back to why you fobbed me off onto Remus--"

"Fobbed!"

"You don't like gay people and you could hardly stand to talk it over with me, which explains why I never had a clue what you were on about."

"I don't dislike gay people, Harry."

"Sure you don't. You've always had a problem with Remus."

Snape ground his teeth together. "My problem with Lupin is in the past. I have no 'problem' with him now."

Yes, he did, and Harry hated it. "That explains why you were so hateful to him not two hours ago--"

Snape's features snapped taut. He opened his mouth to reply, closed it, and finally said in a strained voice, "That was something else."

"It was contempt and you know it."

"No." Snape's hair swayed as he shook his head. "No, Harry. It was . . . At any rate, it wasn't deliberate. Instinctive, rather."

"Yeah, because you hate gay blokes!"

"I most certainly do not."

Snape had raised his voice by then, but Harry didn't care. "Yes, you do. Or else why were you so rude to one today?"

"I'd rather not discuss my reasons."

Harry snorted again. It seemed to be becoming a habit. "I'd rather not have discussed my wank fantasies, Dad, but you didn't give me much choice. So out with it!"

Surprisingly, that worked.
"I resented the fact that you would most likely speak with him when you hadn't been willing to speak with me!" A vein in Snape's temple throbbed. "I am your father, not he! And yet from the first moment you lived with me, I have had to listen to you moan for his presence, for him to visit--"

"That's right, visit," interrupted Harry, suddenly seeing things with a startling new clarity. He deliberately softened his voice. "I didn't ask to go and live with him, you know. I was living with you and wanted to keep it that way. But . . . I love him, too. Just . . . not the way I love you."

Snape's eyes glittered. "I should hope not. I've never traded your safety and well-being for ice-cream."

_No, you just taunted me every chance you got for five long years,_ thought Harry. That was behind them, though. Snape had even apologised, so enough said. Besides, he understood why Snape had brought up the ice-cream. He had some kind of sibling-rivalry thing going with Remus. Or more of a fatherly-rivalry thing, Harry supposed.

He needed Harry to acknowledge which one of them was the better father-figure. Which was stupid, since only one of them was his father. Remus didn't even come close.

Harry had learned from Marsha, though, that what people needed emotionally didn't always make sense. They needed what they needed, full stop. And Snape had given him so very, very much that Harry didn't mind giving him this in return.

"No, you never sacrificed my safety for ice-cream," he said quietly. "Or for anything else. And you've never vanished on me for an entire year, either. You've always been here, protecting me, even back when we didn't get on. I know that, Severus. You're the one who's my dad. I even made Sirius come to terms with it."

Snape looked away. "You wouldn't talk with me."

"I'm sorry about that," said Harry sincerely. "I just didn't want you talking me into going on dates. My liking a particular girl can only put her in danger, and that would be wrong." He deliberately didn't look at Draco as he said that; no point in re-hashing that old argument. "I'd have been willing to talk about my orientation if I'd known that was what had you worried."

"It didn't have me worried, except insofar as I thought you were refusing to accept yourself as you were," said Snape, looking at him again.

"It didn't have me _worried_, except insofar as I thought you were refusing to accept yourself as you were," said Snape, looking at him again.

"It did have you a little worried, I think," said Harry, sighing. "After all, you disliked Remus for years before he went out for ice-cream. And it's not like he was a Piers-type bully. Remus is very gentle. Really, he's sweet."

"Yet he looked on while Potter and Black did their best to drive me from the school. A coward unwilling to stand up to his friends. Not to mention that he very nearly _ate_ me. You know all this, just as you know that I was unaware last year that he was endangering himself for the war effort. I thought him a coward, still."

"Yeah, well I also know that back in school, you caught him in a clinch with a bloke or two and you had a problem with it." Harry shoved his plate out of the way and leaned closer. "But I understand that, Severus. How could you feel any differently considering . . . uh, you know. The way your father was."

"The way my father was," repeated Snape slowly. "What do you mean?"
Harry looked down at his half-eaten beef, not wanting to hurt his father by reminding him. But there was no help for it. "Well, you know. How he was a little bit gay--"

"No, he wasn't."

"But you said he touched you," exclaimed Harry. "Uh, sexually, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Snape dryly. "Hostilian was a child molester, certainly. But what he did to me didn't start with desire, unless you count his lust for artistic talent. In fact, knowing what I now know of potions, I rather suspect he needed . . . assistance in order to initiate . . ."

"Oh." Harry swallowed. "All right, but I still think it's left you with some . . . um, resentment that spills over into how you see Remus. And into the way you couldn't even talk with me properly. That's not at all like you, and I don't think the only reason for it was my supposed discomfort with the subject."

"Perhaps you should discuss the matter with the good doctor," said Draco lightly.

Harry almost started. Draco had been silent for so long that Harry had almost forgotten he was there.

"Don't jest about your therapy."

Draco shook his head. "I wasn't. She knows what she's doing; that's all I meant."

"She is a very good therapist, Dad--"

"No doubt, but I will not be consulting her."

"But I really think you still have some issues--"

"Harry, when I believed you were gay, I repeatedly tried to convince you that it was all right for you to act on your feelings. I was perfectly prepared to watch you become involved with other boys, with all that implies. Does that sound like I have 'issues'?"

Harry flushed. "Well, I just thought you loved me enough that you were trying hard to overlook how much the whole thing was going to bother you, but it did bother you and you were taking it out on Remus."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Extrapolate, if you would."

"Well . . ." Harry sighed. "I wasn't thinking about unadoption. I think . . . you'd stick by me no matter what. I believe that, really I do. But I guess I thought you'd respect me less if . . ."

"You thought I'd love you less, you mean."

Harry cleared his throat. "Maybe . . . maybe something like that."

"You idiot, idiot child."

It was probably silly to be giddy at the claim that he was doubly an idiot, Harry thought.


"According to Marsha, the official term is 'unconditional love,'" said Draco in a low voice. "Like how you and Severus forgave me for the whole Venetimorica mess last year."
Harry thought that calling it a "mess" was a vast understatement, but on the other hand, Draco did have his pride. Too much of it, but that was Draco.

"All children should receive unconditional love from the people charged to care for them," agreed Severus calmly.

Harry wondered if he was thinking of himself, as well as his sons, as he said it.

Snape began drumming his fingers on the table. "Is this why you've been so adamant about your preferences, Harry? Because you believed that I would eventually love you less if you were to admit to an attraction for young men?"

"No," said Harry shortly. "It's because I'd like to think you know me by now, Severus. This is like . . . it's like you thinking that Potions is my favourite class in the world. You ought to know differently if you know me."

"Hmm. Speaking of Potions, why did you react so badly when Draco teased you during class this week? He suggested that you might have been kissing Miss Lovegood in the supply closet, and you all but bit his head off."

Harry thought back and almost groaned. What was Harry supposed to say? Well, I was a bit upset because Luna had just swooned at the thought of your sleek dark hair?

"I didn't want you to think I was using brewing time to mess about," said Harry quickly. "And besides, I also didn't want you to think I was a total hypocrite, claiming I was going to steer clear of romance and then leading her on or something. Luna doesn't deserve to be treated that way."

Snape said nothing in reply, but just kept drumming his fingers against the table.

"What did you think I meant?"

"I thought it was a rare flash of your true feelings showing, that you would regard your brother as 'stupid' for assuming you would want to kiss a girl. Then later, I thought you were regretting your outburst and sought to correct it by very publicly kissing Miss Weasley."

"Right, you thought I was covering."

"Confused and trying your best to cope," corrected Snape. "I also found it significant that you appeared to be immune to Miss Morrighan's . . . charms."

"Ha. She's not charming at all," said Harry tightly. "I think she's evil. Though I will admit she's sexy as hell in those form-fitting leathers. I didn't notice at first because my hand was smashed and I couldn't think of much else. And by the way, I didn’t hit Piers because I was trying to reject myself, if that's your next question. I hit him because he grabbed onto me and I wasn't going to take that, not from him."

The slight drumming sound ended as Snape went completely still. "What do you mean by calling her evil?"

Draco gripped his fork so tightly that Harry was afraid it was going to bend.

Harry cast about for a way to give Snape a hint, at least. "I don't like the way she teaches her class."

"With her interest in interspecies communication, she can't possibly object to your being a
"No, it's not that. But . . . she's not fair, either."

"If she's treating you unjustly I will have strong words with her--"

"Not me," said Harry, careful not to glance at Draco. He'd had enough conflict for a while. He didn't want to start fighting with Draco.

Draco gave a low laugh. It sounded fake to Harry, but then Harry knew the real story. "She's too fixated on animals," Draco said, reaching for his wine. "I think she regards students as the animals their houses represent. It's quite bizarre. And really, the headmaster should put a stop to her outlandish costumes. I enjoy the view, of course, but it is very distracting. Why do you think he allows it?"

Talk about skilfully redirecting the conversation, thought Harry.

"Because she's always dressed that way. Maura Morrighan regards herself as a free spirit. As I recall, there used to be fewer beads, though. Before she went to the States, her clothing was more traditionally Celtic."

"But just as tight?" prompted Draco.

Snape shot him a glance. "Yes."

"I had no idea that the school would put up with such insubordination from students."

"She didn't attend here."

"Beauxbatons?"

"No," said Snape in a voice that didn't invite further questions.

Draco shot Harry a glance as if to say, *Your turn to ask something*. Harry just shook his head and went back to the topic that mattered. "I hope you believe by now that I'm not gay."

"It would have helped if you'd occasionally mentioned a girl. Or girls in the abstract."

"I did. I'm sure I did--"

"You said you were bad with them."

Harry supposed that hadn't helped matters, considering. He thought back, hard. "I also said once that I'd be embarrassed to have to come to you for advice about dating and girls. Doesn't that tell you that I assumed if I started dating, it would involve girls?"

Snape gave a sharp nod. "There's no further need to convince me, Harry. I can see that your mind is made up."

*About time*, thought Harry. Now, if he could just get Draco to tell their father what was going on in Defence class . . .

But that was Draco's business. Harry wasn't going to muck about in his brother's relationship with Severus.

"Dessert?" asked Snape.
Harry glanced at the remains of their meal. "None of us ate very much. I thought you didn't approve of empty calories replacing nutritious food."

The man shrugged. "An occasional indulgence won't do any harm. What do you fancy?"

Harry thought that maybe this was Snape's way of saying sorry. "Um . . . crème brulée, I think."

"For you, Draco?"

"The same."

Snape even had some, though he didn't eat more than a bite or two. He just sipped his Galliano while he watched Harry, his eyes dark and thoughtful.

-------------------------------------------

The first meeting of Dumbledore's Army didn't go off without a hitch. In fact, it went so badly that Harry wondered why he hadn't seen the problems from miles away. Too much on his mind, he supposed.

"Him," said Michael Corner in a snarl, more or less. "Him! Draco sodding Malfoy! I don't think so."

"Draco Snape," said Draco. To his credit, he kept his voice fairly level.

"Your name's hardly the point," said Terry Boot. "Last time we tried to learn Defence on our own, you did everything you could to break the group up and get us all expelled. Or worse, considering how mental Umbridge turned out to be. If you think you're going to be our leader after all that, you're more barmy than she was!"

Draco crossed his arms as he stood in front of the fireplace the Room of Requirement had conjured. Everyone else was sitting in roomy armchairs or comfortable sofas, as the room had evidently decided that what they needed for their first meeting was a discussion area instead of a duelling ground. Or maybe Draco had decided that; he'd been the one to open the room.

Harry had to admit, he looked like a leader standing there in front of everyone, a fire roaring behind him.

"Whom would you prefer?" he asked mildly, his emotions clearly under some kind of tight control.

"Harry, of course," said Ginny firmly. Draco stiffened and raised his chin as she went on. "He did a wonderful job last time."

Harry didn't think so, but this wasn't the time to bring up what had happened that night at the Ministry. "I'm at a strong disadvantage this time," he said dryly. "My magic's gone weak and wonky; you know that. I'm still working on getting it back to normal."

Ginny knew the cover story for what it was, of course, but a reminder didn't hurt. Or maybe Harry
was just reminding himself to stick with it, no matter how much it sometimes bothered him.

"We voted last time; I say we vote this time," declared Zacharias Smith.

"You voted for me and I'm handing the job to Draco."

"The group was disbanded. We need a new election."

Zacharias always had been an annoying sort, thought Harry.

"Excellent idea," said Hermione smoothly.

Harry stared at her, but she sailed right on speaking.

"The first step would be for interested parties to declare candidacy. So far we have Draco Snape. Is anyone else interested in serving as our leader this year?"


"I'm not able to do it!"

"You can only nominate yourself," said Hermione briskly. "So, anyone else? Well, that's it then, I suppose. We've only one candidate, so--"

"We can vote for anybody we please," interrupted Ernie. "As Head Boy, I'm recommending that you all vote for Harry no matter what he says. Even if he can't demonstrate spells so well these days, he can still organise things and decide what we need to learn. He's the only one here who's ever duelled You-Know-Who and definitely the one with the most experience dealing with Death Eaters. So vote for Harry like your life depends on it, because it might."

Hermione looked flustered; clearly she hadn't expected things to go quite like this. "All right then," she said, standing up. "I suppose we should get on with it--"

Small slips of parchment, along with quills and bottles of ink appeared on tables scattered throughout the room.

"One moment." Draco held up a hand. "Since the Head Boy is campaigning for Harry, I think it only fair that I be allowed to make a statement of my own."

"That's fair," agreed Ernie with a cool nod.

"Most of you have no reason to trust me," began Draco, swinging his gaze about the room, making eye contact with one person after another. "It ought to be a point in my favour that Harry Potter does, but I suppose you all have to form your own opinions. That's fine. It's not fine, however, to assume that Harry has the most experience of anyone here when it comes to dealing with Death Eaters. I grew up in a dark family, as you know, and I understand them from the inside out."

"Yeah, 'cause you are one," muttered Michael Corner.

Draco's voice tightened. "I'm not, but I can understand why you make the assumption. I changed sides last year. When I stole Harry's wand from my own father, I cut all ties with the Death Eaters. If you don't believe me, you've only got to remember that my father put out a contract on my life. But that's not why you should vote for me. All you have to do is ask yourselves how much you want to live. Who better to teach you to defend yourselves against Death Eaters than me? I know how they think. I know what spells they favour, and how to counter them. I know things Harry
couldn't teach you even if his magic was in perfect shape, because I've been schooled from an early age in the kind of dark magic the Death Eaters will use against you."

"Very good points, Draco," said Hermione. "Now, would anyone else like to make a statement?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Don't vote for me."

With that, Hermione distributed the parchment slips before turning away to fill out her own.

Harry couldn't teach properly this year, and he didn't want to be elected really, but he still felt vindicated when he got every vote except five. Which five people had voted for Draco, though?

Draco, of course, and Harry, and most probably Hermione, but who else?

Harry glanced around the room, studying faces and wondering.

"All hail our great leader," murmured Draco in a tone that was just six inches away from nasty.

Ignoring him, Harry decided to make the best of a bad job. "Thank you for your confidence," he said, leaving his chair and striding to stand before the fire. Draco glared at him, but moved out of the way. "It's good to know that you think so highly of the way I led the group last time. My first act as leader is to appoint Draco Snape to lead in my stead."

With that, he sat back down.

Draco's resentful scowl vanished as he stepped back to centre stage. "Now that that's settled, our first order of business should be to--"

"Just hold up," said Ernie, turning in his seat to confront Harry. "That's not right. We want you, not him."

"To organise things, you said. I just organised them." Harry raised an eyebrow and looked around the room. "Do you trust my judgement or not? Because if not, you shouldn't have voted for me in the first place."

"The vote's been held and our chosen leader has spoken," said Hermione. "Unless we want to spend the whole year arguing instead of learning, we should let Draco get on with it."

Draco took up right where he'd left off. "Our first order of business should be to open the group to all the houses."

"You mean Slytherin!" shouted Michael Corner. "We're not letting any Slytherins in here, except you, and that's under protest!"

"I'll just be leaving, then," said Harry coldly.

"You're not really a Slytherin--"

Harry turned toward him so that his prefect's badge showed more prominently. "Yes, I really am."

"Just because you were adopted--"

"I. Am. A. Slytherin," said Harry, gritting his teeth. "It's not a formality. I sleep there half the time, I'm in five different Slytherin study groups, and if I hadn't argued with the Sorting Hat, I'd never have been in Gryffindor at all."
A surprised murmur washed through the room. Only Draco and a few of the Gryffindors failed to contribute to it.

Then Luna spoke, her soft voice lilting like a melody. "Well, it's rather brave to do that at the age of eleven, Harry. Perhaps that's why it put you in Gryffindor."

Harry's mouth fell open. Not only was that a good point, it was also the most logical thing he'd ever heard Luna say. But then, for all her quirks she must have a good head on her shoulders, or she'd never have ended up in Ravenclaw.

"As I was saying, we need to open the group to all the houses," announced Draco. "Anyone who has a problem with that can take it up with Professor Dumbledore, who insists we can't discriminate now that we're a sanctioned school club."

"So if Slytherins are welcome, where are they?" asked Anthony Goldstein. "Apart from you and Harry, that is."

"That's just the point," said Draco. "I held this first meeting without new members so we could get organised. I want each one of you canvass somebody from another house, fourth year and up. Try your best to include Slytherin. They're more likely to feel welcome and join if they see that it's not just Harry and I who want them here. Just remember one thing. With Voldemort's love of attacking landmarks this year, the war could very well be coming to Hogwarts. We'll need the strongest possible defence against him, and that means involving all the houses."

"He . . . he said You-Know-Who's name!" exclaimed Hannah Abbot, her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

"Harry's advice," said Draco grimly. "Get used to it, because I'm going to."

"Fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself," said Hermione, nodding.

Draco nodded as well. "Any questions?"

"When are we going to learn some actual magic?" asked Michael, crossing his arms the way Draco had. Coming from Michael, it looked pathetic instead of regal.

"Now," said Draco, brandishing his wand. "We'll start with a review of basic shielding techniques, and then move on to offensive spells you can use to end a duel."

"We're here to learn Defence," said Parvati.

"This isn't the Defence Association. This is Dumbledore's Army and an army that only defends will never win a battle." Draco turned his wand on her. "Get ready."

With that, he began.
"You did well tonight," said Harry later as he and Draco were walking back down to the dungeons. "I think you'll make a great leader."

It was harder to resent Draco taking charge now; that vote had really helped.

"I wonder how many other Slytherins will want to get involved, though."

Draco shrugged. "I can't guess when it comes to the boys, but the girls, Harry? I told you last year how much they go on about you. I predict we'll have quite a few join just to be near you."

Huh . . . come to think of it, his study groups seemed to be dominated by girls, too. Harry self-consciously smoothed down his hair.

Draco cast him a derisive glance. "Don't bother. The way it sticks up in back makes them want to run their fingers through it. Or so they say. Giggling, mind you."

"Girls are weird."

Draco laughed. "Yes, but don't let Severus hear you say so. There's no telling what he might conclude."

"He said he believed me finally!"

"You're such a nominal Slytherin sometimes." Draco stopped walking and faced him. "All he said was that he could see your mind was made up. That could mean anything."

"Including that I've decided to like girls rather than I truly just . . . like them," said Harry, gnashing his teeth. "Damn it. I thought we'd laid this to rest. What am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? I can't do nothing!"

"Of course you can. If blunt argument didn't convince him before, it won't next time either, so don't waste your breath."

"But I can't just let him think--"

"If it's any consolation, I suspect he doesn't think that any longer. He's just not sure what to think at this point. I don't believe that will change until he sees you with a girl."

"Ha. He'll just think I'm covering!"

"Not when you truly fall for someone."

Harry sighed. "That's never going to happen. I can't let it."

"It'll happen when you're ready for it," said Draco calmly as he started walking again. "But also when you least expect it. Trust me on that one."

Yeah . . . Draco hadn't started the summer thinking he'd fall in love. He'd still been mourning Pansy, even though she'd been the worst girlfriend ever. Though Harry did still think that Draco had fallen for Rhiannon on the rebound.

He wished they could talk about it, but there wouldn't be much point in that conversation, either. It would just make Draco angry. The way it made him angry whenever Harry pointed out that she
didn't seem to write very often. Certainly, nowhere near as often as Draco wrote to her.

Besides, Rhiannon had to stay just as secret as Harry's true powers. There were few places in Hogwarts where it would be safe to mention her existence.

"How is your Muggle Studies class these days?" he asked instead. "Do you need any help?"

"I have a study group, thank you."

"Well, are there any Muggle-borns in it?"

"No, but Hermione's been kind enough to read through my essays and suggest revisions. Thank Merlin we're taking Arithmancy together. We usually find an empty room after class and then she rips my original ideas to shreds."

Strange how he could sound so cheerful about it.

"If she's too . . . uh, blunt, then I could read your essays. I understand the Muggle world as well as she does."

"Do you? Could you explain then, perhaps, what makes Muggle currencies inherently unstable?"

Shite. "Uh, well it's got something to do with inflation, I think--"

"Bizarre concept, inflation. I could hardly believe it when Miss Burbage explained. But what causes it?"

Harry smiled a little sheepishly. "Uh . . . no idea, sorry."

Draco looked delighted to know something Muggle that Harry didn't. "Because they just make more money all the time, Harry! Like Duplicato, only with machines. It's no wonder their money loses value that way. Paper money, honestly. It's ridiculous. You'll notice that even wizards can't just make more gold."

"I thought alchemists--"

"Mere dabbling. Nobody can make gold in any kind of quantity. Hence, the value of the Galleon has been stable for hundreds of years."

"All right, I guess Hermione's better equipped to help you," admitted Harry.

"I'll consult you more when we start the unit on sport. Hermione's already said she'll be useless there." Draco chuckled. "I almost made a joke about rugby, but decided I'd better not."

"Just so long as you don't think not liking the breast-stroke means anything," muttered Harry.
"And I got my Firebolt back yesterday," said Harry as he sat cross-legged in front of the Mirror of All Souls. "I told you about Draco's present, didn't I? Getting the charms on it upgraded to XL level?"

"How does it fly?"

Harry made a veering motion with one hand. "It's brilliant! Ten percent faster than before, at least, and now even if you don't lean quite right, it automatically banks your turns so you're less likely to fall off."

Sirius splayed his hands out on the floor. "That could be inconvenient if you need to turn without banking."

"Oh, there's an override. You just have to know how to grip it, but it seems like the thing reads your mind. I can still hardly believe Draco did this for me. It would be a lot more like him to enjoy having a broom that can fly circles around mine."

"That kind of victory would be unsatisfying, perhaps?"

"Please," said Harry scornfully. "You remember the Slytherin Quidditch team, Sirius? Winning fair and square isn't high on their list of things to do. They cheat like mad."

"But that's it, don't you see?" Sirius leaned forward a little bit. "He doesn't want to cheat against you. I think this is Draco's way of saying he's your brother, even when the two of you are on opposite sides."

"Thank God we're not going to be on opposite sides in anything except Quidditch."

Sirius gestured at the hazy fog that appeared to surround him. "When you come here, Harry, you start to understand what matters and what doesn't. When I think of all the time I spent fussing over Puddlemere United . . ." A faint smile lifted the corners of Sirius' mouth. "If you lose to Slytherin, don't let it bother you. Even if the other Gryffindors are prats about it. It doesn't mean anything in the long run."

Harry knew that, but still-- "I'm not going to lose to Slytherin!"

"If you don't want to, best to not drink anything Snape gives you for at least forty-eight hours beforehand--"

"Sirius!"

"Just joking."

"No, you weren't."

The man in the mirror gave a little shrug. "I don't imagine that Severus has an afterlife perspective about winning and losing. He's quite partisan when it comes to such matters."

"So were you when you were alive!"

"Mmm," said Sirius as he idly stroked his chin. "I suppose he can't help it. Not that, at any rate. Everything still going well with him?"

"Yeah," said Harry, deciding he'd just as soon not mention the way Snape had thought he was gay. Let alone that Snape still wondered about it, if Draco knew what he was talking about. "The first
Quidditch match has been scheduled for early November. Slytherin vs. Gryffindor, as my luck would have it. And my dad even said to fly my best and do Gryffindor proud."

"He's lulling you into a false sense of security so he can slip you that potion."

"Sirius!"

"That time I actually was joking."

"I hope so."

"Enough about Severus," said Sirius brusquely. "Do you remember how I said I'd have a look about for Percy Weasley?"

"You found him?" Harry leaned forward. "Oh, God. I don't know if I should feel relief or dread. Did he have a message for Ron? Did he . . ." Harry gulped. He wanted to ask if Percy had expressed any remorse for the way he'd treated his family, but how could he ask that? You weren't supposed to speak ill of the dead.

That probably went double when you were speaking to the dead.

"He hasn't yet caught on," said Sirius sadly. "I don't know, I suppose it took me a while as well, though with the way time is here, there's no telling how long . . ."

"Caught on to what?"

"Oh, fate. Destiny. He's still obsessed with how he came to be here."

"Well, the Ministry attack was terrible," said Harry. "And Percy's probably kicking himself. He was invited to my birthday party but he insisted on working instead, and look at where that got him."

"But it was his time," said Sirius, his voice like a wave lapping the shore, slow and steady and serene. "There's no point in anger, but young Weasley can't accept that yet. He could barely hear me trying to tell him that his brother Ron misses him. All he could talk about was revenge."

"I can't blame him for hating Voldemort--"

"Revenge against Lucius Malfoy," corrected Sirius.

"Lucius Malfoy?" echoed Harry, confused. Malfoy had died almost two months before the Ministry attack, so what could he have to do with anything?

_Uh-oh . . . nobody knew that Lucius had died, except Order members. And that certainly didn't include Percy. Everybody else in the world thought he was still alive, since Remus had taken his place at Voldemort's side.

In that moment, Harry knew what Sirius was going to say.

Sirius didn't know that, though; he went ahead and said it anyway.

"Lucius Malfoy killed him," said Sirius, shaking his head. "It wasn't the explosion at all. It was _Avada Kedavra_. And all Percy can think about is revenge."
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:

Chapter Twelve: "Dear Draco"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
Harry's mouth went dry. It was a minute, or maybe two, before he could speak. Sirius didn't seem to notice; he was still shaking his head and going on about Percy.

Finally, Harry managed to force some words up through his tight throat. Who cared that he was babbling? Not Harry. Not under these circumstances. "Oh. Um, yeah. Revenge is bad. Really bad. Even Severus says so."

That caught Sirius' attention at once. "Oh, he says that, does he? Of all the hypocritical--"

Harry bristled. "Would you rather he teach me that revenge is good?"

Sirius made a grumbling noise that was just a shade or two removed from a growl. "Fine, fine, fine. I imagine he's doing his best. I'd just rather you could have made a home with someone kind and compassionate, Harry. Like Remus--"

Harry almost choked. Ten minutes ago he'd have agreed with that assessment, but now? Knowing what he knew about Percy's death? Not that he could mention what he knew.

"Snape's kind and compassionate."

Sirius snorted.

"He is," insisted Harry. "You just have to know how to read him. Like . . . well, after I was blinded, he admitted that he didn't hate me at all--."

"Charming."

"It was, Sirius. Because what he meant was that he was really starting to care about me."

"And of course, being Snape, he couldn't possibly have said that."

"He's said it since. A slight smile lifted the corners of Harry's mouth. "I'm not much better, Sirius. I couldn't even say 'son' at first. I called myself his adoptee."

Sirius leaned towards him, his fingers fully splayed out on the mirror. "Oh, Harry. I wish I'd been there for you. I wish I could have taken you in when your parents died, or at least after I'd escaped from Azkaban . . ."

Oh. Harry saw it then. Something that should have been obvious before. Sirius disliked Snape, of course. But he was also jealous of his role in Harry's life.

Sirius felt . . . displaced, that was it.

He was dead and couldn't possibly step into Snape's shoes, but that just went to prove that being dead didn't make you any less human, Harry thought. And even though he didn't believe in Sirius' ideas about fate and destiny, he decided that it wouldn't hurt to use them at a time like this.

"It just wasn't meant to be," he said, reaching out to touch the cold surface of the mirror. "More than a Christmas together . . . fate worked against us on that one."

A sharp knock on the door interrupted their conversation. Harry glanced down at his watch to see that his father was, as usual, right on time. Because of course Harry couldn't walk a few steps down
the corridor on his own. Oh, no. He had to be escorted even between his own home and the little room where they’d set up the Mirror of All Souls.

"Sirius," said Snape in a level tone as he came through.

"Severus."

Snape turned to his son. "Are you ready to leave?"

"Yeah," said Harry. Sirius looked a bit disappointed, but Harry couldn’t help that. He couldn't stay and talk longer, not when the image of Remus casting *Avada Kedavra* was burning behind his eyes. He did his best to force it away as he said good-bye to Sirius. "I'll come back soon."

Sirius nodded, staring almost hungrily as Harry and Snape walked away.

"Shall I walk you to Gryffindor or Slytherin?"

"Home. I need to talk to you."

Snape inclined his head, but didn't ask any questions until privacy was assured behind the warded door to his quarters. "Problem?"

"Not mine," muttered Harry.

Snape's gaze narrowed. "If someone in Slytherin is harassing you then I will certainly--"

"Nothing like that." At his father's sceptical glance, Harry admitted, "Well, it's not exactly a bed of roses. A lot of them want to hex me for playing for Gryffindor still. But they don't want to hex a prefect. Or get on your bad side, so it hasn't got past some nasty tricks."

"What nasty tricks?"

"I don't need help dealing with them, Dad."

Snape's gaze only grew sharper. "What nasty tricks?"

Harry sighed. He really didn't want to discuss this. Other things were a lot more important. "They put a dozen toads in my bed, all right?"

"And?"

"That's the worst of it so far."

Snape clasped his hands behind his back. “On your behalf I am glad the incident was not more serious, though I must say, the creativity of your peers has lessened in both scope and bearing.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. “Are you trying to say that the Slytherins are being kind of pathetic?”
“Twelve toads, Harry. Honestly.”

"It was thirteen toads, if it makes you feel better, but only twelve survived. Sals ate one. I'm just glad it wasn't Trevor." Harry scratched the back of his head for a minute. “Draco isn't here, is he?”

“No. I believe he made arrangements to study with Ms. Granger this evening.”

"Let's sit down, all right? I have to ask you something."

Snape looked a little puzzled, but he swept his robes out of the way and took his usual seat while Harry sat close by on the sofa. Then he waited, but it was a minute before Harry figured out how to begin. Direct was probably best, he decided.

"Why did Remus kill Percy Weasley? Did Voldemort order him to, or did he have to protect his cover, or . . .""

Harry learned something new about his father, then. Gob smacked wasn't a good look for him. Not at all.

It didn't take long at all for the pieces to fall into place inside Snape's mind. "Ah. Black has seen Weasley in the afterlife, has he?"

"And we both know that his report of 'Lucius' killing him on July 31st isn't accurate. But why did Remus kill him? You didn't answer my question."

"I'm constrained by an Unbreakable Vow, as you know--"

"Yeah, not to discuss the incident except with those who know the truth. Well, I'm one of those now. So?"

"I'm sorry you know as much as you do," said Snape flatly. "I've no wish for you to know more."

Harry leaned back against the sofa and thought that through. "I'm not a child, Severus. I understood what you meant when you were ranting that Remus would have to be able to kick house-elves."

"I never rant."

If the topic had been less serious, Harry would have laughed at that. As it was, the vision of Remus killing Percy playing out inside his mind, he couldn't see any humour at all. "You think I can't live with the idea that Remus has to do nasty things just now? Horrible, unthinkable things?" When Snape opened his mouth, Harry went right on speaking. "I'd have to be stupid not to realise it. I mean, after Samhain? I have a very personal grasp of what torture can involve."

Snape closed his mouth.

"So I can't understand why you don't want to tell me what happened that night."

"Because I know you."

"That doesn’t make much sense, Dad."

Snape slanted him a glance as though to say that the 'Dad' card wasn't going to work, this time. Harry flushed. He hadn't meant to play that card. Not consciously, at any rate. It gave him some sympathy for Draco, actually.

"It may not make sense, but it's all the answer I'm willing to give you."
Harry thought about that for a few moments, weighing his options. He didn't have many good ones. Arguing until hell froze over was probably useless, but he wasn't willing to drop it, either. Which left . . .

Harry stood up. "All right. I'll go and ask the headmaster. He might know more than you, anyway. After all, Remus reported to him. You just read his mind, and you might have missed things--"

"I do not miss things," grated Snape. "Sit down."

Harry ignored the command. "Of course you miss things. You read my mind for practically a whole year and never noticed what gits the Dursleys were!"

"In your case I had preconceptions--"

"And you have none about Remus?"

"Sit down!"

Harry obeyed. He didn't really want to go to Dumbledore about this, after all, and not just because he had a sneaking suspicion that the headmaster would try to influence him once he was up there. Subtly influence him, but still.

No, the bigger problem was that he didn't want to damage his relationship with his father.

"Dumbledore won't speak with you any more than I will, Harry. You are the entire reason he bound me in the first place, as if he didn't know that I would no more hurt you than slit my own throat."

Harry blinked. "I can't possibly be such a part of whatever it was that happened, so what do you mean? Hurt me how?"

"You're not expecting me to answer that, are you?"

Damn. Harry didn't want to have to do this. He levelled his gaze at his father. "Then I'm sorry. I'll have to floo up and ask the headmaster."

"As I said, he won't discuss this matter. Not with you."

"But he will, Severus. As soon as Dumbledore knows that I have part of the story, he'll tell me the rest. He'll have to, don't you see? He was frustrated last year that I'd found another mentor. He'd jump at a chance to shift my loyalties back in his direction. And what better way than to help me when I come to him asking?"

"So you'll manipulate me by threatening to manipulate the headmaster! You never belonged in Gryffindor at all."

Harry reached out and covered Severus' hand with his own. The same gesture from Snape had calmed him more times than he could count. "Yeah, I did and you know it. I bet it'll take more than cunning to win the war. But cunning's part of it, and I'm glad I've had a chance to learn from the best."

 Snape's hand moved restlessly under his own, but he didn't yank it away. He did sniff, though. "I'm hardly a Hufflepuff to be swayed by flattery--"

"No, but you are a man who keeps trying to change this into a conversation about the houses. I'm not going to let you. Why did Remus Lupin kill Percy Weasley? Either you tell me, or I guarantee
you the headmaster will. But Severus? I'd really rather hear it from you.”

Harry knew he’d won when Snape gave a long sigh and tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Whoever said that fatherhood was a thankless job had it right indeed."

This, from a man who got annoyed whenever he was thanked?

Snape sat up again and gave Harry a long, considering look. "I hope you realise that you've placed me in an impossible situation."

"I know," said Harry. "But I have to know. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Sometimes it is better not to know the truth. Knowledge can be harmful." A light shudder passed through the man's shoulders, but then his features hardened and his voice became scathing. "But you must know everything, of course."

"Maybe not everything, but this . . . yeah."

"Well, you're not to think that you can threaten to run to the headmaster every time I deny you something you want," Snape continued, glaring. "I thought we had an agreement. I am the father here, not you. Attaining your majority doesn't change that fact. You will have to accept that I know best--"

"You're the father," Harry murmured, his voice cracking with stress as he went on. "I know, and I'm glad to have you. I wouldn't turn from you to Dumbledore, except . . . Severus, if you know best and you also know me, then you'll understand that I can't bear knowing Remus killed Percy unless I also know why."

He raised beseeching eyes, only partially aware that they were filling with tears.

Snape gave a long sigh. "Damn that flea-bitten mongrel straight to Hell."

Harry gulped. Snape hadn't said anything like that in a while. "I don't think there is any Hell, really. I mean, unless Sirius is missing something. But you know, he didn't know he was telling me anything important. As far as he knows, Lucius Malfoy, not Remus, is the one who killed Percy."

"Yes, yes, of course. He's blameless as usual--" Snape shook his head and seemed to come to a decision. When he spoke again, his voice held no more bitterness. It kind and compassionate, just like Harry had called him. "Very well, then. I will tell you, with one caveat. You are not to blame yourself, Harry. You bear no responsibility at all for what transpired on your birthday. Only one person is to blame."

"Yeah." Now that he was about to hear the worst, Harry's stomach churned. How bad would it be? "Remus," he said thickly.

"No." Snape's voice was quiet, his eyes intense as he leaned toward his son. "Harry . . . Percy Weasley is to blame for what happened."

"Percy?" Harry's brow furrowed. "How could he be--"

"You know something of his character, I think."

"But he was just working that night; he wasn't--" Harry gasped. "Oh. Oh, God. I thought he was just Fudge's little toady, following him around and lapping up crumbs and trying to climb the Ministry ladder, but . . . oh, my God. Percy was working for Voldemort, you mean? He was a
secret Death Eater, and Remus had to . . ."

No, that couldn't be it. If Percy had been a Death Eater, Remus wouldn't have had any reason to kill him. Not if he wanted to keep his cover. Except . . .

"This is why Voldemort punished him!" Harry exclaimed. "Remus executed a Death Eater!"

"Stop these asinine guesses," snapped Snape. "Mr Weasley was not a Death Eater. He was a grubby little man with almost nothing on his mind save his own personal advancement, no matter the cost."

Yeah, that summed up Percy pretty well. He'd known Harry, but had turned on him the moment it had looked good for his career, and tried to get Ron to do the same!

"Then why on earth did Remus kill him? Avada Kedavra, no less! I wouldn't have thought Remus would even be capable of summoning up enough hatred to cast that!"

Snape leaned closer, his fingers brushing against Harry's knee as he spoke in gentle, soothing tones. "Lupin killed him because Weasley was a grubby little man with almost nothing on his mind save his own personal advancement, no matter the cost."

It was code for something else. Harry sensed that, particularly after Snape had repeated himself word-for-word, but unlike his father, he couldn't put the pieces of a puzzle together so easily. "Um . . ."

Snape nodded. "We should back up a bit. On the night of the Ministry attack, Lupin was ordered to go to Fudge's office and kidnap the Minister before the explosions commenced. He had a Portkey linked to one of Voldemort's strongholds. As it turned out, Fudge was not present in his office, but Percy Weasley was."

"Working late that night, yeah." Harry swallowed.

"Lupin . . ." Snape grimaced. "Faced with an unpleasant choice, Lupin tried to do the best he could. The Portkey was timed to activate just before the Ministry was destroyed. Leaving Weasley there would mean certain death for him, so Lupin grabbed him and let the Portkey fling them to their destination. He had some asinine plan to be 'careless' and let Percy Weasley escape. He couldn't help him in any obvious way, of course, lest it reach Voldemort's ears that 'Lucius Malfoy' was not as loyal as he ought to be."

So far, so good. It was even to Remus' credit, what he'd tried to do.

"What went wrong?" asked Harry quietly.

"Weasley went wrong. All he knew was that he'd just been abducted by a leading Death Eater. He thought to save himself at any cost." Snape paused as though waiting for Harry to put it together. "Don't forget, all of this happened on your birthday."

As if Harry could ever forget that . . .

"Percy Weasley had been invited to your party," Snape added. "Harry . . . he knew where you were."

The pieces abruptly clicked into place. They made a clanking sound inside Harry's head. "Oh, no. He didn't. He wouldn't! Except, this is Percy we're talking about. He probably would!"
"He did," said Snape, watching Harry carefully. "He was no doubt mad with fear, but that hardly
exonerates him. No sooner had he landed on his arse inside the cell prepared for Fudge, than he
was babbling that he had valuable information, that he knew where to find Harry Potter at that very
minute, that he was too important to kill."

Harry felt sick. And he felt something else, too. For the first time, he felt a little bit sorry for Percy
Weasley. Talk about irony . . . "That was the worst thing he could have said, if he wanted to stay
alive."

"Lupin had no choice. Voldemort would be coming any moment. He couldn't possibly let him
come into contact with Weasley, who was so willing to trade your life for his."

Harry had already figured that much out. "But he could have let him go--"

"No, he couldn't," argued Snape. "Weasley had already signed his own death warrant. He had
demonstrated that he would betray you the first time it seemed opportune. Lupin reasoned, quite
correctly, that Weasley knew too much about you to be allowed to live."

"But what chance was there that he'd be captured by Death Eaters again?"

"Quite a good one, if he continued to rise in the Ministry." Snape leaned back and folded his hands
together on his lap. "Lupin had only a few seconds in which to make these judgements, Harry. He
was no doubt furious at what Percy had just said. And while he was willing to suffer Voldemort's
wrath over an 'escape' when it was Arthur and Molly's son escaping, he was less willing when it
would mean suffering in order to help someone who, quite frankly, deserved no consideration
whatever."

Harry's next thought was so horrible that he almost cringed. "Oh, God. Percy would have
endangered his entire family, just to save himself! His own family! He'd have led Voldemort to the
Burrow!"

Snape's face twisted. "Yes. Exactly. I can feel no regret at his death. I feel nothing but contempt."

Harry felt contempt, too. Who wouldn't? But he also felt a sensation of guilt beginning to creep
along his spine, working its way up to his brain. He tried to push the feeling away. He didn't want
Snape to regret telling him. "Um . . . but why did Voldemort Crucio Remus? Because he Portkeyed
out with Percy instead of Fudge?"

"No. Lupin was punished because he had killed Weasley. The Minister's personal assistant might
have proven useful, and Lupin had only a feeble excuse to offer for his decision to end Weasley's
life. He claimed that Weasley had insulted Voldemort."

"Stupid reason to kill him, yeah." Harry swallowed, pushing the guilt away again. It wasn't his
fault, it wasn't. He knew that when he thought about it rationally. But emotions, as Marsha often
said, weren't always rational. "Um . . . useful, how? Imperius?"

"Possibly. Voldemort might also have wished to torture him for information or sport."

Harry shuddered, memories of Samhain rushing through him again. "Why didn't Remus do
something? Vanish the body and claim nobody was in Fudge's office?"

Snape gave a slight shrug. "He has convinced himself that it was because there was no time.
Voldemort appeared mere seconds after he had killed Weasley, and Lupin was in some amount of
shock over the events that had so rapidly unfolded. He maintains that it was all he could do to
compose himself and continue to act the part of Lucius. I, however, suspect that there was an
element of self-flagellation involved."

"Self . . ."

"He felt guilty and some part of him wished to suffer, making him slow to hide what he'd done."

Harry frowned. "You saw that in his mind?"

"No, but I saw his horror and guilt, and I know Lupin."

Snape might be right, thought Harry, remembering how Remus had refused the potion that would have helped him recover from the Cruciatus. Remus had had a reason for that . . . but Snape still might be right.

"You aren't to blame yourself," said Snape sternly. "It's not your fault that Weasley tried to buy his life with your own, or that Lupin put an end to it. And to him."

"I know," said Harry, wishing his voice wasn't so thick. He did know. It was just . . . hard to really believe it, deep inside.

"Do you?"

"Yes," said Harry, a little bit more firmly. He hated lying to his father, but this wasn't really lying, was it? He knew perfectly well on an intellectual level that Percy had been a rat who brought this on himself. As for the rest . . . well, he was being too soft-hearted and he knew it. He shouldn't be filled with horror that Percy had basically died because . . . well, because Harry existed, really. Yet one more person dead because of him. His best friend's brother, this time.

Poor Ron. Harry knew how bad it felt to lose someone.

And poor Remus, to have to do something so very awful. To a boy he'd taught. Remus, who was usually so gentle, who hated his werewolf form, who'd never killed during his transformations. And now he'd killed as a human being . . . for Harry.

Maybe that was actually why Harry felt so guilty. He didn't know any longer. It was a tangle inside him, and when he realised that his arms were getting itchy, he only felt even more mixed-up. The only thing he was really sure of was that he didn't want Severus knowing that Harry was, in fact, blaming himself.

Some, at least.

"Don't worry about it," he said quickly. "Uh . . . it's not like Percy was that boy at the Death Eater meeting you told me about. An innocent victim . . . no, he brought this on himself. And . . . well, I'm glad I know the truth. At least it all makes sense now."

"Why Voldemort punished Lupin?"

Harry nodded, relieved that his father was following his lead. "And also why you started to respect Remus a little bit. What he did . . . I mean, what he had to do? That can't have been easy."

Snape steepled his fingers and regarded his son over the top of them. "It's not so much what he did, Harry, as why he did it. When it came to protecting you, he didn't hesitate. Not for an instant. What father could continue to hate such a man?"

Despite his inner turmoil, a smile broke across Harry's face. Strange how much those last few
words meant. So much, in fact, that he wanted to hear them again. "You don't hate Remus?"

"I don't hate . . . Remus," said Snape, lacing his fingers together. "And since you seem to need reassurance, perhaps I should clarify one other thing: I respect him more than a 'little bit.' Indeed . . . I respect him a great deal."

"This makes up for the ice-cream thing?"

"Yes, because foolish as that was, it wasn't done deliberately. This . . . this was."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah, it was. Poor Remus. No wonder he looked so rough at the Order meeting. I can't imagine what it was like for him, having to face Mr and Mrs Weasley, knowing . . . but they don't know, do they?"

"Of course not. It's better for them to believe that their son died like all the others did, than to know exactly how craven he turned out to be. Aside from that, the last thing we need is division in the Order. You're not to breathe a word of this to your friends."

"You mean Ron." Harry ducked his head. "All right."

"I mean it--"

"All right, I said." Harry looked up again. "You can put me under an Unbreakable Vow if you like. Just like Dumbledore did to you."

Snape's nostrils flared. "I actually care what happens to you. I certainly wouldn't sentence you to death for attempting to break a confidence."

"I'm sure Dumbledore cares about what happens to you--"

"In the circumstances, that's debatable," said Snape tightly. "But that is no matter. Have you any further questions?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Should I tell Draco? You certainly can't."

"I can't imagine why he would need to know this. If that changes, you may use your own judgement. In the meantime, the fewer people who know the truth, the better."

"All right. That makes sense."

Snape rose to his feet, his robes swirling about his ankles. "Are you sleeping in Gryffindor or Slytherin tonight? I'll escort you."

"I think I'd like to stay here, if that's all right." When Snape stared at him, Harry felt his face grow warm. "Of course it's all right. I don't know why I said it like that. I'll sleep at home tonight, Dad."

Snape gave a sharp nod. "You fear a nightmare?"

"No . . . I just want to stay here."

Harry was grateful his father didn't ask why, though the 'why' was obvious. Decorum again, he thought, and had never been so grateful for it.

"Whom shall I inform? We don't want your brother or your friends in a panic when you don't appear by curfew."
Harry shrugged. "I stopped alternating a while ago. Now I just sleep in whichever house I fancy for the night. Draco and Ron will both assume I've gone to the other house." Huh . . . Harry hadn't realised it before, but that meant that he could stay out all night if he wanted. Well, if he had an escort. On the other hand . . . "Maybe I should plan where to sleep in advance. If I got abducted again, nobody would raise the alarm until breakfast!"

"After what happened last spring, the headmaster placed additional spells on the castle. He and I will know at once if you vanish from the grounds."

Harry thought of the Portkey in the maze and grimaced. "He should have done that a lot sooner."

"Magically speaking, it wasn't possible until you had a parent on staff."

"Even though we're not blood relatives?"

"Blood ties aren't the only kind of family bond."

"Hmm, like how Draco's lineage potion meant his wand could only be used by those named Malfoy, so he had to keep that in his name. Blood didn't matter," mused Harry. "All right, but I still think Dumbledore should have put those spells on the castle as soon as I was adopted."

"He was reluctant to fully acknowledge the fact at first," said Snape dryly. "As I think you are aware. So then . . . have you any homework to do this evening?"

"All caught up," said Harry, cheerfully ignoring the way that stretched the truth. He had a Charms essay he could work on, but it wasn't due tomorrow, so it wasn't really homework for tonight, was it?

"I have some potions to complete, if you'd care to assist me."

Maybe he should have owned up to the Charms essay. But no . . . at least this way he'd get to spend some time with his dad. That was always good, even if it meant a bit of brewing.

"I'll just change into a grottier robe, then," he said, heading off to his room.

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When Harry saw Ron the next morning at breakfast, he felt more than a bit awkward. In fact, he wondered if he should have gone to the Slytherin table instead. He'd thought about that while he'd showered, and then again while he was getting dressed.

In the end he'd decided he didn't want to be such a coward. He was going to have to face Ron sooner or later. He wasn't going to give up his best friend or disobey his father.

For all that, though, Harry wanted to tell his friend the truth about Percy. Odd, since he knew that would be a bad idea all around. What good would it do? It wouldn't make Percy less dead, or help him reconcile with his family. All the truth could do was hurt Ron.

But still, Harry felt like telling him.
It made conversation difficult. Worse, it made his arms start to itch. The feeling became worse the longer Harry held off speaking, until it seemed to spread all the way to his shoulders. He ended up reaching a hand inside his robes so he could scratch.

He stopped when he noticed that Draco was watching him from across the Great Hall, his grey eyes narrowed. Harry shrugged a little and returned his attention to his sausages and eggs.

"I'm moving practise to half six, so make sure you eat early tonight," Ron was saying by then. "Nobody else had the pitch booked, so I thought we might as well use it. It's only three weeks until the big match."

Well, at least talk of Quidditch gave Harry something else to think about.

When the handful of players at their end of the table nodded, Harry began to feel self-conscious. Almost guilty again. And there was no reason; it wasn't as though any of them were looking at him accusingly. Whenever the Gryffindor vs. Slytherin match was discussed in practise or such, though, he expected them to glance his way. He wondered what they thought of him, if it ever crossed their minds to question whether he could really play his best against his other house.

Particularly when his father and brother both wanted Slytherin to win.

Then he'd tell himself that they probably weren't questioning that. He seemed to be the only one doing it. It had seemed all right at first, the idea of playing against Draco this year. It had even seemed exciting.

Now, the closer the contest loomed, the more nervous Harry felt. It was idiotic; he knew that Snape didn't expect him to throw the match. He wasn't going to dose him to lose, like Sirius had half-jokingly said.

Snape would be proud if Harry caught the Snitch.

But wouldn't he be just a little bit more proud if Draco caught it? Particularly since Draco hadn't ever won when playing against Harry?

"All right there, mate?" asked Ron.

"What? Oh . . . oh, yeah. I think I have a bad sausage or something. Tastes a bit off."

Ron leaned across the table. "The elves don't serve bad sausages. Come on, Harry. Something's really wrong. I can tell. What is it?"

To Harry's absolute horror, Ron dropped his glance to Harry's sleeves. Harry wished then that he'd never told his friends about his needle problem. It was bad enough having Draco quiz him about that at random moments.

"It's the game," he whispered. Well, it was partly that, wasn't it? He couldn't breathe a word about Percy. "I just . . . I just wish we were playing Ravenclaw first. Or Hufflepuff. Who decided it had to be Slytherin straight away?"

Ron shrugged. "The powers that be, mate." The he starting talking Quidditch again.

Normally Harry would follow every word. Now, he just wanted to put his head down on the table and make the whole world disappear.
Why was it that when you wanted time to slow down, it did the opposite?

The weeks until the first Quidditch match of the season seemed to be melting away. That probably had something to do with how busy Harry was. Between classes, homework, prefect duties, D.A. meetings, and Quidditch practise, Harry sometimes felt like it was only at night that he could take a deep breath and have some time to think.

It might have been better not to, though. Mostly, he thought about Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, or about what terrible new thing Remus might have had to do to keep his cover, or about how horrified Ron would be if he ever learned the truth about Percy's death.

The Quidditch match was definitely the least important of those three things, but for some reason, it weighed on Harry's mind the most. He supposed that he simply didn't want to disappoint his father, not even in a roundabout way.

He told himself that that was different from worrying that Snape might love him a little less if Gryffindor won the Quidditch Cup this year.

"Morning and evening practices starting tomorrow," said Ron one Saturday night as the moon was rising over the pitch. "There's only one more week to go."

How could two entire weeks have vanished like that? It seemed like yesterday that Ron had said there were three weeks before the big match. "Won't Slytherin want the pitch?"

"They have the afternoons booked solid," said Ginny with a frown. "During classes, even! If you ask me, Snape's got a nerve, excusing them from lessons. McGonagall would take points if we so much as asked. Oh! Sorry, Harry."

"That's all right," said Harry, waving a hand and trying to sound as relaxed as he hoped he looked. "No argument here. Snape does have a nerve. But if it leaves the pitch free for us when we want it, so much the better."

Thankfully, nobody followed up with a comment or a question about Harry's loyalties, and if they were divided or not.

He soon found out, though, that Harry's divided loyalties were on their minds, just not in the way he'd thought.

"Won't matter how much they skive off classes to practise," said Dean, who'd made Chaser that year. He was chortling as he said it. "Will it?"

"What?" asked Harry.

"He just means that we're just going to be ready for them," said Ron quickly, glaring at Dean.

Harry smelled a rat. "What?" he asked again, glaring at them both.

"Just something Seamus thought up," said Dean, tucking his broom under his arm as he began to walk back toward the changing rooms. "Don't worry, Harry. Those Slytherins deserve every bit of
it after the way they've cheated year after year."

"We can't cheat just because they do!"

"Now, who said anything about cheating?" asked Ron with a grin. "We just want to throw the Slytherins off their stride."

Harry was appalled. "We'll get caught! We'll have to forfeit the match and be disqualified for the Cup!"

"Not when Seamus' little brainstorm isn't even against the rules," said Dean, giving Harry a wink. "Don't worry, Harry. It's all above board. And they do deserve it."

"Deserve what?"

"Sorry, but we can't tell you," said Ron unapologetically. "You might feel that you have to tell your father. Or your brother. We didn't even want you to know we had it planned."

"And just when did you plan it?" asked Harry hotly. "Having secret practices, are you? Without me?"

"No, no," said Ginny soothingly. "You're just off in Slytherin a lot, Harry. And we understand that. Really, we do. But it's also the reason why we thought you'd be better off not knowing, all right? You are a Slytherin prefect, after all. But you're also a Gryffindor, so you should just pretend that Dean here didn't have such a big mouth."

"Hey!" yelled Dean, turning around.

Ginny stuck her tongue out at him, then smiled sweetly at Harry. "Why don't we make a deal? I won't complain about being demoted to Reserve Seeker, and you won't say another word about our little surprise for the Slytherins."

Harry's mouth fell open. "You told me you didn't mind being the reserve!"

"I don't, because you're better than I am, and I want Gryffindor to win," said Ginny bluntly. "I should still be able to get something for my sunny disposition."

She had a point there, but . . . "I can't believe you'd . . . you'd condone cheating, Ginny!"

"It's not cheating. It's just a prank."

"But--"

"You're forgetting that I’m related to the twins," she said lightly. "Come on, Harry. It's just a bit of fun, I promise. Nobody'll get hurt, and it'll all be over before the match even begins."

Harry believed her. She wouldn’t lie to him. For all that, though, he still felt uneasy. He wondered if that was because Seamus was going to play some sort of prank on the Slytherins . . . or if it was because the Gryffindor team had deliberately excluded him from the whole thing.

He probably deserved it, though. After all, he was keeping secrets from Ron. Much more important secrets, too. Harry was a little miffed to be left out of a prank, but Ron would be horrified to know that his brother, his own brother, had died because all those years ago, Harry had lived.

So what if Percy had been an arsehole the last few years? Ron had grown up with him, played with him, loved him.
And he was dead because of Harry.

After an insanely early practice the next morning, Harry headed to the Slytherin table to eat. It was a relief not to have to see Ron.

It was also a relief to have something to think about besides Percy. For most of the meal, Harry kept toying with what he might be able to say to Draco about the coming prank. He didn't want to break his promise to Ginny, but Draco was his brother. The trouble was, Harry didn't know anything specific, so how could he warn Draco?

A simple, "The Gryffindors are planning a prank, so watch out for one," would only make the Slytherin team decide to strike first. So that was out . . .

He admitted then that it was probably for the best that the team hadn't told him. He wouldn't have been able to sit back and watch Draco fall headlong into the prank, whatever it was.

All thought of mischief vanished, however, when the post came.

Draco smiled widely, as he always did when he received a letter from Rhiannon.

"My new Quidditch gloves must be on their way," he said, waving about an envelope that prominently displayed the name and logo of Quality Quidditch Supplies. Personally, Harry thought he was laying it on a bit thick. Yes, he wanted to keep Rhiannon's existence a secret, so he was hardly going to admit that the letter inside the envelope was from his Muggle girlfriend. On the other hand, he was calling too much attention to the letter, full stop.

And did he actually have new gloves coming, to back up the lie?

Huh . . . that probably didn't matter. Ever since Draco had got Sirius Black's legacy, he'd been owl-ordering loads of things for himself. He probably had a dozen pairs of Quidditch gloves by now, more than any casual observer could keep track of.

Harry reached for the platter of bacon and served himself another couple of rashers. It wasn't until he was spreading marmalade across his toast that he realised that something was wrong. Beside him, Draco had gone utterly still. When Harry glanced his way, it was to see that his brother's face was far more pale than usual, his fingers white where they gripped the yellowish parchment.

"Something wrong?" asked Harry, pitching his voice low.

Draco abruptly jerked himself out of his daze. "What, wrong?" he asked, his voice pitched unnaturally high as he thrust the letter back inside its envelope. "What could be wrong? Will you excuse me, Harry? I've forgotten something that I need for class."

Harry reached under the table and grabbed one of Draco's wrists, squeezing tightly in an effort to help him calm down. "It's Sunday. No classes."

"Well, I've forgotten something I need, all the same," snapped Draco, yanking his hand from
Harry's grasp. "I'll see you later."

He shoved Rhiannon's letter into a pocket as he stood up and stalked away.

Harry was torn between giving him the privacy he obviously needed, and going after him to see how he could help. By the time he'd decided, Draco was out the doors of the Great Hall.

Snape had left the Head Table some time earlier, which only left Ron, Hermione, and Ginny to go with Harry so he wouldn't walk alone.

"Can you walk me down to Slytherin?" he asked the minute he'd reached the Gryffindor table. For once, he didn't even care how that question made him sound.

"Sure, mate," said Ron. "Just as soon as I recover from this morning's practise. You know, if I wasn't captain I'd be complaining up one side and down the other. But as it is . . . I think I'll just have another couple of eggs. Then I'll walk with you, but after that? I need a nap."

"Now," said Harry. "I have to go now."

"I'll walk you down," said Hermione quickly, obviously reading from his tone that he was worried about something.

Harry glanced up and down the table for Ginny, but she'd already finished her breakfast. Well, Hermione alone was escort enough.

"I thought you were spending the day with us," said Hermione as they started off. There wasn't any accusation in her voice, though. "So we can revise for Tuesday's Transfiguration test?"

"Uh, I might not be able to," hedged Harry. How could he know? He had to find out what was wrong with Draco. "It might have to wait until tomorrow."

"Oh, Harry. You shouldn't wait until the day before a test to study. How many times have I told you that short-term memory can be very unreliable?"

"Too many," said Harry, lengthening his stride.

"But you want to be an Auror. You actually have to understand all this material, and not just for the N.E.W.T.s--"

"I know, Hermione."

"I'm sorry," she said then, hurrying to catch up. "What's the matter? I should have asked that first of all."

"I don't know." Harry was careful to keep his tone and words vague enough that passers-by in the corridor wouldn't know what he really meant. "But Draco got a letter. One of those letters, and whatever it said . . . I don't know. He didn't look happy."

"Oh, dear. I hope she's not sick or hurt."

"Narcissa Malfoy's too tough for that to happen," said Harry, giving Hermione a look. She got the point and said nothing else specific. In fact, she started revising Transfiguration with him as they walked along.

When they'd reached the entrance to Slytherin, Harry waved her off. "I was told in no uncertain terms not to let anybody overhear the password."
"As if I'd want to sneak in," she said, tossing her head. "I'm not a second-year any longer, you know."

"I'll see you later," said Harry, waiting until she was a few feet away before he whispered the password. At least it wasn't something nasty like "pureblood" any longer, but since Draco had changed it the week before to "Quidditch Cup," that was small consolation.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," said Greg dourly as Harry walked through the common room and headed for the stairs. "Draco just kicked us out."

"His exact words were 'out, out, out!'" drawled Zabini, idly flicking through a wizarding fashion magazine.

"He kicked you out too?"

"No, but he was yelling," said Zabini with a small smile. "Most unMalfoyesque, wouldn't you agree? But then, he's a Snape these days. Hmm. A Snape who's snapped."

Harry's hand clenched at the way Zabini was obviously enjoying Draco's bad mood.

"Perhaps if you go in he'll yell at you as well," the other boy said, grinning in a way that could only be described as vicious. "Wouldn't that be a sight to see? Or hear, rather. Such loyal, loving brothers finally at odds. Perhaps I'll sell tickets."

Harry ignored him, but once he was outside the seventh years' dormitory, he cast a wandless privacy charm, one strong enough to overcome any eavesdropping spells that Zabini might have strewn about. Then he tried to go in, but the door was warded shut. Harry could have opened it with a wanded spell, but he was concerned he might overdo it and blow the door off its hinges. Not good when the true strength of his powers was supposed to remain a secret.

He settled for knocking loudly, and then swore as he realised that his spell from before was isolating the dormitory from the rest of Slytherin. Draco couldn't hear him.

Sighing, Harry cancelled his spell and knocked again.

"Busy!" shouted Draco. "Come back later!"

"Draco, it's Harry--"

"I don't care if it's Merlin himself. I'm busy, come back later!"

"It's my room too," shouted Harry back. "Let me in!"

"Fuck off!"

Harry heard Zabini start to chortle. Well, at least it gave him an idea. He leaned closer to the door. "Zabini's enjoying your mood and the more you yell the more he enjoys it," said Harry softly against the edge, where wood didn't quite meet stone.
A minute later, the door was yanked open. Draco stared at Harry for half a second, his grey eyes looking almost wild. Then he whirled around and stomped back to the small desk next to his bed.

Harry gently closed the door, warding it thoroughly.

"Leave me alone. I'm trying to concentrate," barked Draco the moment Harry finished.

"Concentrate on what?"

"I'm writing a letter. I'm sure you can guess to whom."

"Is she all right?"

"Like you care," spat Draco, turning around in his chair. "You're probably happy to be proven right!"

Proven right? Harry's eyebrows drew together. "I don't understand."

"Well, since she's not your girlfriend I suppose you don't have to," said Draco in a strained voice. "Harry . . . please just sit on your bed and let me think. I have to get this right."

Harry still didn't understand, but he did as Draco had asked.

For a long time after that, there was no sound in the room except the scratching of a quill and the occasional noise of parchment being crumpled into a ball. Harry closed his eyes and waited, trying not to count the number of drafts Draco was going through. After a while he was bored to tears, so he summoned his Transfigurations book and tried to revise for Tuesday's test. Maybe he could surprise Hermione and show up to their study session with the material well in hand, for once.

"There," said Draco at last. "There, there, there."

"Done?"

"It's probably not perfect but . . ." Draco sighed. "I don't know what else to say to her."

Harry laid his book aside and sat up. "About?"

Draco's eyes were ringed with red, even though Harry hadn't heard any sound of crying. "Is Rhiannon sick? Hermione thought that might be what had you so upset--"

"You told Granger?"

"Well, somebody had to walk me down here! I'm not supposed to go places alone!"

"You could have gone to Gryffindor where you belong!"

Harry flinched, his voice low when he answered. "You don't mean that."

"You're right; I don't." Draco sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just . . ."

"What?" Harry gulped, his mind going a full year to when he'd seen Aunt Petunia in hospital, lying there so frail. Lying there looking like death. "Is it bad? Is it leukaemia?"

"She's not sick." Draco's throat contracted. "I almost wish she were, and yes, I know that makes me a horribly selfish person. But I am a horribly selfish person, Harry. I had you fooled, didn't I? I think I had myself fooled."
"You didn't have me fooled," said Harry gently. "I know you aren't perfect. But you are a lot less imperfect than you used to be, Draco."

"No, I'm not, because I do wish . . . At least then I wouldn't have to think of her with . . ." His voice sounded like it wanted to break, but Draco wouldn't let it. "With someone else."

Oh. Oh.

Harry didn't know what to say. "She . . . she found someone else?"

Draco's upper lip curled. "Yes. At Uni. He's older than she is, don't you know. And right there with her. And long-distance relationships don't work, she says! Just like you said!"

His voice had grown shrill by the end.

"I never said that."

"You said I was on the rebound from Pansy!"

"Well, I thought you were," murmured Harry. "But that doesn't mean I expected her to be the one to . . . uh . . ."

"Spit on my love? Stomp on my heart? Dump me?"

"I'm sure she doesn't mean it that way," said Harry, feeling helpless. "She's just . . . well, people can't always help falling in or out of love, Draco. But I really didn't see this coming. I mean, she was so fascinated by magic that I was sure--"

"That she loved me for my magic!"

Harry winced.

"Well, maybe she did," said Draco fiercely. "Because he's a wizard too, she says. And the worst part is, she wouldn't have realised if she hadn't met me first! She said so! She knew the right questions to ask when something struck her as odd!"

Harry nodded and tried to look supportive. It wasn't hard; he was supportive. He just didn't know how to help Draco through this. "So you wrote her a reply?"

"Yes." Draco shifted on his feet as if deciding something, then suddenly flicked his wand to summon a length of parchment. He thrust it into Harry's hands. "Read."

Harry almost recoiled. "I don't want to read it!"

"But I need you to." Draco bit his lip, a gesture so unlike him that Harry's heart ached. And that was before he went on. "I need an outside opinion. I have to know if . . . if I sound too pitiful. Girls don't like that. I mean, witches certainly don't. Wouldn't Muggle girls be the same?"

Harry reluctantly took the parchment and read it through. His first reaction was that "pitiful" didn't even begin to cover it. Draco sounded positively needy. And wretched. If he sent this letter, he'd feel humiliated every time he remembered it.

"Well?"

"It won't do," said Harry, trying to be diplomatic. "This reads like you can't live without her."
"Because I fucking well can't, you imbecile!"

Harry knew it wouldn't do any good to say that yes, he could. Draco wasn't going to believe that, not now. "Maybe so, but it's going to sound pitiful, and you said you wanted to avoid that. I think . . . I think what you have to do is preserve your pride. Tell her that you understand and that you wish her well."

"That won't get her back!"

"If she's enough in love with someone else to write you about it, I don't think you can get her back."

"Has anyone ever mentioned what an unmitigated bastard you can be, Potter?"

"I'd be an arsehole if I let you send that letter out as it stands." When Draco just stared, Harry tried his best to let his Slytherin side come through. "Look, begging's not going to get you anywhere. You're right. Girls don't like that. If you really want her back, your best strategy is to pretend that you don't care."

"Girls are fucking insane," said Draco in a venomous tone. "Every last one of them. Magical or Muggle, it's all the same. They live to see us bleed."

"So don't let her," said Harry. The look in Draco's eyes was starting to scare him a little. It had shifted from hysterical to something closer to raw fury. "Laugh it all off. Tell her that yeah, the summer was fun but you can see now that that's all it was. Just a summer romance."


And Draco had wanted to marry her, so that word must have hurt him deeply.

"Well, I can tell you one thing," said Draco as he strode back to his desk, and bending over it, started to write on a fresh sheet of parchment. "If pretending I don't care doesn't get her back, then I'm going to look up the nastiest, most disgusting, disfiguring hexes wizards have ever invented, and--"

"No!" cried Harry, jumping off his bed and rushing forward to grab Draco's shoulders. He gave him a hard shake. "No, no, no! Damn it, this is what I was afraid of all along, that you'd lose your temper and hurt her!"

"Hurt her!" Draco violently wrenched his shoulders to shake off Harry's grip and then just as violently, struck him full across the face. "Hurt her!"

Harry staggered back and somehow managed not to give as good as he'd got. "Yeah," he said, one hand raised to his blazing cheek. "Hurt her."

"Fuck you! She could cut my heart from my body and I'd never, ever hurt her! I love her!"

"You just said you were going to start looking up spells--"

"For him."

"Oh." Harry flushed, wishing he hadn't jumped to conclusions. "Oh. Well, how was I to know? You do have that impulse control problem."
Draco glared, his eyes glacial. "Not like I used to."

"Really." Harry moved his hand away from his cheek and let Draco see what he'd done.

"When you're being particularly stupid I regress," said Draco tightly. "Oh, hell. I didn't mean to hit you. Here, let me set it right."

Draco’s idea of setting it right was to use some fancy transfigurations to conceal the bruise. It still hurt like hell. When Harry said so, Draco chilled a book to serve as an ice pack.

"At least you didn't punch my eye," murmured Harry. "I guess you are getting better."

" Shut up."

Harry didn't. "What are you going to do about Rhiannon? You can't hex her new boyfriend, Draco. In the first place, Severus will kill you if you sneak down to London to do it, and in the second, crap like that will destroy your chance of being accepted into Auror training. You're an adult now, don't forget."

"Being an adult sucks raw eggs."

"What are you going to do?"

"Finish my letter. Oh, but look. Grabbing me like you did, you've spilt ink all over it. Careless of you--"

"Yeah, well you've more than got even." Harry moved the chilled book around on his cheek a bit to find a more comfortable position. There wasn't one. "Well?"

Draco ignored him and kept writing, but finally turned and held a parchment up in front of Harry's eyes, the ink on it still wet and glistening. "What about this?"

_Dear Rhiannon,

Upon receipt of your letter of 21 October I find we are in one accord regarding our short-lived liaison. It was indeed, nothing but a brief affaire de coeur meant to last no longer than a single summer. The blossom was fragrant whilst it bloomed, but we must not mourn that it has now withered.

I wish you every happiness as I sign myself,

Draco Alain Gervais Malfy Snape_

"Now you sound like you have a stick up your arse," said Harry. He wasn't in the mood any longer to be diplomatic. "It's 1997, not 1897. And don't call her your dearest."

"What would you write, then?"

Harry didn't think that Draco really wanted to know, but when Harry started talking, he touched quill to parchment and transcribed what Harry said.

"Dear Rhiannon, Thanks for writing. I know what you mean about long-distance relationships. Now that you've found someone else, I won't feel guilty about wanting to ask a certain someone to the Halloween Ball. We had a great summer and I'm happy I got to know you. Yours truly, Draco Snape."
Draco kept writing for a few moments after Harry had finished speaking, and then said, "My version. Dear Rhiannon, I appreciate your taking the time to write to me. It's true that long-distance relationships can be fraught with difficulty. I've felt the strain myself as I've pondered whether I should ask a certain young lady to accompany me to our annual celebration of All Hallows Eve. I'll always remember our summer together with fondness. I wish you all the best, Draco Snape."

Harry cocked his head to one side as he listened. "Just say that you wish her well."

"No. This is already a forty-seventh draft."

"All right then. I'll do."

Draco's voice went dark. "It had better do more than that. The point is to get her back."

"Well, maybe it will," said Harry, though personally, he doubted it. "Now what you need is a distraction. How about some one-on-one out on the pitch?"

"The pitch!" exclaimed Draco, checking his watch. "I should be out there already! Why didn't any of my team mates come and get me?"

"They probably did and we couldn't hear them." Harry studied his brother carefully. "Are you sure you're all right to fly? It's not a good idea to mount a broom when you're really upset about something--"

"You're the one who suggested Quidditch."

"Well, I'd be sure to look out for you. Slytherin's probably running some cut-throat practises these days, getting ready to face us."

"And you call me conceited." Draco took a deep breath and wiped at his eyes. "Yes, I'm all right to fly. It might be the only thing that can get my mind off... her. Oh, and for the record, Harry? We're more than ready to face you. You're not going to know what's hit you."

The impulse to warn him about a prank washed over Harry again, but without details, he was still stuck in the same quandary.

"Just don't let a Bludger hit you," he said. "And make up a good story to tell Zabini. He's probably down there right now, slobbering over the idea that you're miserable."

"Blaise isn't the type to slobber. He's more likely to polish his broomstick to thoughts of my misery, the sadistic fucker."

"Polish his . . ."

"Wank, Harry."

"Oh."

"If I walk you to Gryffindor will you very nicely ask Hermione to post this as soon as possible? I don't mean the next time she happens to write to her parents. I mean today."

"I'll ask. But, uh . . . what should I tell her? She knows something is wrong."

"She knows that you thought something was wrong. Tell her that you misunderstood."

"She won't believe me."
"Make her."

"You still don't understand how clever she is, do you?"

"Just make her," said Draco, sealing the envelope and shoving it between the pages of Harry's Transfiguration book. "Take this. You need to study for the test."

"I'm not that bad at Transfiguration--"

"Yes, you are." "Git."

"Wanker. Literally. You even told Dad so!" Draco howled with laughter.

It sounded a little forced to Harry, but that was all right. At least Draco was trying to lift himself out of his gloom. That was better than wallowing in it.

The laughter was for something else, though, Harry soon realised. Draco opened the door in the middle of it, releasing the wards Harry had cast.

Draco was laughing so Zabini wouldn't know that he was cut up inside.

---------------------------------------------------

"It sounds urgent," said Hermione, her fingers brushing Harry's as she took the letter from him. The common room had been too noisy for serious studying, so Hermione and Harry had headed off to an empty classroom on the third floor. Ron was supposed to join them later, but first he'd wanted to have a go at watching the Slytherins practise. He'd invited Harry along, but Harry didn't have any great urge to spy on his brother, even if it would help Gryffindor in the upcoming match.

He supposed that meant that his loyalties were divided.

"It is a little urgent, I guess," said Harry. He'd already decided not to lie to Hermione, and he'd warded the room so they could speak freely. At times, his strong magic really came in handy.

"What's the matter?"

"Dear John letter, basically."

"Oh, no. That's dreadful."

Harry cleared his throat. "Draco wanted me to tell you that he wasn't upset at all, that I'd misunderstood. He didn't explain how I was supposed to get you to owl that off immediately in that case. But . . . I suppose he's not thinking very clearly right now. Don't let on, all right? I think he feels embarrassed that you might find out Rhiannon dumped him."

Hermione nodded and pulled out a sheet of parchment. She began to compose a cover letter to her parents as she spoke. "Did she give any reasons?"

"It just sounded like . . . average kinds of things. Or like she was never in love in the first place. Not the way he was." Harry paused. "Or she was tired of waiting for him. She wanted him to come
down to London on a weekend, and Snape said he couldn't."

"Of course he couldn't. I thought you said she knew about the war!"

"She didn't seem to get it." Harry sighed. "The last I heard, she was bugging him to visit her over the Christmas holiday, and Snape said 'no' to that too."

"Well, think of it from her point of view," said Hermione calmly as she sealed Rhiannon's letter inside her own. "She probably felt like that would be her only chance to see him all year, and if she doesn't really understand about the war, it would seem to her that Draco isn't very keen to visit her."

"That just means she never really loved him," said Harry stubbornly. "If I loved a girl, I'd never give up on her."

"Yes, I remember Cho," said Hermione dryly.

"All right, I guess I did give up on her when she sided with Marietta. But that's just my point. I turned out not to love Cho so much, after all." The conversation reminded Harry of another one. "Er . . . you've never had any suspicion that I was gay, have you?"

Hermione burst out laughing. "You? No. Why do you ask?"

"Because Severus is an idiot."

"You don't mean . . ."

"I do mean."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione covered her mouth, but it didn't help; she kept on laughing. "What a muddle. You've sorted it out now, I take it?"

"Yeah, but I think he won't be really convinced until I'm married with three kids," said Harry sourly. "I almost wish I could start dating so he'd believe me right now. But I might as well paint a big target on her forehead and label it 'Apply Cruciatux here.'"

Hermione took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Come to the Owlery with me."

That turned out to be a good idea; Hedwig was there. Harry held out an arm and made a soft cooing sound to summon her, then lightly scratched behind her ears when she used him as a perch.

Harry didn't think he earned an Outstanding on this Transfigurations test, but he'd probably managed an Acceptable. He tried not to be too annoyed over the way it seemed like only the most useless information had been included on the test. As an Auror, he might actually need to know how to transform shoes into ice-skates; it could come in handy if he had to cross a frozen lake and there were anti-Apparition wards around it. But was that on the test? Oh, no. McGonagall had asked them to explain in detail why hot water could be transfigured into ice with far less magical effort than cold water. Who cared why that was true? As an Auror, all he had to know was that it
was. Besides, weren't weather charms really more of a Charms topic?

"I'm glad I memorised the sixteen phases of the Animagus transformation," said Hermione in a jolly tone as she left class arm in arm with Ron.

"Yeah, knowing the names of the phases is really important for people who haven't even made a dent in actually becoming Animagi," complained Harry.

"Sour grapes, Potter?" drawled Zabini, who was approaching from the opposite direction. "Well, what can one expect from someone with such weak magic? I, on the other hand, have made it to the fifth stage."

"I wouldn't brag about being a worm," said Ron. "But keep working on it, Zabini. When you have the transformation mastered, I'll be very happy to squash you flat."

Zabini had his wand out in a flash.

"No magic in the corridors," said Harry. "Put that away, Zabini, or it'll be five points from Slytherin."

Zabini scowled and pocketed his wand again.

Sometimes, Harry thought, it was quite enjoyable to be a prefect.

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Draco was morose and withdrawn all week long. When a teacher asked him a question, he answered in monosyllables. Not even Morrighan's usual goading seemed to affect him. He just stared at her with bleak eyes and took her insults, though whenever Zabini was watching him he would act like nothing was wrong, making jokes and laughing at them.

All told, he reminded Harry of the day Marsha had explained the term "manic depressive."

The only time he truly perked up was when the owls came flying into the Great Hall. Draco would track them with his gaze, clearly hopeful. When day after day passed with no sign of any post for him, he'd sink even deeper into gloom.

Finally, on Friday, an owl dropped a large maroon envelope in front of him, the words Fiery Gems glittering across the seal. Draco reached for it with shaking hands.

"Not here," said Harry under his breath. "Don't you want some privacy?"

"But it will be all right. It has to be all right," said Draco in a strained voice.

Zabini was far down the table, but several sixth-year girls were staring at Draco curiously.

"I'm sure they were able to repair the locket you sent them," said Harry. "Fiery Gems has a very good reputation for that sort of thing. Done with breakfast, are you?" He stood up, relieved when Draco did the same.
They found a quiet room halfway to the Defence classroom. Harry locked and warded the door while Draco collapsed into a chair and stared at the unopened envelope in his hand.

"Maybe you should wait until after classes are over for the day," said Harry carefully.

"I can't. Can't, can't, can't." Draco ripped the envelope nearly in half and yanked out the parchment inside.

Harry had known it wouldn't say what Draco wanted. Draco, however, had still held out some hope. The letter obviously killed it. His face went pasty, his breathing shallow as he kept reading. Finally, he flung the letter away from him and leaned heavily on the table in front of him. "I feel sick," he moaned.

"Do you want a bucket?"

"I . . . I don't know." Draco raised his head just enough to look at Harry with bleary eyes. "I want my mum. She always knew what to do when my tummy was sore. She'd cast a spell and pat my forehead with a cool, damp washcloth . . ."

"I'm sorry she's not here," said Harry quietly.

Well, at least the claim seemed to perk Draco up a bit. "No, you aren't. If she were here you'd be accusing her of something. I know you would."

"Well, I'm sorry that you miss her, anyway. Er . . . do you want me to find Dad, then?"

"I want to be alone."

Harry shook his head. "It's almost time for class. Come on. At least being in a lesson might take your mind off--"

"Off the fact that he looks like Fox Mulder?" asked Draco, raising his voice. "That's what she wrote this time! He looks like Fox Mulder and he plays the piano, and he can charm it to sound like a harp, which she thinks is just 'enchanting!' And he's a Muggleborn which is probably a better match for her!"

Harry realised he was biting his lip when he tried to speak. "She told you all about him? Oh, God. I'm sorry, Draco."

"You should be. It's your fault! That bloody letter you made me write! She thinks I'm not bothered that she's found someone else! She thinks we're mates now and she can chat to me about her . . ."

Draco dropped his head back down to the table. "Go away, Harry. Just go away."

"I can't," said Harry baldly. "Not unless you want me to walk alone to Defence."

"Bugger it." Draco's eyes were bleak when he lifted his head. "Fine. I'll go with you, but I'm not going in. I can't take it today. I'm going back to bed."

"Really, you'll feel better in class--"

"Not her class."

Harry couldn't argue with that.
"Where's Draco?" asked Hermione when Harry came in alone.

"Oh . . . uh, not feeling very well." Harry lowered his voice. "I don't suppose you know who Fox Mulder is."

"A character on that American programme I told you about. The X-Files."

A vague memory swam through Harry's mind. Something about little green men invading planet earth, and a crazy police officer or something. Not that it mattered. Rhiannon had been mad about the show; that was the point.

"Why?" Hermione tilted her head to one side.

"Er . . . just wondering."

"No, you weren't."

"Well, I'm not going to explain why. It's somebody else's business."

"Ah."

That was all she needed to figure the whole thing out. Hermione nodded briskly. "Well, tell him I hope he starts to feel better soon."

"I will not," said Harry, crossing his arms. "He'd be horrified that I talked to you about this. Forget I asked about the fox thing."

"Do tell," said Zabini smoothly from behind Harry's left shoulder. Harry started; he hadn't noticed Zabini coming in. "You're trying to become a fox Animagus, Potter? That animal's a bit cagey for the likes of you, surely?"

"Shut it, worm," said Ron as he turned away from Dean.

Harry wondered if they'd been discussing the prank. The one Harry wasn't allowed to know about.

"Your attention, please," said Morrighan as she closed her office door behind her and headed down the short staircase to the classroom. This morning she had a pair of blue budgies perched on one shoulder. One looked to be asleep; the other was grooming itself.

Harry didn't know what she was going to say exactly, but he knew who it would be about.

"Miss Bulstrode. Where is Mr Snape?"
Millicent slowly shifted on her feet. That name called only one person to mind, it seemed. "Uh . . .
teaching Potions, I suppose?"

"Draco Snape."

Millicent looked around, her meaty shoulders rotating as she searched the room. "I've no idea,
ma'am. He came down to breakfast. Or I think he did . . ."

"He's probably skiving off class," Zabini said, an angelic smile plastered across his face. "Draco
does quite a bit of that. Didn't the headmaster mention it?"

Harry promised himself that he'd get Zabini for that. "He does not skive off class, and you know it,
Zabini!"

Morrighan pivoted to face Harry. "Then where is he? Surely his brother would know."

Harry sourly wondered why she hadn't asked him first, if she thought that. "He wasn't feeling well.
He went up to our room to rest."

"If he's not in the infirmary, I expect him in class. There's no in-between. Mr Potter, you're to go
and fetch him. Immediately."

_Uh-oh._ Harry felt his face flaming. How could she!

"Well?"

Harry gulped. No hope for it, though. "I need Hermione to come with me," he blurted. It was either
Hermione or Ron, and of the two, Harry was positive Ron would be the worse choice. If someone
besides himself had to see Draco curled up in bed, depressed and defeated . . .

Yeah, definitely not Ron.

"Does she have special healing powers that I should know about?" asked Morrighan in a mocking
tone.

Harry almost told the teacher that she should give it up as a bad job. Her sarcasm was nothing
compared to the comments Severus could dish out.

"No, but I'm not supposed to walk places alone," he retorted, trying for an aura of calm and dignity.
The only thing worse than saying it out loud was letting people know how humiliated he felt. "I
was kidnapped last year."

Morrighan blinked, and then her face seemed to go pale, no matter that her skin was lightly tanned.
She spoke in a subdued voice. "Very well. You and Miss Granger will go together."

Zabini snorted. "Not to Slytherin, she won't. If Potter needs a child-minder so badly, I'll go with
him."

Harry gritted his teeth. "The point is that I be accompanied by somebody my dad actually trusts.
Come on, Hermione."

He led the way out of the room, fuming. It was small consolation when he heard Morrighan call
out, "Back to your place, Zabini!"

Hermione trailed after him, saying nothing at all until they were at the entrance to Slytherin. "I'll
just move off a tad, then--"
"Oh, who the fuck cares? Quidditch Cup," said Harry, almost barking the last two words.

"Draco's language is rubbing off on you," she murmured as they went in. Her eyes wide, she began taking in everything in sight, from the enormous fireplace that looked carved out of one gigantic bone, to the high-backed chairs that would conceal their occupants from behind. "This is twice as large as our common room!"

"Three times, at least." Harry shrugged. "Life isn't fair."

"No." Hermione lowered her voice. "Poor Draco."

Harry nodded. "Wait here for me. I don't think he'd want you to see him . . . yeah."

Hermione nodded and moved off to examine a few books that had been left lying about.

----------------------------------------------

Harry had been worried that he'd have to break the door down using dark powers and then cover up the damage with a wanded Reparo, but not one strong enough to change the door all the way back into a tree . . .

As it turned out, though, the door wasn't even locked.

That, more than anything else, told Harry how devastated Draco must be feeling. He wouldn't want Zabini or Crabbe or Goyle walking in on him when he was so vulnerable. Hell, it was a sure bet he wouldn't even want to see Harry. Yet he'd forgotten to so much as lock the door.

Harry's second surprise was that Draco hadn't gone to bed as he'd said.

No, things were worse than that. Much worse.

Draco was sitting cross-legged on the floor, rocking back and forth as he clutched a letter to his chest. More letters were scattered around him on the floor. Dozens of them, each one bearing the same handwriting.

Draco’s handwriting -- Harry would recognise that perfect script anywhere. Sighing, he sank to the floor himself.

The other boy didn’t look up. "Is it lunch already? You go ahead . . . I'm not hungry--"

"It's not even half nine," said Harry gently. "Draco . . . I'm sorry about Rhiannon, but sitting here reading copies of every letter you’ve ever sent her isn’t going to help anything--"

"I have to discover where I went wrong," said Draco, his gaze continuing to study the letter in his hands, his eyes scanning left to right, left to right . . ."So that I can fix it. Go away, Harry."

"You didn't go wrong. She just wasn't as serious as you thought." Harry wished now that he hadn't given Draco false hope the last time they'd discussed Rhiannon. He was determined not to make that mistake again. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing to be done."
"You're not sorry." Draco's hands tightened on the parchment he held. "You're happy. You never liked her and you never wanted me to be with her."

"I liked her fine."

Draco looked up then, his eyes rimmed with red like he'd been holding back tears. "Be honest. You could barely stand the thought of me with her!"

Harry shook his head. "I liked her fine."

Draco looked up then, his eyes rimmed with red like he'd been holding back tears. "Not because I didn't like her. I thought . . . I don't know. A lot of things, like it was too soon after Pansy. And I suppose the truth is that I was jealous that you felt free to have a girlfriend when I didn't dare let myself even think about . . ."

"I know, I know. You thought she was all wrong for me, you thought that --"

"No," interrupted Harry. "I was wrong about you, Draco. That was the main thing."

"You weren't," said Draco in a dull voice as he slumped closer to the floor.

"Yes, I was." Harry braced himself in case Draco hit him again, though it didn't seem likely. Draco was too morose for that. "I thought you'd hate her when she turned out to be a Muggle."

"I could never hate Rhiannon," said Draco, his voice catching again. "Not even now. But you're wrong about me, all the same. I'm a horrible person. All I want is her, and I don't really care that she wants someone else. I think I'd slip her a love potion if I could get away with it, but Severus would probably smell it on her breath . . ."

"That only means that you're hurt. You're not a bad person." Harry gave a tremulous smile. "In fact, you're a better person than I realised. You've come a long, long way from the boy who used to call Hermione those nasty names."

"No, I haven't--"

"Yes, you have," said Harry firmly. "Just this week you told me that magical or Muggle, girls were all the same."

Draco's forehead furrowed. "I did?"

"You said all they want is to see us bleed."

"Oh, that. A rather misogynistic remark. I wouldn't expect you to approve."

"Well, you were upset, like I said. But the sentiment behind the words . . . it's amazing, Draco. It's like the part of you that's my brother is a lot bigger now. I mean, bigger than the part of you that was raised as Lucius' son."

"You're such an optimistic fool. I only sided with you in the first place to save my own skin! I told you that!"

"I know." Harry smiled again. "But it's more than that now. It's been more than that for a long time. You told me that, too."

Draco turned his face away. "Why are you here, anyway? I want to be alone."

So he could wallow, thought Harry. Maybe it was just as well that Morrighan had insisted he come to class. "Sorry," he said again, even though this time he wasn't. "I was sent to fetch you. The professor noticed you were missing."
"Tell her I'm staying here."

"She's already gunning for you," said Harry bluntly. "Don't make things worse."

Draco sighed. "Morrighan's a troll."

"I'll just help you clear these away--"

"Don't touch them!" exclaimed Draco, gathering up the letters himself. "They're charmed to turn blank forever if anybody but me lays a finger on them."

"Good precaution. But . . . uh, why did you make copies in the first place?"

Draco carefully tucked the letters into a pouch as he answered. "I was taught growing up that one should keep proper records of all correspondence. Also . . ." He quickly warded the pouch and stowed it in his trunk. "I wanted to make sure I didn't relate the same anecdote twice, that sort of thing."

Harry thought that sounded obsessive, but he decided not to say anything.

Draco rose to his feet and extended a hand to help Harry up from the floor. "Well . . . I can't say that I'm looking forward to Defence with Malevolent Morrighan, but I suppose she'll already be wondering what's taking us so long."

"Uh . . . speaking of us, you might want to splash some water on your face. Hermione's in the common room." When Draco stared, Harry started feeling defensive. Well, at least he hadn't admitted that he'd let her hear the stupid password. "I couldn't walk here by myself, could I?"

"You could have left her cooling her heels in the corridor!"

Harry thought he'd be better off ignoring the whole topic. "Just splash some water on your face--"

"Water, honestly." Draco pointed his wand at himself and said a couple of incantations that removed the puffy rings around his eyes. "There."

He was in full-Draco form when he entered the common room. Chin high, hands shoved into the pockets of his robes, he looked down his nose at Hermione, who to no-one's surprise had her nose buried in a book. "Thank you for accompanying Harry. It can't have been easy for you, entering a place like this."

Hermione laid the book aside and rose gracefully to her feet. "Well, there aren't exactly slogans on the walls," she said mildly. "It's just a room, Draco. I'm hardly going to blame the floor for the fact that a lot of the people who walk it despise Muggleborns."

Draco curled a lip. "I was referring to the appointments, actually. I imagine that your tower looks rather tawdry in comparison. And no wonder, with a head like McGonagall. She doesn't seem to care how disadvantaged your lot is."

Harry wasn't sure why Draco was trying to get a rise out of Hermione, but he was proud of Hermione for refusing to let him.

"You're upset," she said, nothing but compassion in her tone. "I'm very sorry, Draco. I thought that the two of you made a lovely couple."

Draco whirled to face Harry. "You told her! You told her!"
"She knew who was sending you letters, and she saw the look on your face. I told you I wasn't going to be able to mislead Hermione."

Draco whirled again, this time darting forward to grab both of Hermione's hands in his own. "Tell me how to get her back! Your advice worked wonders last time--"

Oh, God. Hermione didn't want to hurt Draco; it was written all over her face. But she had too much good sense to offer false hope the way Harry had. Thankfully, she was also clever enough not to let slip any of the details Harry had mentioned. "Well . . . the reasons she gave for writing to you . . . what were they?"

Draco dropped her hands and shoved his own back into his pockets. "She talked about Hogwarts being too far from London-- not that it is, with Apparition, but fucking Severus won't let me go anywhere! And she said we didn't have that much in common, since we came from such different worlds, and she'd met this new bloke who 'fit' her better."

"Oh. Muggle, is he?"

"Ha. Muggleborn. She gets the both of best worlds that way!"

"Well, those reasons don't sound like they have much to do with you personally, Draco. And if you have to change yourself to suit her, you probably aren't a very good fit for her."

"Would you like a reason that has to do with me personally?" Draco made a noise that was very like a snarl. "I don't look enough like this Fox Mulder, whoever that is--"

Hermione shot Harry a quick, understanding glance. "You don't want to look like him. He's quite a bit older. Which is perhaps the point. She's moved on into the adult world, while you're still finishing your schooling."

"He's soooo handsome, though. She said so!"

"Oh, Draco," said Hermione, very softly. "You can't believe that to be the problem. You're quite remarkably handsome, yourself."

"One of my eyebrows is higher than the other--"

"Just enough to give you a dashing air. Trust me, Draco. No girl who breaks up with you will ever do it because of your looks."

Draco looked a little mollified, even as he took his hands out of his pockets long enough to smooth his hair back. "All right, then. But I thought, you know, if I could manage a trip to London, just a very quick one--"

"You know you can't do that. It won't help anything even if you aren't found out. And if you are, you'll just have to hope that it's your father who finds you first, and not Voldemort."

The part about probable death-and-torture sailed right past Draco. "It won't help anything?" he asked, sounding piteous.

Hermione accompanied her answer with a firm nod. "It absolutely won't. She's moved on, and the very best you can do is accept that gracefully."

"But--"
"Morrighan's going to pitch one hell of a fit if we miss much more of her class," said Harry.

"More of a fit than she usually throws around me?" Draco looked like he wanted to snarl again, but instead he put on what was obviously his "public" face. "We may as well get it over with, I suppose."

"It's just for one year," said Hermione bracingly. "And you've held up very well so far."

"She's going to push me until I can't take it," Draco muttered in a dark tone, his public face slipping.

Unfortunately, those words proved to be prophetic.

---------------------------------------------------

"Mr Snape," said Morrighan as soon as he'd entered. "You're late. Twenty points from Slytherin."

"Yes, Professor," said Draco, sighing as he went to stand in his usual place by the wall. The desks had been shoved to one side, leaving plenty of room for duels and spell practice.

"I expect to hear a coherent explanation for your inexcusable tardiness, Mr Snape!"

Draco firmed his lips. "I had a migraine."

"You should have gone to the hospital wing for a potion if that were true. Not that I'm surprised you would lie, a boy like you. Well? Why were you so late? Tell the truth this time!"

Draco's features went taut as he spoke from between his teeth. "I had a migraine."

Morrighan's smile was razor sharp. "I'm afraid I don't believe you."

"I'm afraid I don't bloody care," shouted Draco.

Harry winced. Normally Draco would have let her goading comments slide off him, but just now, his emotions were too raw, too flayed. He was playing right into Morrighan's hands.

She didn't waste any time in gloating over that fact, either. "Twenty more points from Slytherin," she said with soft enjoyment. "Twenty points and a detention, Mr Snape. Tomorrow, shall we say? Report here at eight o'clock sharp and be prepared to spend the entire day cleaning my classroom floor. Without magic."

Harry clenched his fists, but tried to make his voice sound calm. Morrighan liked him, so maybe he had a chance. Of course, she wouldn't like him after this; she wouldn't appreciate anybody standing up for Draco. Not that that mattered.

"Tomorrow's the first Quidditch match of the season, Professor. Slytherin's playing, and Draco's our Seeker. Couldn't he serve your detention at some other time?"

Morrighan flicked her long, brown hair behind her shoulders. "No. I think not."
"It won't be a real victory for Gryffindor if Slytherin can't field the best players they have--"

"Like you're going to win," said Zabini, rolling his eyes and scoffing.

"There," said Morrighan, nodding. "The Slytherins don't seem to feel they need Mr Snape so urgently."

"I'm a Slytherin and I think they do," retorted Harry.

"I didn't mean that we could do without Draco," said Zabini grudgingly. Evidently he loved the Quidditch Cup more than he hated Draco. "We need him on the pitch tomorrow."

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," said Morrighan airily. "And the matter is closed. Miss Bulstrode, if you'd be so kind as to select a partner? I believe it was your turn to demonstrate a fantail block."

Millicent planted herself like a mule refusing to be led. "But Quidditch means a lot here, and we had to go without Draco Seeking for us for most of last year--"

"That's not really my concern."

"But it is ours," said Daphne Greengrass in a soft, lilting voice. "Can't you help us, Professor? Harry's right; Draco could serve your detention at some other time, couldn't he?"

"This discussion is over," said Morrighan in a frosty voice. "Miss Bulstrode, you will either demonstrate the block or you will take a zero for the day, along with another twenty point loss for Slytherin." With no more warning than that, the teacher flung out her wand, casting a nasty-looking greyish hex toward her student.

Millicent got her block up in time, but just barely. It wasn't strong enough; a few tendrils of the hex whipped around her shield. The magic seemed attracted to her hair. Harry understood why when he saw what the hex did.

Five separate locks of Millicent's hair transformed themselves into writhing snakes.

"The Medusa curse," murmured Hermione. "It's illegal in thirteen countries. Not this one, unfortunately."

Draco made a gagging noise under his breath.

Millicent was less bothered, but then, most Slytherins liked snakes all right. She started to raise a hand, looking like she meant to pet one of the heads.

"Don't. They bite," said Morrighan calmly. "Finite Incantatem. Now, who can tell me why the Medusa curse is, at least in part, poorly named."

Hermione's arm jerked a little, like she was trying to resist raising her hand. Ever since the first day of Defence class, she'd been reluctant to volunteer. Harry thought she was probably still annoyed over the rule against books.

"Well," drawled Draco in a bored tone, as if Morrighan's questions were barely worth answering, "you don't see anyone in here who's been turned to stone, do you? Except you, of course."

The last four words were delivered in an undertone, but not enough of one.

Morrighan whipped around to face him. "What was that, Mr Snape?"
"I said that my shoe feels coarse," said Draco with a face so straight that Harry knew he had to be Occluding to hide the lie. He started shaking one of his legs a little like he was trying to dislodge a pebble.

Hermione abruptly began coughing to hide her giggle. Even Ron's lips twisted in a wry smile. Morrighan narrowed her eyes, looking around suspiciously, but all the students who had overheard Draco put on innocent expressions.

Even Zabini didn't rat Draco out. Maybe, Harry thought caustically, he was worried that Morrighan would ground Draco for two Quidditch matches instead of just the one.

The one against Gryffindor!

The rest of the class passed without incident, though Draco kept making whispered remarks throughout. He was smooth as glass about it; whenever Morrighan heard enough to challenge him, a plausible lie tripped off the edge of his tongue.

What could Morrighan do? Unlike Snape, she didn't have phenomenal hearing, and if she cast Sonorus on Draco, he'd deafen everyone in the room.

Besides, what a fucking bitch really did sound remarkably like what a lucky witch.

And at Hogwarts, "witch" was hardly an insult.

"Stop it, Draco," murmured Harry at one point. "I know you're upset about the match, but I'll find some way to fix it. Even if I have to tell Dad--"

"Don't you dare. I already have it solved," said Draco airily.

"How?"

"Never you mind."

Harry stared at him doubtfully. "All right, but stop provoking her. You'll just make things worse."

"No, I won't, because they can't get worse." Draco made a face, but then brightened. "And too, you haven't heard the coup de grace yet."

"The who de what?"

Draco only smiled. "Do you know what I found out the other day, Harry?" he asked in his normal voice, before dropping into the murmur he kept using to insult the professor. "Morrighan's mother was a lying hog."

"Excuse me, Mr Snape?" barked Morrighan from a dozen paces away.

Harry was surprised that Draco didn't turn that one to his advantage. There's no excuse for you . . .

"I said that I can hover an entire log." Draco blinked like he was surprised to be questioned.

Hermione suddenly made a high squealing noise.

"What, Miss Granger, what?"

"I bit my tongue," said Hermione, looking down at the floor. "Ow. It really smarts."
Morrighan looked exhausted. Apparently it was a lot easier to belittle Draco than to catch him actually doing something to deserve her ire. "Oh, class dismissed," she suddenly snapped. "Mr Snape, I'll see you here tomorrow at eight."

"Yes, Professor," he said demurely.

"Not a minute after," she warned, watching him through narrowed eyes.

"Eight on the dot. I promise."

Interesting how Draco could both look and sound like an angel when he wanted, thought Harry.

Harry was dying to pester Draco more about how he was going to get out of Morrighan's detention, but there wasn't much chance. As soon as class let out, he and Hermione headed off to Arithmancy while Ron and Harry went out to the grounds for Magical Creatures. Hagrid was in fine form, and if Harry had been listening to his rambling tales, he'd probably have learned quite a bit about giants and trolls and ogres.

He wasn't listening, though. All he could think about was Draco.

At lunch both Draco and Hermione were missing. Ron grumbled, but he was used to it. They'd made a habit of going down to the kitchens for food on those days when Hermione was going to help Draco revise Muggle Studies.

Normally, Harry would have seen Draco in his afternoon classes, but not this week. Harry still didn't know how Snape had convinced the other teachers to let the Slytherin Quidditch team skip lessons to practice. It wasn't exactly Snape-like, was it?

Then again, he did want Slytherin to win. Or more specifically, he wanted Draco to win. The strange thing about that thought was that it didn't hurt Harry to think it. He supposed it went back to what Snape had mentioned once: that treating his sons equally didn't mean treating them the same. Snape knew that Draco had a huge chip on his shoulder when it came to Harry. An inferiority complex, Marsha had called it. And Draco's snobbish attitude . . . a lot of that was overcompensation.

Snape probably thought that anything that helped Draco win against Harry was a good thing. Even if it meant Harry would lose.

Because Harry didn't really need to win, did he? But Draco did.

Not that Draco had much chance, now that he was serving detention during the match. Their father must not know about it yet, if Draco was still skiving off classes to practice. Could it possibly be true that Draco had a way around the punishment Morrighan had announced?

The more the day wore on, the more Harry doubted it.

Draco had more-or-less forbidden him to talk to their father about the problem. Harry knew he
really should, especially since he was a Slytherin prefect and the issue was one that directly affected Slytherin . . . but somehow, he couldn't quite bring himself to violate his brother's trust. Maybe because last year, he'd been so adamant that he didn't need his father stepping in to handle Aran for him.

So . . . no Snape. What, then?

*Morrighan,* thought Harry. Talking to her was almost guaranteed to get him nowhere, but he had to try something, didn't he?

Harry nudged Ron the moment they were in the hallway together. "Dinner can wait."

"But 'm hungry--"

"What else is new?" Harry grabbed Ron's arm and hurried him along. "I need you to walk me back to Defence."

"Oh." Ron scowled. "When even *I* start feeling sorry for Draco Malfoy -- er, Snape . . . I don't care how tight her trousers get, detention during Quidditch is just unreasonable!"

Harry glanced sideways at his best friend as they turned a corner and headed toward Defence. "I thought you'd almost approve. Anything to disadvantage Slytherin?" "When they lose they'll claim we didn't face their real roster, and you know what? They'll be right!"

Harry cleared his throat. "But wasn't our team going to play some sort of trick on them, anyway?"

"Just to annoy them a little, to get them back for all their cheating! We weren't going to take any of them out of the match!"

By then they were at the Defence classroom. Harry motioned for Ron to stay in the corridor. Then he took a deep breath and knocked. "Professor?"

The door swung open. Inside, Harry could see a pair of pink monkeys scampering across the surface of the desks. Sometimes Harry thought that Morrighan should really be teaching Care of Magical Creatures, she had so many. Or Care of Regular Creatures -- she had plenty of those, too.

"Mr Potter," said Morrighan, turning around from where she was studying a diagram on the blackboard. "What can I do for you?"

Harry cleared his throat again. "I'm here as a prefect. The punishment you gave Draco Snape today will affect all of Slytherin, not just him, so I want to ask you if--"

Morrighan flicked her wand to close the door. "As a prefect, Mr Potter, do you believe that acceptable behaviour includes arriving forty-five minutes late to class and yelling at a teacher?"

"Well, no, but I was banned from Quidditch a couple of years ago, and I know how bad it feels to have to miss a match--"

"Then perhaps your brother will re-think his behaviour," said Morrighan calmly.

"He got some terrible news this morning," blurted Harry. "He shouldn't have talked back to you, but--"

"He's old enough to handle a little bad news--"

"But if you knew what he'd been through these past few months--"
Morrighan rolled her eyes. "To quote the Americans, Mr Potter, your brother is in serious need of an attitude adjustment."

"He's in serious need?" Harry realised he was grinding his teeth, so he made an effort to relax his jaw. "He's tried his best to get along with you, and you've had it in for him since the first day of class, Professor. Be fair. I mean, try to be fair. I mean, if you can--"

Harry knew that he was putting his foot in his mouth in a big way by then, but as things turned out, it didn't matter.

The door opened rather forcefully and Snape strode in, his robes whirling majestically as he stalked inside.

"Professor Morrighan!" he snapped, his boots thudding against the stone floor with every step. "Forty points from Slytherin, is it? Forty points in a single day, and from my son? I do believe we need to conduct a parent-teacher conference!"

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Thirteen: "Gryffindor vs. Slytherin"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
Morrighan's face smoothed itself into a pleasant expression. If Harry didn't know any better, he'd have thought that Snape had just suggested a stroll in the moonlight. "Certainly, Professor. Mr Potter, if you'll excuse us?"

"Harry will stay."

"That's hardly appropriate," said Morrighan. "Unless we need to discuss him instead of his brother."

"Do we need to discuss Harry?" asked Snape in a voice that could only be described as caustic. "The counters failed to inform me that you'd taken forty points from him as well!"

Harry crossed his arms. "She wouldn't take forty points from me, Dad. She doesn't hate me."

"Are you implying that I hate your brother?" asked Morrighan, her nostrils flaring.

"Implying? I'm saying it flat out. You hate his guts and you know it!"

Morrighan widened her stance a little, the doe hide across her hips stretching so tightly that it was a wonder the laces didn't snap. "I don't hate him; I simply know his type."

His type? Harry clenched his fists and opened his mouth to give her a piece of his mind, but his father beat him to it.

"His type?" Snape took another step forward and glared, the air around them seeming to crackle with barely leashed fury. "You've changed, and not for the better. The Maura I knew from years ago wouldn't judge a man by his father!"

Morrighan gasped. "How dare you suggest such a thing?" Her gaze suddenly shot to Harry. "Please do leave the room--"

"No," said Harry and Snape at the same time. It was Snape who explained first. "Harry's not to be alone in the halls. I believe that was mentioned rather prominently at our first staff meeting of the year. You were present, were you not?"

Oh. Harry felt he had no choice but to come clean. "Well, Ron's out there, waiting for me--"

"Indeed he is not. I told him not to loiter in the hallways. This is a private matter between Professor Morrighan and myself."
For a second, Harry was surprised that Ron would have left, considering the Howler Snape had sent him last year. But then he realised that Ron must have thought that Snape would walk him to dinner.

"Just so," said Morrhigan, nodding. "It doesn’t concern other students, and that includes brothers. We'll have to defer this conference until later--"

"Yeah, until it's too late for Draco to play in the Quidditch match!"

Snape's eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean?"

"She assigned Draco detention. During Quidditch!"

Snape rounded on Morrhigan. "Maura!"

She planted her hands on her hips. "And you would never do such a thing, of course."

Snape's lips twisted. "Only in the case of great bodily harm. What did Draco do, slice another student to ribbons?"

"He was unconscionably late to class and when I rebuked him, he spoke to me most disrespectfully!"

"She called Draco a liar to his face, and he said he didn't care what she thought," corrected Harry. "He shouldn't have said it, but she provoked him. She always provokes him, and Draco just takes it and takes it, but sooner or later he was bound to snap."

"Of course I called him a liar. Your brother was lying."

"How do you know?" asked Harry.

"The look on your face," said Morrhigan bluntly.

Oh.

"You are not grounding Draco during the match," said Snape, shaking his head. "Out of the question." "I certainly am," retorted Morrhigan. "He's been assigned a detention, and as I heard quite clearly during that first staff meeting, Severus, I'm within my rights to insist that students serve detention at my convenience rather than their own."

"Staff are expected to attend Quidditch matches!" said Snape triumphantly.

"Expected but not required."

"You're just being vindictive!" shouted Harry.

"Lower your voice," ordered Snape. "Maura, be reasonable--"

"She's never reasonable when it comes to Draco!"

"Lower your voice!"

Harry thought that was rather unfair, since Snape had shouted himself.

"The headmaster made it quite clear that a parent cannot overrule a teacher's disciplinary authority, Severus."
"Then as Draco's Head of House, I'm afraid I must insist--"

"Heads have no control over their fellow professors, and you know it."

Morrighan might think she had this won, but she'd made a tactical error in mentioning Dumbledore. It had given Harry an idea, and once he thought of it, he didn't hesitate. "Let's take the matter to the headmaster," he said, careful not to yell this time. "He can decide if Draco deserves to miss Quidditch. But he's going to get the whole story, right back to the first day of class. He's going to know how you constantly insult and belittle Draco."

"You," said Morrighan with a sigh, "are exaggerating."

"We'll see if I am or not when I ask to use his Pensieve." Harry reached up to loosen his tie, which felt like it was strangling him. "And do you really think that after that he's going to let you punish Draco even more? You've been punishing him horribly since the minute you first learned his name!"

"Oh, Maura," said Snape, shaking his head. "I never would have believed this of you. A boy is not his father, no matter how much he may resemble him--"

"I care nothing about Mr Snape's parentage, Severus!"

"That explains why you called him a nasty, evil little boy last week. It explains why you hex him at least ten times as much as anyone else. The whole class knows that you hate him." Harry turned to his father. "Listen, Dad, when even Ron starts feeling sorry for Draco, you know things have got to be pretty bad in this class."

Snape's lips were a thin, compressed line. He parted them just enough to speak. "Professor Morrighan, you will explain yourself."

"The boy is exaggerating--"

"Let me use a Pensieve then. That'll prove I'm not."

"Explain what you meant about knowing Draco's type," said Snape. "Now, Maura."

At least she had the grace to flush. Not that it excused her, thought Harry.

"The type of boy that would torment magical creatures," she said quietly, her eyes glistening like she was close to tears just thinking about it.

"Ah," said Snape, his voice suddenly much less harsh. "Yes, of course."

Harry didn't understand. "What are you on about? Draco doesn't--"

It only took one word to silence him. Snape was the one who provided it. "Buckbeak."

*Oh.* Harry gnawed his lip as he thought that over. Yeah, the Buckbeak thing had been one of Draco's more evil moments. And Morrighan had more reason than most to care about a thing like that. Not only did she have a magical connection to animals, she'd probably got to know Buckbeak pretty well in the year and a half since Sirius had died. What had Dumbledore said? That Buckbeak had joined Morrighan's herd of hippogriffs in Ireland?

"Well . . . Draco didn't actually *torment* Buckbeak," said Harry finally. "And Draco didn't try to have him killed just out of the blue. I mean, he got attacked. It was his own fault, I admit, and yeah,
Harry didn't know what else to say. He didn't want to defend what Draco had done.

"You don't think it's torment for a hippogriff to be chained for months on end?"

Oh, hell. She was actually crying now. Not in any dramatic way, but the little tears welling in her eyes would be hard to miss. Or the expression on her face -- she looked like she was the one who had been chained up.

"All right, that was very bad of him," admitted Harry. "I'll even say that it was evil. But he's not. Really, he's not. That was when he was thirteen years old, Professor. Didn't you ever do anything terrible when you were growing up?"

"I never harmed an animal."

Snape cleared his throat. "Maura . . . I understand that you find Draco's past actions to be entirely reprehensible. But apart from this morning, has he done anything objectionable during a Defence class?"

She looked like she was struggling to think of something. Harry certainly didn't respect her, but he did appreciate the way she was willing to admit the truth -- when it was pointed out to her. "No."

"Then perhaps you can see that forty points and a detention during Quidditch is excessive, to say the least."

"The points stand."

Snape firmed his lips. "Tardiness does not call for huge point losses. No more than a point per minute is my own rule of thumb--"

"You son arrived forty-five minutes late to my class this morning, Severus," said Morrighan in a weary voice. "The points stand."

Snape nodded curtly, his robes swirling as he turned to face Harry. "Forty-five minutes?"

"I wasn't kidding when I said he'd got some terrible news," murmured Harry.

"Explain."

Harry was a little surprised that Snape hadn’t noticed Draco's mood this week. Didn't he already know that there was trouble in paradise? But then, Draco hadn't been in Potions class or Ethics since he'd got that first letter from Rhiannon. The Slytherin team had been outside practising. "You should ask Draco about it--"

"This sounds like it's turning into a family matter," said Morrighan, "If you'll excuse me, therefore-"

Snape whirled back to face her. "We still need to discuss your future conduct toward my son."

She turned her face to the side, but couldn't really hide it since her hair trailed down her back in a thick, elaborate plait. "I can't help how I feel."

"Perhaps not, but you can control how you behave."

"A boy who hates animals--"
"He doesn't hate animals," said Harry. "He's got a pet ferret now, and he plays with him all the time and takes really good care of him. He's not the same person now that he was four years ago. Please, Professor, don't judge Draco by that one day."

She didn't reply, but just kept her face turned away.

"Maura," said Snape quietly, "I know you. You understand how wrong it is to let your personal feelings toward a student cause such . . . unprofessional behaviour."

That got her to turn her face back. In fact, she whipped her neck around so fast it was a wonder she didn't strain something. She still didn't speak, though. She just kept staring from Snape to Harry and back. Then she sighed.

"I suppose that you would know. I remember how you used to ramble as you brewed. You used to dread the day that James Potter's son would arrive at Hogwarts . . . and yet here you are, his adoptive father."

"Just father--"

"Hush, Harry."

"I suppose the two of you must have always got on?"

Snape inclined his head. "As you see."

Somehow, Harry managed not to gape.

Morrighan's eyes glittered. "Don't preach, Severus. It doesn't suit you. Besides, the situations are hardly parallel. You may have managed not to visit the sins of the father upon the son, but in my case, it's the son himself who is . . . depraved."

"Depraved? Maura . . . all Draco truly did was lose his temper because he felt humiliated in front of his peers. He told his father he'd been attacked, which was technically true, if a rather incomplete rendering of events. It was Lucius Malfoy who called for Buckbeak's execution."

Harry decided he'd better not mention that Draco had been ecstatic when the day had arrived for Buckbeak to be killed.

"At his son's instigation--"

"Draco is not innocent of blame, but events quickly spiralled beyond his control. And too, he is not the same young man today. Harry is correct; Draco has turned his back on the values espoused by his family. He is a member of the Order of the Phoenix, Maura. Last year, he saved Harry from being turned over to Voldemort."

Morrighan widened her eyes, but not at the mention of Draco's heroism. "My, my. That's a new turn of phrase for you."

"Harry's influence," said Snape with a slight smile. A very slight smile, but Morrighan caught it, all right.

"I seem to have missed a great deal," she said, very quietly.

"Aren't we getting away from the point?" asked Harry. "Draco's been absolutely miserable during Defence this year. That's hardly going to help him get the kind of N.E.W.T. score that will
convince MLE to take him into the Auror Apprentice program.”

"That boy wants to be an Auror?"

"Yes. And he deserves every chance--"

"That's enough, Harry," interrupted Snape. "Professor Morrighan understands the situation now. I'm certain she'll make every effort to leave her personal feelings at the classroom door in future."

Snape had a lot of nerve advocating that, with his history, but what mattered more to Harry was the fact that he was speaking for Morrighan. She hadn't promised to behave herself. She hadn't even nodded.

They were through here, though, as far as Snape was concerned. He took Harry by the elbow and steered him out into the hallway. Morrighan closed the door behind them. She didn't quite slam it, but it was a near thing.

"Dinner at home tonight, I think," murmured Snape, taking a turn away from the Great Hall. "Your brother has some explaining to do."

"Er . . . shouldn't we go and get him, in that case?"

"He's waiting for us in the dungeons. With the match tomorrow, I thought a family dinner tonight a sound idea. He was supposed to tell you."

Sirius started talking inside Harry's head, warning that Snape planned to slip him a potion . . . Harry told the voice to shut up. He wondered if he should go a bit further and tell Sirius to grow up. Sirius might have been joking, but some jokes just weren't amusing.

"Draco's had a lot on his mind." Harry shrugged. "I guess he forgot to mention your dinner idea."

"He also forgot to mention that he'd been forbidden to participate in the match. Neither did he tell me about the points. He left it to the counters to inform me."

"Well, he was probably hoping you wouldn't notice. It wouldn't be very Slytherin to call attention to the points."

"Was he also hoping I wouldn't notice him missing from the pitch tomorrow?"

"He probably should have come clean about that bit," admitted Harry. "But . . . he's not thinking straight. Hasn't been all week. He'll have to tell you about it, though."

Snape slanted Harry a glance as they walked along, but said nothing further on that subject.

"Good news," said Harry as he came into the living room. "No detention tomorrow, after all."
"How did you--" Draco stopped speaking and scowled when Snape followed Harry into the room.
"You ran to tell Dad all about it when I specifically said not to!"

"He just happened to come along while I was talking to Morrighan."

"And who asked you to do that?"

"Draco," said Snape, holding up a hand. "Your teacher and I have just held a rather illuminating discussion. Idiot child. Why didn't you come to me?"

"I had it under control," said Draco tightly.

"So much so that you were going to let the team resort to our Reserve Seeker?"

"I had that under control, too."

Snape arched a single eyebrow. "Do tell."

Draco shrugged. "Well, Morrighan said to report to her at eight. She never once said that it had to be eight in the morning."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "She said she was going to make you work all day--"

"I was going to claim that I thought she meant that in a figurative sense--"

Snape looked like he was torn between chuckling and reprimanding Draco. He settled for the latter. "Idiot child doesn't begin to cover it. Do you have any idea how I would respond if a student had the sheer effrontery to act that way toward me?"

Draco's chin went up a couple of notches. "It wouldn't matter what she did. By the time I did come to her detention, the match would have been over, and--"

"You truly believe that Maura Morrighan is not capable of walking down to the pitch to have you pulled from the match?"

"She probably wouldn't walk," said Draco scathingly. "She'd show up on a hippogriff!"

"The root of her inability to treat you fairly," murmured Snape. "Professor Morrighan is quite extraordinarily fond of animals, as you've no doubt noticed. Including hippogriffs. In particular one named Buckbeak?"

"Oh."

"Yes, oh."

"But that was years ago, and it's not the kind of thing I'd do today--"

Snape began shaking his head. "I also had to learn this lesson the hard way, Draco. What is past for you is not necessarily in the past for other people. Living down one's more regrettable decisions is a task far more easily contemplated than done."

"Well, I still think she's grossly unfair to hold it against me." Draco made a face.

"We have discussed the matter and I have every hope that she will do better in future. If she doesn't, you're to let me know at once. Is that clear?"
"Yes, sir."

"I'm at a loss to understand why you let it go on for so long." Snape's eyes burned as he bit out the next few words. "Didn't you learn anything from last year? When you need assistance to deal with an unreasonable staff member, I will assist you."

"I didn't need assistance," said Draco sullenly.

"Yes, you did. No teacher has the right to treat you as her own personal Quaffle."

"Fine, then. I didn't want assistance from you."

Snape drew back as if struck.

"Fuck," said Draco under his breath. And then more loudly. "That's not what I meant, Severus."

Snape remained silent and kept his face averted from both of them.

Draco sighed. "I just meant . . . well, you're the one who accused me of calling you 'Dad' whenever I wanted something! And this would be even worse. I used to run to Lucius over every last thing. I expected him to solve all my problems here. Just like with Buckbeak. I didn't want to be like that anymore. Or at least, not with you. I . . . I guess I wanted to be the good son for once, that's all, and handle something on my own."

Snape was shaking his head as he turned to face them. "Draco, you are a good son."

"No. I'm not." A tiny thread of hysteria wove its way through Draco's voice. "I'm not a good anything. Rhiannon . . . she broke things off with me."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you really?" Draco shoved his hands in his pockets. "She might not have done it if you'd let me go and visit her, or at least promise her some time together at Christmas!"

"Be fair. She met somebody else," said Harry.

"She might not have noticed anybody else if Severus had let me give her some hope--"

"Draco," said Snape in a stern tone, "I understand that you are upset, but do try to view the matter rationally. If Miss Miller could not wait until another meeting could be arranged, then she is not worthy of your attentions."

"Don't say that," said Draco, baring his teeth. "Don't you dare. Rhiannon's perfect!"

*If she was perfect then she'd show up on time for her job,* thought Harry. He knew better than to say that out loud, though.

"She is a fine young lady and she has been very good for you. But for her to break things off because you will not endanger yourself and the war effort for her convenience?" Snape shook his head.

"She . . ." Draco's voice broke, maybe because he couldn't find a way to argue with Snape's logic. If he said that it hadn't been "convenience," that Rhiannon truly was in love with someone else, then Snape would reply that Rhiannon wasn't the one for him.

He would be right, too.
"It doesn't make this any easier," added Snape after a moment. "I do know that, Draco."

"What, you've been dumped, too?"

"Draco!" hissed Harry.

"I think that Draco and I need to speak alone," said Snape calmly. "Harry, perhaps you could be so good as to arrange dinner for the three of us. Draco?" He gestured towards his office.

"Order wine," said Draco.

"What kind?"

"It doesn't matter."

Harry tried to order wine but the elves wouldn't supply any to a student. It didn't seem to matter that he was of age.

"Sorry," he said when Draco emerged from the office after about twenty minutes talking with their father. "The elves said--"

"You don't know how to deal with them, that's all." Draco sat down and picked up his water goblet, staring at it morosely. "It doesn't matter."

"Maybe Dad can ask--"

"For wine?" Severus' robes billowed as he settled himself in his usual chair at the table. "I think not. You both have Quidditch tomorrow."

Draco set his water goblet down hard enough that the contents sloshed. "That doesn't matter, either. Everyone at this school knows who the better Seeker is. Youngest Seeker in a century, best Seeker in two centuries, I'll bet. Ha, three centuries. Four--"

"That's enough, Draco," said Snape calmly. "You'll do your best, as will Harry."

"When has my best ever been good enough to beat Harry Potter? Have you thought of that, Severus? Well, have you?"

"What I think is that this maudlin self-pity won't help matters any."

Draco looked away from them both and began picking at his pot roast. Harry tried to make small talk, but it was no use. Draco gave one-word answers when he bothered to reply at all, and in less than ten minutes, he had left the table, saying he needed a shower.

Harry winced once he was out of sight, hoping that Draco wouldn't try to sing any opera. For now, and probably for a long time, that would only be a reminder he didn't need.
"He didn't eat much." Harry glanced at his father. "What can we do?"

Severus shook his head. "Recovering from a broken heart is something one can only learn by experience, Harry. Nobody can do it for you."

Harry thought about not asking, but decided that he knew his father well enough to chance it. "You sound like you're speaking from experience. Do you . . . well, I was surprised at the way you spoke to Morrighan. You knew her pretty well, huh?"

"You don't do subtle, do you?" asked Snape with a very slight laugh.

"Well, you kind of opened the door when you told me you'd been involved with Madam Pince."

Snape said nothing, but calmly continued to eat the salmon fillet Harry had chosen for him.

"So?" Harry finally asked.

"I have some history with Maura, as I'm sure you've divined, despite your abysmal marks in the subject."

"And that's all you're going to say."

"Perceptive of you."

Harry couldn't help but chuckle, at least until another thought occurred to him. "You're not going to overlook the way she's treated Draco, are you?"

Snape raised both eyebrows. "Did I appear to be doing so?"

"No, but . . . there at the end, you could have been a little more emphatic."

"Ah. Well, I know her, as you said. I left her to contemplate her own behaviour. I expect that she'll be more reasonable in future."

Harry wasn't so sure, but he supposed that time would tell.

"Enough of Maura," said Snape, setting aside his fork. "There's something else I've been meaning to discuss with you."

"I know. The match tomorrow--"

"Certainly not that."

"But I know you want--" Slytherin to win.

He couldn't say it out loud, even though it was true.

"I want both you and Draco to do your best, as I said." Snape folded his hands together at the edge of the table. "Harry . . . how could you think that I would wish for you to lose?"

"But you don't want Draco to lose, either."

"No," Snape's lips thinned. "Having two sons can be very vexing. At times I wonder how Molly and Arthur remain sane."

"The Burrow's like a happy madhouse. Very happy. What did you want to talk about, then?"
"How you are doing."

"How I'm doing? Um, fine. Well, it's a little harder than I thought to let Draco run the D.A. meetings. I mean, letting Slytherins join was obviously the right thing to do, but add a few of them to the mix and Draco feels like he has a reputation to maintain, and it makes him less approachable--"

"Do you recall once telling me that all our conversations revolved around your brother?"

Harry chuckled. "Yes. But that hasn't been true for a long time."

"I should hope not." Snape flexed his fingers, like he was trying to figure out how to approach his topic, whatever it was.

"Oh, for God's sake," said Harry, getting it finally. "Is this about me and girls again? I do like them. I just don't want to get one killed--"

"No, no, nothing like that." Well, at least Harry's outburst had loosened his tongue. "I thought perhaps that the date might be preying on your mind."

"The date?" Harry *did* get it then. "Oh. You mean Samhain."

"Just a few days hence. Did you not realise?"

Harry shrugged. "I told you once that the Muggle-raised don't pay much attention to things like cross-quarter days."

"I don't ask because I thought you needed to harvest potions components at the correct time," drawled Snape.

Harry shrugged again. "I don't know. I suppose it crossed my mind at the Halloween feast that Samhain wasn't far off, but I didn't spend any time thinking about it."

"Remarkable."

Something in his father's tone told Harry things that Snape hadn't said. "Oh . . . you've been dreading the date?"

"Anniversaries can be . . . difficult."

Harry could tell that his father was thinking about not just Samhain, but his birthday as well. January ninth each year had to be terrible for him. A reminder of so many regrets . . . Harry wasn't going to bring that up, though. It would just be one more reminder. He'd stick to talking about the date Severus had actually mentioned.

"Sometimes I think that Samhain was more difficult for you than for me," he said, scooting his chair a little so the table wasn't between them.

"Because children are more resilient than adults?" Snape's mocking tone said how little he believed the old adage.

"More because all I had to do was . . . well, put up with it, right? You had it worse. You had to participate."

Snape shielded his eyes, though the light in the dungeons was hardly bright.
"When are you going to believe that I understand that?" asked Harry, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned closer to his father. "You saved me that night, and I meant it when I said that there was nothing to forgive. I never had to forgive you for anything, because I knew at the time that you were doing the best thing. The right thing."

Snape nodded, the motion a little shaky. A moment later he lowered his hand and spoke in a low tone. "It was necessary to let them... hurt you. Yes. Of course I know that. But whenever I think on it too long..."

"Don't think on it, then." Harry smiled. "I don't. Not any longer."

"I don't have enough discipline to stop myself from thinking about it, sometimes."

"You, undisciplined? I don't believe it."

Snape gave him a small, wry smile. "Wait until you're a father. Thoughts will circle in your mind like ravenous vultures, even when you know there's no point to them."

"Well... think of it like you were a doctor, then."

Before Harry could explain, Snape's brow creased with puzzlement. "Unlike you, I've very little experience of doctors."

*Learn by experience,* right. "Well, then think of it like something you have a lot of experience with. A potions issue. Don't you sometimes brew things that cure in the end, but cause painful side effects along the way?"

Snape gave a slow, thoughtful nod.

"There you are then," said Harry warmly. "You were my own personal potion that night, Dad. I hope you can think of it like that, and feel a lot better."

"The intention was for me to console you, instead of the reverse." Snape looked at him for a moment, his dark eyes shining. "You're growing up to be a fine man, Harry. I'm very proud of you."

Harry sat up straight and grinned. "But I'll always be your idiot child."

"That you will," murmured Snape. "That you will. Well. You're quite welcome to stay the night, of course--"

Harry shook his head. "Thanks, but I have to get back to Gryffindor. There's a team meeting first thing in the morning. When Draco finishes his shower I'll ask him to walk me there."

Snape slanted him a glance as he stood up. "Very well, but I should warn you that Draco's mood is uncertain, to say the least. He didn't appreciate your going to Morrighan on his behalf. And while we're on the subject, I didn't appreciate your not coming to me, if he wouldn't."

Harry flushed. "He wanted to handle things himself."

"If you begin to harm yourself again and want to 'handle it yourself,' wouldn't you believe that Draco should mention the matter to me?"

"That's different--"

"Not entirely. I expect you to do better in future. Now, shall we have a game of chess while we
wait for your brother to emerge?"

Harry nodded and soon found himself struggling to keep up with Snape's brilliant sense of strategy.

"You should learn to stay out of things that aren't your business," said Draco when they were halfway to Gryffindor Tower.

"My brother is my business."

"I never ran to Severus about your troubles with Aran, did I?"

"You threatened to--"

"Threats aren't action."

"Look," said Harry, grabbing at Draco's sleeve to stop him from stomping ahead. "I handled Aran on my own and that turned out to be a huge mistake. I should have trusted Dad to help me. But I didn't go running to him about Morrighan, you know. All I did was go and talk to her as a prefect for Slytherin. I'm entitled to do that--"

"Not when it concerns another prefect. Then, you let the prefect in question deal with matters for himself!"

"Well, you never told me not to go to Morrighan, did you?"

"I sure as shite told you not to blab my private business to Hermione, and what did you do? Told her every last thing!"

"I didn't! I just asked her a couple of questions and she figured the rest out on her own. She's like that! You should know that by now--"

"What I know," said Draco in a fair imitation of Severus, "is that you need to grow up."

All right, so only the first part was like something their father would say.

Draco whirled on his heel and strode forward. Harry had to hurry to catch up.

He probably should have left well enough alone, but he didn't appreciate Draco's accusations, let alone his last comment. "I think you're just upset over that bad news you got, and you're taking it out on me."

Draco's eyes glowed fiercely as he shot Harry a glance. "Stop pretending to be Marsha. This isn't a case of transference. You see? I actually know the correct terminology. I'm angry at you because of what you've done."

What a prat. "Yeah, that was evil of me, wanting to make sure that you got to play in the match
tomorrow. Thinking of my brother. Yeah, that was terrible."

"Don't think of me too much. I wouldn't want you to throw the match!"

"I'm not going to throw the fucking match. Are you insane?"

"Are you, is the question." Draco kept stomping ahead even as he raked Harry up and down with his gaze. "I've seen the way you look during meals when you're sitting with your team mates. You're thinking about it, sure as my name is . . ."


"Shut up. I know what my name is. You're too conflicted to play your best tomorrow. That's the point."

"Then why were you going on about how you always lose to me?" Harry knew that was a rather nasty thing to say, but Draco had been nasty for a while by then.

"A momentary lapse. I forgot you were planning to throw the match."

"Stop saying that!"

"Stop acting like you'll be ashamed to play your best, then!"

Harry blinked, a sudden suspicion washing over him. "Wait. Is this some weird kind of reverse-psychology strategy? You're trying to throw me off stride?"

Draco's gait got a little stiffer. "I don't know. Maybe. I'm just . . . I'm not happy with you, Harry."

"Maybe that's good, for now," said Harry slowly. "It might help you play your very best. I don't want you to throw the match, either."

"I've never once contemplated doing any such thing."

Harry nodded. That wasn't hard to believe.

Draco came to an abrupt halt in front of the Fat Lady.

"Well . . . good night . . ."

"Is it?" Draco rolled his eyes. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be the one with the Snitch in his hand."

With that, he turned and walked away, but Harry noticed that he stayed in sight until Harry had given the password and entered the safety of the Gryffindor common room.

"So that's it, then," said Ron the next morning to the Quidditch players assembled around him on the pitch. "Any questions?"
Of course there weren't any questions. They'd had a team meeting before breakfast, and then one during the meal, and now a third one out on the grass.

Anyway, the glances the Gryffindor players were exchanging were clear enough. Everybody was thinking of the prank that was probably underway in the Slytherin changing room. They were practically rubbing their hands together with glee!

Harry couldn't stand it. He was used to being left out of things, but not things like this. "I'm going to circle the pitch for a while," he said, wanting to get away from his team mates. "Warm up a bit."

"Match starts in about ten minutes," said Ron, nodding.

Harry took off at once and sailed high over the stands, already filled to bursting with students waving banners to support either Gryffindor or Slytherin. He saw Hermione down on the grass, frantically waving, too, but she didn't have a banner. He wondered why she wasn't climbing to the top of one of the Gryffindor stands.

Huh . . . she seemed to be waving at him in particular, rather than cheering on the team. When Harry veered her way and moved a little closer, he could see that she looked almost panicked.

He pulled up alongside her and put a foot on the grass to hold his broom steady. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, Harry!" She actually wrung her hands. "I just overheard Parvati and Lavender gossiping! Seamus has arranged for a boggart to get loose inside the Slytherin changing rooms!"

That was the prank that had everybody so excited. A boggart? Harry rolled his eyes. "Any competent third-year can get rid of a boggart, Hermione--"

"Not always. Not if it takes you by surprise--"

"Or if it shows you something you're not prepared for," added Harry, a memory jolting him. Last year he'd almost been incapacitated by a boggart, and that was when he'd known to expect one! But the vision of Snape dying before his eyes, of losing somebody important again, had been more than he could bear. "Rhiannon!" he suddenly gasped.

"Exactly," said Hermione, grabbing his arm and squeezing hard. "Go, Harry. Go. We can't have it spreading through Slytherin that Draco's greatest fear is seeing his girlfriend with somebody else! Depending on what the boggart draws from his mind, they might learn her name and where she is--"

Harry kicked off before she'd finished speaking and zoomed low to the ground, heading at full speed toward the little thatch-roofed cottages that served as changing rooms. God, what if he was too late? What if the Slytherins already knew exactly what Rhiannon looked like? They weren't all evil, or Death Eaters in training -- Harry understood that now -- but some of them belonged to dark families and wouldn't hesitate to share this information with fathers who would report it to Voldemort--

He jumped off his broom a few feet from the door and rushed straight in, grateful like never before that the adoption had made him a full Slytherin. Otherwise, he wouldn't even be able to get through the door.

What he heard and saw when he got in, though . . .

Snape was there, and he was alone; the Quidditch team was nowhere to be found. Snape's back was
to Harry, but Snape didn't know that. As far as he was concerned, he was talking to Harry.

That's the form the boggart had assumed: that of Harry himself. Harry's mouth dropped open, a chill sweeping through him as he stood there. *He* was Snape's greatest fear?

"And I know," said the boggart in Harry's voice. But it wasn't Harry's voice. It was filled with loathing, filled with hate. "I know everything. *Snape*. Sirius told me. He ran into another Death Eater in the afterlife, and this time, he got an earful. You should have told me the truth!"

A wheezing noise came from Snape. "I . . . I . . . I thought you wouldn't understand--"

"I don't understand!" shouted the boggart, yanking the Slytherin prefect badge from Harry's robes. The badge made a clattering noise against the stone floor as the boggart flung it violently down. "I'll never understand! You told him, you told him, you told him! You were already working for the Order, and you still told him!"

Another wheezing noise, this one sounding like Snape was breaking apart inside. "Harry . . . the situation was complicated, Harry--"

"Don't call me Harry! You don't have the right!"

"You're my son," cried Snape. "Whatever happened in the past, today you are my son!"

"I shouldn't be," said the boggart in a low, contemptuous voice. "Not when you were the one who killed my real parents."

"I didn't kill them--"

The boggart went into a frenzy, its face contorting with rage. "You told Voldemort the prophecy! *You* were the spy who overheard Trelawney telling it to Dumbledore. Don't say you didn't kill them when you know you did!"

Snape crumpled to his knees.

"I hate you," added the boggart, leaning forward as if to soak in Snape's misery. "I'd never have agreed to become your son if I'd known what you did!"

The chill Harry had felt before was growing colder, soaking through muscle and bone until he felt cold clear through. Numb, that was it. He understood what he was seeing and what it meant, but it was too much to take in all at once.

Harry's teeth started chattering as the boggart continued to taunt the crumpled man.

Snape had been the spy. Snape had betrayed his parents. Snape had caused their deaths. And he'd never told Harry . . . just like usual, nobody had told Harry anything. Dumbledore probably knew all this. He could have told Harry and stopped the adoption, but even though he hadn't *approved* of the adoption, keeping Harry in the dark was more important than telling him the full truth for once-

Snape Snape Snape had been the spy--

Harry lifted his wand. Strange that his arm wasn't shaking at all. He supposed it proved that he really was numb inside. Pain would come later, he thought. And anger. All he could feel right now was a sort of shock at the way his whole life could splinter into pieces, just like that.
"Riddikulus."

The spell didn't work. Not much reason why it would. Even if Harry could cast normally, he wasn't doing a very good job at imagining boggart-Harry as something comical. There was nothing amusing about this situation. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

His spell did do one thing, though: it alerted Snape to his presence.

The Potions Master whirled around on his knees, his black eyes wide with shock as he took in the sight of Harry standing there in Quidditch robes. He slowly swung his face back toward the boggart, which was still spewing angry phrases about betrayal and unadoption and mutual repudiation. Then, just as slowly, he rose to his feet and held out his wand toward the dark creature.

_His_ arm, Harry noticed with something like bleak disinterest, shook like a leaf buffeted by strong wind.

"Riddikulus."

A bare wisp of a spell left the end of Snape's wand.

"Riddikulus."

That time it worked, though Harry never saw what the boggart had become. Snape banished it too quickly for that. He stood with his back to Harry for a long moment, and then turned a final time, his face haggard and so sallow that he looked ill. Or maybe that was due to his expression.

"Harry . . ."

Harry didn't know what to say or do. He tried to acknowledge his name with a nod, but wasn't too surprised when it came out closer to a full-body twitch. Being numb would do that to you.

"You heard."

Which meant, of course, that Snape didn't know what to say or do, either. Otherwise he wouldn't state the obvious. Then again, what _did_ you say to a boy who had just found out that you had practically murdered his parents?

"Yeah," Harry couldn’t think about this now, couldn't deal with it. He'd rather talk about anything else in the entire world. He was glad the match was starting in less than five minutes. He needed the distraction.

After it was over . . . well, after it was over he could start to figure out what the hell he was going to do.

"Where's the team?"

Snape stared at him. "Performing their annual good-luck ritual. Harry--"

"Why are you in here alone?"

"Tradition. Harry--"

So Snape wasn't going to take a hint. Fine. "I don't want to talk about it."

Snape's hand was still shaking as he tucked his wand away. "I think we'd better."
Harry felt like ice, inside and out. Frozen. Unable to feel. He couldn't let himself feel, because if he did, the pain would tear him apart. Betrayal . . . deception . . . "The match will be starting in a couple of minutes," he said in a voice that sounded dead even to him. "Even if I wanted to, I couldn't talk to you now. And I don't want to. I don't know if I'll ever want to talk to you again."

Snape grimaced. "I know. But there's much I should tell you--"

"It's too late. You should have told me when you asked to adopt me," said Harry calmly, backing toward the door as he spoke. "I have to go."

Snape took three long strides toward him and took hold of his arm. It was the same one Hermione had grabbed, but the touch was entirely different. Unwanted. From someone that he thought now he'd never really known at all. "You shouldn't be flying, not in this state. Harry--"

"Don't call me that. The boggart knew what it was talking about; you don't have the right," said Harry dully. "And I'm fine to fly. I need it."

"Harry--"

"I need it, Severus. I mean, Snape. I mean . . . I don't know what I mean. I have to go."

"Promise me that we'll discuss this after the match," said Snape urgently. "What you saw was undoubtedly my greatest fear, but fears by their very nature are often irrational. There is more to the story than you know."

"Fine. We'll talk after the match." That was easy enough to promise. Five years after was still after, and so was a hundred. All Harry really knew was that he needed to be away from this, away from Snape, now. Before he lost control and he really wasn't in any shape to take to the pitch. "Father . . . Dad . . . it seemed like such a farce now. Such a complete farce. Harry had been an idiot. An idiot child, so much in need of love and care that he'd take it from any direction, no matter how ludicrous. He should have listened to the people around him, the ones who had been telling him he'd have to be mental to want Snape for a father. They'd been right, after all. Harry had been mental."

"After the match," echoed Snape, sounding torn up inside. Harry didn't care about that, though. He couldn't. "Harry . . . good luck."

Yeah, right.

Harry walked out without another word and mounted his hovering broom. Leaning down close against the handle, he accelerated as fast as he could. He told himself he just wanted to get back to the pitch in time for the match, but the truth was something very different.

He wanted to get away from his . . . get away from Snape.
"Where have you been?" asked Ron, glaring as Harry took up his position on the pitch.

"I'm here now--"

"Barely in time--"

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and the shrill noise cut Ron off. With a last annoyed look at Harry, he flew off to where she was getting ready to release the Snitch.

Harry barely heard her instructions. It was always the same long list, anyway. *I want a clean match, blah blah blah.* Pointless, the whole speech. Literally pointless, since nobody ever called the Slytherins on their rampant cheating.

He'd been avoiding looking at the Slytherins up until then, but that thought had him searching the ranks of green for Draco.

The Slytherin Seeker was gripping his broom tightly, his own gaze more like a glare as he stared at Harry.

Oh, *Draco* was still angry, was he? Harry ignored the fact that he'd decided last night that a little anger would probably be good fuel for their competition. Now, all he could think about was how unfair Draco was being. It wasn't as though Harry had decided to go to Snape about Morrighan's biased behaviour. And what was he supposed to have done during the conference, let her lie to Snape about her real reasons for giving detention during Quidditch? Harry had done Draco a favour, and then this morning he'd tried to do another, rushing down to the Slytherin changing room before the boggart could get out and pretend to be Rhiannon being killed before Draco's eyes!

What real reason did Draco have to be upset, eh? That was what Harry would like to know! *Draco* wasn't the one who'd been lied to for an entire year. Hell, for his entire life! *Draco* wasn't the one who'd been adopted by a man he couldn't trust! No, Draco and Snape got on fine, didn't they? Slytherins, the both of them. Always brewing together. Always keeping secrets from Harry, like the one about who exactly had been present on Samhain. Like the one about Draco's full name.

Like this one too, probably!

As the Snitch was released and began to dart madly around the players, the fury banked inside of Harry seemed to burst free, searing him from the inside out. That's right -- Draco had probably known this all along! How could he not know it, with his eavesdropping tendencies? All the Death Eaters probably knew the truth!

Harry could just see it now. Draco and Snape had agreed from the outset that Snape had better not tell Harry what had really happened to James and Lily Potter. A couple of ex-Death Eaters, huddled together, keeping their slimy secrets. Harry could just see it. They'd tell themselves it was for Harry's own good, that he wouldn't understand.

Well, they were right on that score. Harry *didn't* understand.

A rush of air whizzed past him, green robes flapping against his own broom, the rider came so close. Then Draco circled again, this time shouting over the wind. "I thought you said you weren't going to throw the match!"

That was when Harry realised that the match was underway. Strange . . . he'd seen the Snitch released, but somehow he hadn't registered what it meant. When everyone else had started flying Harry had headed upwards too, but that was pure instinct. He hadn't been looking for the Snitch at
Baring his teeth, Harry pulled hard on his broom to make it rise higher over the pitch. He began flying in a wide circle over the other players, dipping up and down at random intervals, his eyes continuously moving in a sweeping motion as he searched for the glint of light that would give away the location of the Snitch.

"That's more like it!" yelled Draco as he pulled in alongside Harry, their brooms moving in tandem. "I don't want to win just because you feel too sorry for me to play properly!" "I'm surprised you care how you win!" shouted Harry back, the wind whistling so loudly through his ears that he could hardly hear himself. "As long as you win! That's all that matters, isn't it? To Slytherins!"

"You're a Slytherin!"

Not really, thought Harry, sick at the mere idea. He'd been fooling himself; he could see that clearly now. The rage that had broken free in him before seemed to turn to lava now. Hot, bubbling lava boiling over into every thought, every movement.

It was like his Occlumency shields had slipped from his control and taken over his whole mind. Harry was nothing but his fire now.

"Get away!" he screamed, angling his broom into Draco's to jolt him onto another trajectory. It wasn't the safest manoeuvre while flying at high speed mere inches from another player, but who cared about that? The lousy Slytherins did it all the time, trying to knock opposing players off their brooms. "Go find the Snitch on your own!"

Draco spun sideways over the side of his broom but quickly righted himself and pulled in by Harry once more. "Why, you--!"

So Harry jolted him again, this time harder.

A Bludger flew past him, missing his head by no more than a quarter-inch.

"Fucking Slytherins!" screamed Harry, veering closer to Draco, but not to jolt him again. He just wanted to scream into his face. "Is that what you did at your good-luck ritual? Decided to knock me off my broom?"

"They wouldn't bat Bludgers right at you like that if you'd stop trying to knock me off mine," yelled Draco back. "What's wrong with you? I'm the one who should be narked!"

Like Draco had any reason!

Harry gave him a disgusted look and abruptly yanked his broom toward the middle of the pitch, away from Draco.

It wasn't that easy to shake him, however. Draco smoothly followed, staying in tandem with Harry through every twist and dive that followed, screaming all the while. "You told Hermione my private business when I specifically said not to! And then you had to go and blab to Dad about Malevolent Morrighan! Just couldn't resist it, could you? You had to play the good son!"

The good son . . . Yeah, he'd wanted to be that, hadn't he? He'd wanted Snape to like and respect him. He'd yearned for that, craved it. The memories of how hard he'd tried . . . Harry hated them now. He felt sick at heart. Humiliated, that Snape's approval had mattered so much.

In the next moment, fire burned through the humiliation, sweeping it out of the way so violently all.
that Harry felt like steam must be pouring out his ears. He stopped trying to get away from Draco. "Well you can stop worrying about that one!"

"Sure I can!"

"You can," screamed Harry, clenching the broom so tightly that he thought the wooden handle might crack. "I'm done, it's over, over! I'll never be a good son again!"

Draco rolled his eyes and looked about to retort, but suddenly sped off at a sharp angle. Harry had seen the glint, too, but he was a fraction of a second slower at reacting to it.

Pressing his lips tightly together, he leaned down low on his broom and headed full-speed towards the Snitch.

This time there were no words as he flew right alongside Draco. They were both focussed entirely on the Snitch, which darted left, right, up, down, changing speed and direction to lead the Seekers on a dizzying chase high above the other players.

Harry's fingers brushed against it once or twice, as did Draco's, but the Snitch leapt away from their fingers, every time.

Maybe it was faster and more responsive when two Seekers were almost within reach, thought Harry. Well, fine then. He suddenly yanked hard on his broom and shot skywards, doing his best to imitate the look of a Seeker in hot pursuit.

"It seems that Harry Potter has spotted the Snitch!" announced Padma.

She might have thought so, but Draco didn't. He continued on his original trajectory, his hand stretched out in front of his broom, his whole body straining forwards as he chased the Snitch.

Damn.

Gritting his teeth, Harry angled his broom down, adjusting his course as he shot toward the ground. He was going to intersect Draco's path and snatch the Snitch from right under his nose, and after that, he'd like to see Draco claiming that Harry had thrown the match!

"Now it looks like the Gryffindor Seeker was chasing a ghost, and he's heading back down to where the Seeker for Slytherin is hot of the trail of the real Snitch--"

Thanks, Padma, thought Harry sourly. Draco had obviously heard her, he glanced upwards as Harry soared towards him, his grey eyes furious. When Harry was only a few feet away, Draco suddenly changed angles to collide with him, physically blocking him from getting to the Snitch.

The collision caused them to start tumbling together, head over heels, the ground and sky changing places so fast that the world became a dizzying dance of blue and green. Grunting, Harry clenched his broom hard with his knees and tried to even out the spin until he could soar free of it. It seemed to take forever, and all the while the ground was rushing up at them. When they finally broke apart, Harry was panting and exhausted and so dizzy he could barely think straight. His vision seemed to be swimming.

The Snitch was dancing before his eyes like a metal butterfly.

Blinking in surprise, Harry reached his hand out to grab it, but he encountered only empty air. When he blinked again his vision cleared. Just the dizziness, then. He almost wanted it back, because while he'd been whirling toward the ground, he hadn't been thinking about what he'd heard
before the match.

Now, he couldn't think about anything else.

Why did Snape have to do that? How could he have adopted Harry and not told him the truth about something like that? The entire year that had just passed had been nothing but one long fraud!

Harry wished that none of it had ever happened, that he'd never got that letter from Surrey, that he'd never started down this path. He wished he'd never been adopted, or ended up wearing a Slytherin prefect's badge. He didn't want to be a Slytherin, not any longer.

He wanted to be just Harry again, instead of Snape's son.

Another glint caught his eye, this one high above him in the east. Harry shot upwards after it, annoyed when Draco fell in beside him. They climbed together, neck and neck, each boy pushing his broom to the limit of its acceleration. A Bludger shot by beneath them, whistling as it soared past.

Draco's fingers, longer than Harry's, grazed the Snitch's wing.

"Oh, no you don't," screamed Harry, knocking his broom into Draco's to get his hand away from the Snitch.

"Oh, you want to play rough!" Draco banged his broom into Harry's, much harder than Harry had done to him.

Gritting his teeth, Harry gave as good as he got, watching with satisfaction as Draco was knocked several feet off course.

He should have expected what came next. Draco did have that impulse control problem, after all, and his emotions had been raw ever since he'd opened that letter from Rhiannon.

Draco steered his broom in an arc, turning it so he could ram it full tilt into Harry rather than just nudging him as they flew side by side. Harry was knocked considerably more than a few feet off course. In fact, he was knocked straight into the path of a Bludger that seemed to appear from nowhere.

"Harry!" Draco screamed. "DIVE!"

Harry did, but the Bludger was too close to avoid completely. It clipped him along the side of his head as it rushed past.

Pain exploded in his left temple, pain so intense and sudden that his hands lost all purchase on his broom. Harry felt himself slip off, falling sideways before plunging towards the ground. The last thing he remembered was Padma's frantic voice reporting, "Harry Potter's been hit! Harry Potter's been hit!" and a softer, higher-pitched voice crying out, "Oh, no! Harry . . ."

He was still plummeting towards the pitch when the whole world went black and silent.
The first thing Harry was aware of was the smell of cinnamon, close alongside him. The scent was faint, muted, and overlaid with other things, but it still managed to evoke vague images of home-baked cookies and warm summer nights. Sometimes the scent grew stronger and sometimes it seemed to fade, but it never went away completely.

Footsteps came and went, most often accompanied by murmured voices. Harry strained to separate individual words from the buzz, but it was hopeless. That was when he first became aware that his head hurt. It was a dull, low ache that seemed to radiate out from the left side of his skull to throb through his whole body. The longer it went on the worse it hurt, until finally, he whimpered.

The cinnamon smell came closer. His lips were parted by the feel of smooth metal. "Swallow, Harry," a deep voice urged, and Harry did. Magic seemed to pour through him, the feel of it sweet and startling. His headache receded like a tide pulled out to sea until it was nothing but a tiny point of pain, somewhere too far away to see.

Harry sank back down into sleep.

The next time he woke up, he felt marginally stronger. Last time he'd been nothing but one big headache, but now he could feel the rest of his body. It ached too, like he'd strained muscles rarely used. Even his hands hurt.

His hands . . . someone was holding them, he dimly realised. Or two someones, since it didn't seem likely that the same person was sitting both to the left and right of where Harry lay on his back.

Ron, he thought. Hermione.

He struggled to open his eyes, but the simple action was remarkably hard to accomplish. At last he managed, however, peering out through slitted eyes at a world that looked far, far too bright.

For a couple of seconds he couldn't distinguish anything through the glare, and then images began to come into better focus. To his right sat a great black splotch, though he was sure he didn't know why something black should smell so much like cinnamon. To his left the colours that dominated were green, silver, and palest, palest gold.

Then the green splotch spoke. "He's awake, Madam Pomfrey."

Madam Pomfrey?

Harry felt so muzzy-headed that it took him a second to catch on. If someone was calling for Madam Pomfrey, then he must be in . . . in . . . in the hospital wing, that was it. But why?

On the other hand, he certainly didn't feel very well. Was that his head aching again? It was hard to tell through the haze that seemed to surround his thoughts. He couldn't seem to think very clearly . .
That probably explained why it took a few seconds for him to recognise the voice that had spoken. He should have known those snooty tones at once. What the hell was Draco sodding Malfoy doing sitting at his bedside?

Holding his hand!

Harry was about to yank his hand away when another voice spoke, one that startled him so much that his whole body -- arm included -- seemed to seize up.

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

This voice was smooth, deep, and very, very familiar. Harry had heard it year after year, mocking and belittling him, telling him he was just like his father: spoiled and vain and arrogant.

Harry opened his mouth to yell for help, but he couldn't catch enough breath to do more than pant, his shocked gaze darting from Malfoy to Snape, back and forth. What was a pair of Slytherins doing in here with him?

The answer was as obvious as it was unthinkable -- they were sitting with him, one on either side, holding his hands.

Harry's whole world cracked in half.

Horrified, he finally yanked his hands from their grasp and scurried up on the bed, getting as far away from them as he could, until his back was pressed against the wall behind him, the metal railings of the hospital bed jammed against his shoulder blades.

Then he just stared.

His head still felt stuffed full of cotton wool, but his vision had cleared a bit by then. He could see the way Malfoy jerked slightly in his chair; he could tell that Snape's black eyebrows had drawn together into a single dark line.

"Harry?"

Harry tried to jerk further away, but there was nowhere to go except through the wall. He'd have done that if it were possible.

"Harry?" asked Snape again, leaning closer.

"Why are you here?" gasped Harry. "Why are you calling me Harry? Ow-- ow-- ow--"

He couldn't seem to think through the feeling of the headache rushing back in full force. It was so strong that in that first instant of blazing pain, he thought he'd sick up all over himself. And all over Snape too, if the man didn't back off--

"More potion," murmured Snape, pulling a vial from the inside of his robes. He poured out a spoonful and held it out to Harry, who shook his head in panic, his lips pressed together in one thin line.

Snape sighed. "It will help the pain. Don't be foolish, Harry--"

"What's this, Mr Potter?" asked Madam Pomfrey as she came bustling over. "Awake, but fussy? Well, it's only to be expected after a Bludger to the head. Open up now, though. You know your
father wouldn't hurt you--"

"F- f- father?" Harry thought for a second that he must have heard that wrong. But no, she really had said . . . "What are you-- what are you on about? My father's dead--"

He couldn't say more than that, since a spoon was unceremoniously thrust into his mouth.

Reflex had him swallowing the smooth gel coating the spoon. How it managed to be both tangy and tasteless was beyond him, but that was the impression he got. His headache rolled away again, leaving behind only an annoying niggle centred over his left ear.

Then his thoughts seemed to come into better focus. "What was a Bludger doing in the corridor?"

"The corridor?" asked Malfoy, sounding as muddled as Harry felt.

"It's perfectly normal to be a bit confused after a blow to the head," said Pomfrey in a calm voice. "Lie back down, Mr Potter."

"Well, it's not normal for a couple of Slytherins to be sitting with me in the hospital wing," said Harry, struggling to figure things out as he slid back down in the bed. Snape was still too close for his liking, but at least he wasn't hovering any longer. "And somebody answer me. What was a Bludger doing inside the castle?"

Madam Pomfrey passed her wand over his forehead and frowned, though she spoke briskly enough. "You were playing Quidditch earlier today. But not to worry. I've seen many a Bludger hit in my day, and--"

"I wasn't playing Quidditch--"

He saw, but didn't understand the glance that passed between Snape and Malfoy.

"But you were, Harry," said Malfoy after a moment. "Here, look."

Malfoy reached behind him and picked something up from the next bed over. When he held it up, Harry recognized a set of Gryffindor Quidditch robes. They looked a bit on the large side, but that wasn't what most caught his attention.

"Those aren't mine," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. He didn't feel confused any longer. It seemed like everyone else was, though. "And don't call me Harry. I don't call you Draco, do I? What's wrong with the two of you?"

Another long glance passed between Snape and Malfoy.

"You don't recognise your robes?" asked Snape. It was the Potion Master's voice, no doubt about it, but it threw Harry all the same. He'd never heard Snape speak so . . . so . . . Harry didn't know how to describe it. He just knew that Snape was acting barmy. Hell, everybody was acting funny.

Except for Madam Pomfrey. She seemed more or less like her normal self.

"Of course I don't recognise them," said Harry, feeling odd to have to say it. "That's not my crest. It's not anybody's crest. It looks like it's for two houses."

Harry was getting really sick of those telling glances Malfoy and Snape kept sharing.

"I . . . I'll go and fetch Hermione," said Malfoy in a voice that sounded choked, somehow.
"Since when do you call her Hermione?" shouted Harry after him. He soon wished he hadn't. It made his head give a longish twinge. Well, what did he expect? There was no way Snape would give Harry Potter a headache draught that worked well, was there?

"Harry," said Snape slowly. "What is the last thing that you remember?"

Harry bristled. He wanted to shout again, but thought better of it, and not just because his skull felt like it could crack if he wasn't careful. It was also that unlike Malfoy, Snape wasn't a student. He was a mean, ugly git of a teacher who insisted on sir all the time, and it wouldn't matter to him that Harry was in the hospital wing. If he got annoyed, he'd assign detention and take points, and if he got annoyed enough, he might just throw Harry into a wall.

Well, probably not in front of Madam Pomfrey. But it had certainly happened before. Yeah, yeah, Harry shouldn't have looked into that Pensieve, but he still hadn't deserved to be manhandled--

"What is the last thing that you remember?" asked Snape again.

Harry was surprised that the man hadn't screamed the question that time. Or sneered it, at the very least. After all, Snape didn't like to repeat himself.

Harry debated not answering at all, but gave that up as just plain stupid. What did it matter if Snape knew what he remembered? "Breakfast. Sir."

Pomfrey was still waving her wand over his head, her frown more pronounced by now. Harry got the feeling that she was having trouble figuring things out. He could definitely sympathise. "The last thing you remember," prompted Pomfrey softly. "The very last thing."

Harry decided that he'd pretend that Snape wasn't there. "I was eating breakfast in the Great Hall. I . . . I think I knocked my pumpkin juice over. Ron was laughing--"

"That's good, Mr Potter. Very good. Can you remember the date?"

Harry raised a hand to his temple and rubbed it as he spoke. "September . . . uh, 26th? Er . . . 23rd, maybe. I'm not sure. September, though."

Snape made a low noise somewhere deep in his throat. If Harry hadn't known the kind of man he was, he'd have thought the Potions Master was in some sort of pain. But that was ridiculous.

Pomfrey lowered her wand hand to her side, her fingers tapping restlessly against the wood. "And the year, Mr Potter? Can you remember the year?"

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "Of course I can remember the year. It's 1996."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape go completely still and stiff.

Meanwhile, Pomfrey tucked her wand away in the front pocket of her medi-witch robes. "You sound quite definite."

"I think I'd know the year--"

"Harry--"

There he went again, saying Harry in that strained tone of voice. Maybe Snape was the one who needed to spend some time in the hospital wing.

Harry quashed that thought fast. If he'd been hit by a Bludger he might be here overnight, and he
really didn't want to spend that much time near Snape.

"Allow me to handle this, Severus," Madam Pomfrey interrupted the Potions Master.

Snape sat back again, crossing his arms over his chest.

Harry went back to ignoring him. Or trying, anyway. It wasn't that easy. He was too used to Snape picking apart every word he said, looking for real or imagined faults he could berate and ridicule.

"How are your classes going this term, then?" asked Pomfrey. She had a quill in her hand now, a parchment on a clipboard hovering in the air before her. Harry couldn't imagine what she was going to write down. What he thought of his classes couldn't possibly be relevant to the Bludger hit that had landed him in here.

"Pretty well."

"Could you be more specific?"

Harry sighed. First she wanted details about his breakfast, and now this. Maybe he'd been wrong before, and she was acting just as strange as everyone else.

"Professor Aran doesn't teach us much that's useful. He makes us spend a lot of time with the book. In-class time, I mean." Too bad if Pomfrey didn't want to hear complaints about other staff members. She'd asked for it. And Snape was sitting there listening to every word, which annoyed Harry enough that he heard himself go even further. "Sixth-year Potions is an even bigger bore than usual--"

"Oh, my." Pomfrey turned to Snape and spoke in a low voice. "Best to consult a specialist, I think. I'll make some firecalls and see how soon I can get someone here."

Madam Pomfrey was bustling off before Harry thought to ask, "A specialist for what?"

Instead of answering directly, Snape rose to his feet and stared down at him. For a long moment, Harry had the completely irrelevant thought that he'd never seen eyes that black in any other face. Then, very slowly, Snape asked a question. A stupid question. The stupidest one Harry had ever heard, from him or anybody else. "You truly don't remember me?"

"Of course I remember you. You're my Potions teacher." And a greasy git, he thought, but didn't say. Gryffindor had lost enough points last year on account of Umbridge. Harry was counting on this year to be better. And Aran was all right, as far as that went. Though it would have been nice if he knew his subject better.

"I'm more than your Potions teacher--"

Harry frowned. He knew he was a little shaky on the date, but he was sure he'd remember something important like Snape finally being appointed to teach Defence.

"Wait for the specialist before you tell him anything personal, Severus," said Pomfrey as she came back in.

Why would Snape have anything personal to tell him at all?

"You don't know what damage you could do, otherwise," continued Pomfrey. "This is a delicate situation, and one not well-understood by the magical healing community."
"Wizards are hardly strangers to the vagaries of memory loss," said Snape.

"We have some experience with magically induced memory loss. This is the result of a physical injury. We will wait for the specialist."

Snape looked frustrated by that, but he nodded.

"What are you talking about, memory loss? You mean it's not September?"

It was Pomfrey who answered. "No, Mr Potter. It is no longer September."

The way she said it made a chill course up his spine. Like . . . like something was very, very wrong. Harry's teeth started chattering. "Is it October?"

"It is November, Harry," said Snape, reaching out to take his hand again. Harry wanted to jerk away, but the sheer horror of the situation seemed to hold him transfixed. He'd lost memories? He'd lost time? When the hell was it then?

He was sure he hadn't asked, but Snape answered the question anyway. "It is November, 1997."

Harry felt like he'd been squashed flat by a falling lorry. "I . . . you . . . did you just say . . . 1997? This is-- this is some kind of joke. Isn't it? You're testing a new potion. A gullibility potion--"

"Nobody has been testing any potions, Mr Potter," said Pomfrey sternly. "You were playing Quidditch this morning and you sustained a Bludger hit to the temple. It appears to have given you a spot of amnesia, which I'm sure is merely temporary."

*Quidditch* . . . "You mean those actually are my robes?" Harry shuddered. A snake on his crest, and more than that, Snape and Malfoy sitting with him in the hospital wing . . . "What the hell's been going this past year?"

Snape opened his mouth, then shut it with an audible click of his teeth. Pomfrey shot him a sympathetic glance, but her tone was brisk and businesslike when she returned her gaze to Harry.

"We will wait for the specialist, and that's all there is to the matter, Mr Potter."

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other:*
Chapter Fourteen: "Forget Me Not"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"Harry?"

Harry turned his head at the sound of Hermione's voice and saw her rushing through the doors of the hospital wing, Ron close at her heels. Malfoy came in after them and went straight to Snape, asking something in a hushed whisper. Snape shook his head as he replied in a voice too low to hear.

Harry tried his best to relax. Bit difficult, considering he'd just been told there was an entire year he couldn't remember, but now that his friends were here he could at least make an effort to calm down.

"We've been so worried, Harry," Hermione was saying as she dragged a chair close to his bedside. "That Bludger hit looked terrible, and then you fell so far! Even with the cushioning charms Dumbledore cast the impact must have been severe, and then you were unconscious for so long and--"

"Let a bloke get his breath. Hermione," said Ron, standing behind her with one hand on her shoulder. He threw Harry a lopsided grin. "Good to see you awake, mate."

Finally, some people acting normally around him. Harry sighed with relief. He didn't know what the hell was wrong with Snape and Malfoy, but he didn't really care. "So I really was playing Quidditch today?"

Hermione slowly nodded. "Oh, dear. Draco told us that you were having some trouble remembering--"

All right, so maybe she wasn't acting like her normal self. "Malfoy, you mean?"

Her face fell even further. In the next moment, she glanced over toward Snape, clearly seeking some kind of guidance.

The Potions Master glided silently forward; Malfoy continued to lean against the opposite wall, his eyes fixed on Harry in a way that was frankly creepy. Maybe because Harry couldn't find any hostility on his face. That was practically a first, and Harry didn't like the feeling that he didn't know what to expect from the other boy. It was a ridiculous feeling, anyway. Harry always knew what to expect from Malfoy.

"We're waiting for a specialist, Miss Granger."

_Miss Granger_. Well, that answered one question, anyway. Snape hadn't had some kind of personality transplant that made him call all the students by their first names. So why the hell had he been calling Harry by his?

"You can wait all you like. I want to know what's going on." Harry turned back to Hermione. "Is it
really not the start of sixth year?"

The moment he'd said it, he knew it was a stupid question. Hermione and Ron, and hell, even Malfoy they looked a little different than he'd expect. Older, all of them. And Ron was broader in the shoulders than he should be, while Malfoy was quite a bit taller -- he was almost as tall as Snape. And Hermione . . . Harry hurriedly lifted his eyes from her chest. He didn't want to stare, but he was sure she hadn't been quite so curvy the last time he'd seen her . . .

Hermione didn't reply until Snape gave a slight nod.

"It's near the start of our seventh year, Harry," she said, pulling up a chair to his bedside. She laid a hand on his forearm and smiled in a sympathetic way.

Harry lowered his voice, but not because he was worried about being rude. It was more that he couldn't figure out how Snape might react to his question. Better safe than sorry. "What are Snape and Malfoy doing in here?"

She looked at Snape again.

By then, Harry was tired of it. What was wrong with everybody? "What are you two doing in here?" he asked for himself in a much louder voice.

Snape tapped a finger against the side of his face, like he was mentally debating what to say. That thought brought Harry up short, because he was sure, or almost sure anyway, that he shouldn't be able to read Snape's mannerisms as well as that.

"Draco and I are in here because we are . . . concerned about you," Snape finally said in a low tone. "But more than that I dare not say until the specialist is here to advise us as to particulars."

Harry hardly even heard the last bit. "Concerned about me?" he asked, not bothering to hide his disbelief. Why should he? "Look, I suppose I can believe I've lost a year. It would be hard to doubt it, considering Ron's grown half a foot and Hermione's finally got some . . . er, but what the hell's been going on? Because everybody's acting practically mental, and I'm getting pretty tired of this 'wait for the specialist' crap, and--" Harry suddenly whipped his head around to glare at Malfoy. "Don't you have something to do besides stare at me, Ferret? What's the matter, no Inquisitorial Squad meetings to attend this year?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes as if he didn't like that, didn't like it at all. "Draco!"

That was Hermione and Snape at the same time, and Harry didn't know what was stranger, that Hermione kept calling Malfoy by his first name or that Snape would actually sound angry with a Slytherin. He hardly ever had before. No, when Malfoy started something it was always Potter who got the blame for it, always Potter who lost points--

Then it dawned on him what Malfoy had said. "D.A.? Malfoy's in the D.A.? And planning the meetings?"

"You've missed a lot, mate," said Ron.

"Yeah, like why the robes that are supposedly mine have the weirdest crest ever," said Harry sourly. By then, he wasn't even bothered that Snape and Malfoy were still hanging about. He just wanted answers. So he raised his voice. A lot. "Anybody care to explain?"
"I'm sorry, Harry, but we can't," said Hermione, stroking his arm a little. "Your . . . I mean, Professor Snape is right. We'd better wait for the specialist."

A sudden pain began stabbing Harry behind the eyelids. He scrunched up his face and clenched his eyes, trying to force the feeling back, but that only made it worse.

"You shouldn't have shouted, you idiot child," said Snape's voice from close beside him.

Harry flinched back as he peered at the man through slitted eyes. "Don't call me an idiot--"

Snape sighed and waved his wand to dim the lights in the room. It helped; until then, Harry hadn't realised that the bright lights had been irritating him. After that, the Potions Master held out a spoon coated in some kind of glop that looked a lot thicker than the potion he'd taken before. "You need more headache draught. And for Merlin's sake, this time don't stress yourself. Just relax and wait for the specialist."

Harry didn't want any favours from Snape, but he also didn't want another argument with Madam Pomfrey, so he yanked the spoon from Snape's grip and opened his mouth. The stuff tasted foul, but that came as no surprise. When had Snape ever brewed anything that tasted good?

"Now," said Harry in a more quiet voice, "is there anything that anyone can tell me?"

Ron bit his lip. "Uh . . . not really . . ."

Harry lay back against his pillow and crossed his arms. There had to be something his friends could tell him. "Not even who won the Quidditch game?"

"Nobody won," said Malfoy, even though Harry hadn't been talking to him. "You fell from your broom after the Bludger hit you, and that was that."

Harry snorted. "Well, that answers another question then. Was Gryffindor playing Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw? Because there's no way that Slytherin would stop playing on account of me falling to my death."

"It was Gryffindor vs. Slytherin, Harry," said Hermione in a chiding tone.

Harry didn't think she would lie to him, but he still scoffed. "And what, Slytherin has the worst Seeker ever, passing up a chance to grab the Snitch while I was out of commission?"

"I wasn't even tempted," said Malfoy, stepping forward.

"You're the Slytherin Seeker this year?" Harry barked a laugh. "All right, in that case I understand. You probably forgot all about the Snitch, the minute you saw me falling. Glee can do that. And just think, you didn't even have to dress up like a Dementor this time--"

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Malfoy fiercely. "You're going to feel like an imbecile when it all comes back to you!"

"I feel like an imbecile right now, for wasting more than three words on you--"

"Draco," said Snape quietly. "Stop agitating Harry. He can't remember."

"You know, I did notice that, Severus!"

Severus?
Harry turned back to his friends. "Quidditch games don't stop on account of accidents. Why didn't Gryffindor send in our reserve Seeker when I fell?"

Ron blinked. "Uh . . . well, because Draco's Quidditch captain for Slytherin, and he almost crashed himself, he landed so quickly to see if you were all right, and when his team kept playing he grounded them, and it wouldn't have been right for us to keep playing when they wouldn't--"

"You're calling him 'Draco,'" said Harry dully. "Just like Hermione."

"Well, you really did miss a lot--"

It was a good thing that the doors opened then to admit Dumbledore, because Harry was just about to start shouting again, even though he could tell that it would summon his headache back. Beside the headmaster was a tall, thin wizard with thinning hair and a goatee. The specialist, Harry thought. He hoped so, anyway.

"Severus, Draco, Harry," said Dumbledore, his robes rustling as he moved forward. "This is Healer Yatesborough."

Harry thought it more than a bit weird that Dumbledore would ignore Ron and Hermione but introduce the healer to Malfoy, of all people. Snape he could understand, maybe. Well, if the specialist was going to need some potions, anyway.

Harry held out his hand. He might be laid up in the hospital wing with a bandage the size of a turban wrapped around the left half of his head, but he wanted to get out of here and back to Gryffindor Tower, where hopefully, people wouldn't be acting like . . . like they knew things he didn't. Getting on the healer's good side sounded like the best way to get out of here fast. "Hallo. I'm Harry Potter. Pleased to meet you."

"And you," echoed Healer Yatesborough as he swiftly glanced at Harry's forehead. Ha. The bandage felt like it was low enough to cover his scar.

"Perhaps we could clear the room," said the healer in a mild voice. "I'd prefer to consult with the patient in private."

Snape and Dumbledore exchanged a glance, and though Harry couldn't really read much into it, he did get the feeling that they were thinking about the Order. Which made some kind of sense, Harry supposed. This Yatesborough character could be a Death Eater in disguise, for all they knew. He might be here to kill Harry Potter.

Well, probably not. But if Yatesborough was going to treat Harry's memory loss, then he might have to muck about in Harry's mind, and who knew what he might find there? For all Snape was a lousy teacher and an even worse human being, Harry knew that he was a loyal member of the Order carrying out the dangerous assignment of spying on Voldemort for Dumbledore.

Harry didn't want to get Snape killed, even if Snape hadn't felt the same way about Sirius.

A wave of something painful washed across his heart then. Sirius. If Harry had been alone, he'd have curled up in his blankets and closed his eyes the way he'd done day after day during the summer. Thank God the Dursleys had more or less left him alone with his grief -- not that they'd known he was grieving. For some reason Harry didn't understand now and hadn't understood then, they'd just left him alone.

But he wasn't alone now, so he had to soldier on. He wasn't going to break down in front of Snape,
was he? Or Malfoy, who was staring at him again. "Get out, Malfoy," said Harry harshly. "I don't want you in here."

"Déjà vu," murmured Malfoy in a tone of voice that was just . . . odd. Well, for Malfoy.

"Draco," prompted Snape.

Malfoy glanced at Harry one last time, but then he walked toward the doors and vanished through them. Finally. Harry breathed a sigh of relief. "Ron and Hermione can stay," he told the healer. He didn't want to say the next bit but considering what he'd realised the moment before, about the Order, he pretty much had to. "And the headmaster. He should be here while you cast spells on me, or whatever. And Madame Pomfrey. But I want Snape, I mean Professor Snape to leave."

"Now, Harry," began Dumbledore.

"He's got no right to be in here if I don't want him."

"Actually, I do," said Snape.

"Not technically," said Pomfrey, who had come out of her office soon after the healer had arrived. "The boy is of age."

Snape actually gnashed his teeth at that, though why he should want to much to hang about while Harry was examined was a mystery. What was it to him?

"Would you all leave me alone with Harry for a moment?" asked Dumbledore in a tone Harry recognised. It was like the calm before the storm. Nobody dared refuse him the request, although Snape did step close to say, "Albus, we need the specialist's advice about the best way to proceed--"

"Yes, yes, Severus. Trust me."

Snape looked like he pretty much didn't, but he left as the headmaster had requested. So did everyone else, including the healer and Madam Pomfrey. Harry hid his sigh as he watched Ron and Hermione walking away. He knew he shouldn't feel abandoned; his friends would be waiting just outside the door. It was still hard, though, being left alone with Dumbledore. The last time he'd spent much time with the headmaster, he'd been destroying the man's office. For good reason, too. If Dumbledore had just bothered to tell Harry what was going on that year, then Harry would have had more reason to suspect a trick when he'd got that vision.

Damn it, Sirius would be alive today if people would just stop keeping secrets from Harry--

"Now, Harry," said Dumbledore again, taking the seat Hermione had vacated. The next words out of his mouth made Harry feel like the man had been reading his mind. For all Harry knew, he had. It wouldn't surprise him a bit if Dumbledore used wandless Legilimency all the time. It was probably why he was so good at manipulating everybody. "If you were a member of the Order, and I asked you to do something very difficult because I told you that it was important, would you do as I'd asked? Even if I couldn't explain my reasoning?"

"But I'm not a member of the Order," said Harry. The more he thought about it, the more resentful he felt. "Nobody tells me anything."

"But if you were?"

"But I'm not."
They could probably have gone 'round in circles for an hour, but something in Dumbledore's gaze startled Harry, then. He didn't know what it was. Not a twinkle, certainly. Maybe . . . a glint. Like Harry was wrong, but Dumbledore couldn't quite say so until the specialist let people tell him what had happened during his missing year.

"Wait. Am I? A member of the Order?" Suddenly Harry felt much less fussed.

"You are in fact of age," said Dumbledore, which was no answer at all. But then, Dumbledore often meandered like that when he was trying to tell you something . . . "Harry, there are many things that you do not know at present, and until the specialist examines you, we cannot know how best to proceed. But I am asking you as a personal favour not to insist that Severus leave the room while the healer works with you."

All right, maybe Harry was still pretty fussed. "I don't owe you any favours. You told me that Sirius got himself killed! As if it was his fault he had to put up with the most evil house-elf ever!" An ugly feeling bloomed inside Harry's chest. He felt like he'd have no trouble casting Crucio and meaning it. "Is Kreacher still at headquarters?"

"No," said Dumbledore in a sharp voice. "He's not. And you may not owe me any favours but I am asking you to grant this one regardless."

"Why?" asked Harry suspiciously. "I'm sure the healer can tell Snape later if any potions are needed--"

"This isn't about potions."

Harry wanted to ask what it was about, but he knew he wouldn't get an answer. Well, at least all the secret-keeping made sense for once. They might make his memory problem worse if they didn't get professional advice before they started telling him why it seemed like left was right and up was down.

"Oh, fine," he said, but not graciously. "Snape can stay. Professor Snape, I mean. You don't have to remind me. Make him keep back, though. I don't want him looming over me. And you stay too, in case this healer bloke is bad news for the Order. And Ron and Hermione can come back in--"

"I think that just Severus and myself should be present. And Madam Pomfrey, of course."

Harry resisted an urge to make a face. "Fine. Whatever."

Yatesborough didn't look like he appreciated the arrangement, but he obviously wasn't willing to argue with the headmaster. Harry didn't know what Dumbledore had said to Snape when he'd stepped into the corridor, but Snape took up a position about fifteen feet away. Harry could hardly call that looming, even if the man still looked forbidding in his voluminous black robes, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes a steady black as he stared at Harry.

The healer began with a series of questions. They seemed sort of stupid, considering that Harry told him straight off that he could remember everything just fine, right up until sometime in September of his sixth year.

Yatesborough wasn't satisfied with that, though. He insisted on going over Harry's life before Hogwarts in detail.

Where did you go to primary school? What was the name of your first teacher there? Which stories did you like when you were a child? And on and on.
Harry didn't have any trouble answering all that, or telling the healer that one of his very earliest memories was of Aunt Petunia trying to make him eat cooked carrots, which were pretty disgusting, after all.

"Ah," said the healer in a slow, meditative way. "And your Aunt . . . Petunia was her name? What was she like?"

Harry's skin prickled all over. "What was she like?" he echoed. Something about the way Yatesborough had said that was just . . . off. Harry didn't think he meant, what was she like back then. It had sounded more final than that, somehow.

Not that he understood what the healer could possibly have meant.

"I imagine she's the same as always," he said, shrugging. "Though she was awful quiet this past summer. Or, I mean, the last summer I remember. Huh . . . she let the house get in a state, and Uncle Vernon was cooking most nights, and--"

He'd been about to say that his aunt hadn't even yelled at him much, or dragged him from his room to clean things up, but he stopped himself in time. It wasn't the healer's business to know that Harry's family treated him like an elf. And he certainly didn't want Snape listening to things like that. It was bad enough that the man had seen personal things during those pointless Occlumency lessons.

"Can you think of a reason why she might have been so quiet?"

Harry shrugged. "Not really. It's not like her. But . . . uh, I don't even remember seeing very much of her over the summer. And that's really odd. Do you think my memory problems go back that far?"

"I can't say at this point, not unless someone can illuminate the matter for us--"

"I can," announced Snape. He stepped forward but stopped moving when Dumbledore made a hand gesture. "Harry accurately remembers the summer before his sixth year. He had very little contact with his aunt."

Harry supposed that meant that Snape had been one of his guards. Though that didn't explain how he would know what went on inside the house!

The healer nodded, one hand slowly stroking his goatee. "I see, I see. Well, I think it's time for a little spell-work."

"Not Legilimency. I hate that."

"No, no. Merely a few gentle diagnostic spells." Yatesboroughbrandished his wand and began chanting soft, sing-song incantations as he moved it in loops near Harry's left ear. Harry felt a buzzing sensation and then a lighter vibration that made him think his brain had taken up humming. Both those fell away when the healer stopped casting, and that was when Harry first noticed that his mind felt kind of watery. It was like his thoughts were submerged beneath the surface of a large, calm lake . . . but the strange part was that it didn't seem to make them sluggish. It wasn't at all like swimming . . . well, what Harry imagined swimming must be like. Except for his time with Gillyweed, he'd never been.

"Hmm," murmured the healer, his eyes closed as he . . . well, did something. Harry had no idea what, but he supposed it had to do with the watery feeling that now seemed to completely fill his head. "Yes. Hmm. Well, well. Isn't that interesting . . ."
"Healer?" asked the headmaster.

He shook his head sharply as though coming out of a trance. Harry almost felt like he was coming out of one too; as the healer's diagnostic spells faded away, so did the watery sensation that had been wrapped around his thoughts. "This is an unusual case. Mr Potter's memory loss apparently came about as a result of a blow to the skull, but I must tell you, there is more to it than that."

Dumbledore leaned forward like he was interested in knowing everything. Snape, Harry noticed, went stiff.

"I sense strong magic at play. I can't say what sort, but it seems clear enough that the Bludger hit I witnessed in your Pensieve," at this he nodded slightly toward Dumbledore, "cued something magical in nature to occur."

"Then magic can reverse it," said Dumbledore quietly.

If anything, Snape went even stiffer when he heard that.

"Yes, I would think so. One thing I can tell for certain is that Obliviate was not involved. Therefore, it should be safe to try a few Class R memory spells--"

It wasn't, though. As soon as the healer cast the first spell, Harry clutched his head and yelped. "Ow, ow! Are you sure you're not throwing invisible Bludgers at me, because it feels-- Ouch!"

"Oh dear," said Yatesborough. "I'm encountering a fair bit of resistance--"

"You think?" shouted Harry, and then wished he hadn't because it made the lights in the room seem like blades slicing his eyeballs into ribbons. Even though he could tell they were still dimmed from Snape's spell.

"Stop," said Snape, though the healer already had. "I can't keep dosing him with headache draught every ten minutes."

Yeah, Snape probably had loads of more important things to do--

"It will lose effectiveness and then we'll truly have a problem," Snape added.

Oh.

"Perhaps you can try again tomorrow," suggested Dumbledore.

"No, a reaction like that means that magical healing is not an option," said the healer in a firm voice. "Mr Potter will have to recover his memories in his own time. I recommend that you retain the services of someone skilled in non-magical treatment of the mind. Of course, there are very few witches or wizards who specialise in that field, and to my knowledge none in Britain, but I am aware of a squib psychiatrist who take on the occasional magical cases. Her name is Grate, I believe. Or Goode... at any rate, I shall find out and procure her address for you."

"Thank you," said Snape gravely, though he had a strange look on his face. Harry couldn't read it at all. "Do you think we can tell Harry a few things before she comes? About his aunt, for example?"

What about his aunt?

"Oh, yes," said Yatesborough as he tucked his wand away. "That shouldn't pose any problem. Since the memory loss is magical in nature, the Bludger hit merely providing an opportunity for
magic to latch onto, you can proceed mainly as though Obliviate were involved. Explain his missing year so he has some context in which to understand his current circumstances, absolutely. But considering the reaction he just had, I wouldn't advise you to try to restore his memories by Pensieving your own. That would likely cause more harm than good. For techniques that may assist Mr Potter to recover from the amnesia, consult . . . I'll owl you her name straight away.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," said Dumbledore. "Poppy, would you be so good as to show Healer Yatesborough out? Severus and I will need a few moments to explain things to Harry."

As the door opened Harry heard a chatter of quick voices asking the healer questions. Hermione, and Ron, and damn it, even Malfoy's distinctive aristocratic tones. Why on earth would he hang about in the corridor?

Then the door closed, sealing Harry in with Dumbledore and Snape. For some reason, Harry was put in mind of a tomb. He felt like he'd been condemned; he just didn't know to what. His palms suddenly went clammy. "What about my aunt, then?"

It was Snape who answered, and he stepped close to do it. His hand fluttered along the edge of the bed as he spoke. It was like he didn't know where to put it, and that only made Harry feel even more uneasy. Snape never fidgeted. Never.

"Your aunt has died," said Snape, locking his gaze with Harry's. "Your uncle, as well."

Harry felt all the air leave his lungs. Dead, really? They were gone? Both of them?

He knew he should probably feel a lot more sad than he did, but he couldn't, not when he compared the Dursleys to Sirius. He knew what it was like to lose a loved one. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had never really been that to him, for all they were his only family. Or almost--

"Dudley, too?"

"Your cousin is fine. In fact, you get on with him quite well these days."

"You're joking." Except, Snape never joked, so that was that. Harry cleared his throat. "Um . . . Dudley wasn't in the car?"

"It wasn't a car accident, Harry," said Dumbledore from the foot of the bed.

Of course not. There were plenty of ways to die, after all. Harry knew that. He just couldn't seem to shake himself of the habit of always thinking "car accident" when he heard about someone in the Muggle world dying.

"Your aunt died of leukaemia, and your uncle, a few weeks later in a Death Eater attack."

"Oh, God," said Harry dully. "They killed him to get to me. That's horrible, especially considering-" he gulped. He didn't want to say the rest, true as it was. Killing Vernon Dursley wasn't a very good way to get to Harry, since there wasn't much love lost there. Which meant that Uncle Vernon had died for nothing.

"It's not your fault," said Snape in a soothing voice. Soothing! Harry didn't know what to make of it.

That problem vanished when the man's fluttering fingers came to rest on the top of Harry's hand. Harry yanked it away, a bolt of revulsion spearing through him from head to toe. He didn't want Snape anywhere near him. It was wrong, it was terrible . . . it made Harry angry. Really angry.
Huh . . . it made him a lot angrier than was probably reasonable. Harry was aware of that, but it
didn't matter, not when he felt filled from head to toe with blazing, boiling fury. As he should,
considering! Sirius' death might be over a year ago for everyone else in the room, but the memory
felt fresh and raw to Harry. And what had Snape done to save Sirius, that awful night? Nothing.
Not one damned thing. Snape hadn't lifted a finger to help.

So of course Harry was still angry. "Don't touch me," he muttered, shuddering. "Just . . . don't."

Snape stepped back a full foot and tucked his hands into the folds of his robes. "It's not your fault,"
he said again. "Your uncle was targeted because he had promised to hand you over to Voldemort
and he didn't; the Order had you too well secured."

"Oh, God," said Harry, just as dully as the time before. He hadn't expected to hear that he'd never
see his aunt and uncle again. The shock he'd felt before rushed through him like a whirlwind. And
not just shock at the fact that in the end, Vernon had wanted Harry dead. He'd noticed something
else by then, one more thing that didn't fit the world he'd lived in yesterday. Harry raised his eyes
to Snape's, his terrible anger muted for the moment. "You said his name."

"Yes."

"But . . . you never say his name . . ."

Snape's dark eyes glimmered. "You persuaded me that it was for the best."

Harry didn't like the sound of that, and he liked the way Snape was looking at him even less. Those
black eyes weren't supposed to hold anything but hatred when it came to all things Potter, but there
was nothing like that in them now. And that . . . it was just wrong. Harry couldn't think about it. "I
guess with Aunt Petunia gone the blood wards on Privet Drive vanished? That's why the Death
Eaters could attack?" He tried not to think about why they'd attacked. It was too terrible to
contemplate . . . but he ended up thinking about it, all the same. His own uncle selling him out.
Uncle Vernon must have hated him a lot more than Harry had known. But he should have known.
In the past few years it had been increasingly obvious that Vernon only tolerated him because Aunt
Petunia had insisted.

Aunt Petunia, who was dead too . . .

His hands were shaking, he noticed. Harry drew in a deep breath and tried to keep them still. It was
difficult, though. Finding out he'd lost a year wasn't much compared to what had happened during
that year. And from the look on both Dumbledore and Snape's faces, there was more. A lot more.

He sucked in another huge breath. "All right, I'm ready. Tell me the rest."

"Just the most essential facts, I think, Severus," murmured the headmaster, his hands clasped in
front of him.

Snape looked like he had very little idea where to start, which was another bizarre look for him.
"Ah. Well. You had no family to speak of, and you also lost your magic for a long while--"

"I lost my magic?" Harry narrowed his eyes. "Where's my wand?"

"I have it."

Harry goggled. "Why?"

Snape gave him an impatient look. "With you unconscious it seemed best to safeguard it."
"No, I meant, why you? And give it over."

"Not until we've spoken," said Snape, a slight tremor in his voice. "As for why me . . . well, we come to the substance of what I need to tell you. Harry . . ."

"It will be all right, Severus," murmured the headmaster from the end of the bed.

Snape shot him a cross glance, like he didn't appreciate the interruption when he was clearly gathering his thoughts, or maybe his courage.

"Look," said Harry, his hands itching for his wand. He could hardly stand the thought that Snape had it. "I want my wand back. So if we have to talk about something first, then talk, for God's sake. Why don't you start by explaining why you keep using my first name, all right? I really . . . don't understand that."

Snape gave a shallow nod. Barely more than a twitch, actually. "I took your wand after the accident for the same reason I have called you Harry for over a year now. You . . ." A rasping noise filled the room as he cleared his throat. "You are my son."

You are my son . . . you are my son . . . you are my son . . .

The words clanged in his head over and over like a bell gone mad. Words that didn't make any sense unless--

Harry suddenly wanted his wand ten times as much as before. He flung an arm out, almost like he had his wand in hand, and to his shock, Snape practically leapt out of the way.

"Put your arm down," said Dumbledore sternly.

"But he said--"

"Put your arm down at once!"

Harry did, though he had no idea what the big deal was. Pointing wasn't that rude. "You take it back," he said, glaring at Snape since he wasn't allowed to point. "You take that back right now!"

Snape looked paler than usual, like he wasn't sure his heart could stand another fright, though it wasn't clear to Harry what could have frightened him. "I won't take it back. Whether you can remember or not, whether you care for it or not, you are in fact my son--"

Harry couldn't help it; he growled. "The only way I could be your son is if my mum cheated on my dad, and I know you love to go on about how my father was a right tosser, but my mum loved him, all right, and she wouldn't do a nasty thing like that--"

"Ah," said Dumbledore.

Snape's jaw dropped open.

"No, no Severus didn't intend for you to think that," said the headmaster in tones so calming they almost seemed to have a draught lurking in them somewhere. "Your mother was a fine woman and very much in love with James. Yes, of course. Severus, do tell Harry that you didn't mean to malign her memory."

"I didn't mean to malign her at all," croaked Snape.

"Not even when you called her a Mudblood?" jeered Harry.
He instantly felt ashamed. He knew it was wrong to spread information he'd only got because he'd looked at memories that were none of his business, but damn it, for Snape to claim he'd slept with Harry's mum was just too much to take--

"You are my adopted son," said Snape in a hard voice, then. He sounded like he'd like to smack Harry. But the look on his face didn't match that impression, so Harry ended up just feeling confused. About everything.

"Adopted son," he slowly repeated. "Come again?"

"I adopted you. Is that clear enough?"

"No. Why would you, and why would I agree?" Harry narrowed his eyes. "I bet I didn't. Hell, I bet you didn't either. Dumbledore insisted, huh? Like with Occlumency lessons!"

"I was pleased to adopt you as by then I had come to care for you," said Snape stiffly. "And yes, you agreed. On your part it was more a practical decision at first, as the nominal reason for the adoption was to establish wards similar to the ones that formerly protected you on Privet Drive. However, it wasn't long before you adjusted to having a father and a family to call your own."

"Call my own?" echoed Harry. "You don't mean that I call you Father, do you?"

"Not often. You usually say 'Dad' or Severus, though you revert to 'sir' when you are annoyed with me."

Harry snorted. "Which would be all the time. And what do you call me?"

Snape had started rubbing the bridge of his nose, but that question had him looking at Harry incredulously. "Harry, of course. Hasn't that been amply demonstrated since you woke up?"

"You'd better not mean Harry Snape--"

"You didn't take my name."

"Yeah, well I hope not!" Harry didn't care that that was rude. The whole idea of being Snape's adopted son was just . . . well, gross. He wasn't even sure he believed it; it was that bizarre. On the other hand, he really didn't think that Albus Dumbledore would stand by and say nothing while Snape spun out a web of lies like this one. So then, it must be true. Unlikely as that seemed.

Snape looked like he was debating with himself again. Evidently the answer he had reached was yes, since he went on to say, "Draco, however, did."

"Did what?"

A hint of a razor like smile crossed Snape's features the moment before he spoke. "Draco took my name when I adopted him. He's your brother."

Now Harry was the one left gaping. "He is not!"

"Oh yes, he most certainly is."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Harry, pushing himself to sit up even though it hurt.

"I assure you, Harry, everything Severus is telling you is quite true," said the headmaster mildly.

"But Malfoy's already got parents!"
Snape and the headmaster exchanged another one of those "Order-business" looks that Harry was coming to recognise.

"They're dead?" guessed Harry. "Somebody in the . . . uh, the old crowd killed them?"

"We're well-warded here; you may speak openly," said Dumbledore, though he sounded pleased. Maybe because Harry had remembered to be careful, even though he'd forgotten earlier. Or maybe because Malfoy's horrible parents were dead--

"The situation with your brother is complicated," said Dumbledore. "Draco's parents disowned him in a way that severed their parental rights, which meant it was possible for Severus to adopt him. Afterwards, Lucius Malfoy did indeed die. However, and I must stress that I am trusting you with information of the most sensitive nature; you must be careful to keep it strictly to yourself--"

"So I am in the Order!"

"You and Draco are both in the Order," said Snape.

Well, that certainly popped Harry's bubble. He scowled, even though he knew it was probably making him look stupid and immature.

"As I was saying, Harry, it is not generally known that Lucius Malfoy died last spring. Our own Remus Lupin has been impersonating him so that we may continue to have access to Voldemort's inner circle."

Harry blinked and looked toward Snape again. "Why would we need more access than you . . . ?"

"Sure you don't think that Severus could continue to spy after it became common knowledge that he had adopted you," said Dumbledore gently.

"People know about this?"

The second he'd asked that, Harry knew he shouldn't have. The answer was obvious. His friends had known, and Madam Pomfrey, and thinking back, it seemed like even the healer had had some idea. No wonder he hadn't baulked when Snape had demanded to stay through Harry's healing session. Though there hadn't been much healing, had there?

Just as well. He wasn't sure he wanted to remember a mess like this. Brothers with Malfoy . . . what a farce.

"Yes, people know," said Snape in a sharp tone. "An adoption is a matter of public record, Harry."

"And with you in particular being of some interest to the wizarding world . . ." Dumbledore made a vague gesture.

"But couldn't you have done something?" asked Harry desperately. "To keep it quiet? I mean, if it was just so we could get some warding done, but wait, how come Snape could ward the Tower? Wouldn't he have to be a Gryffindor at least? And--"

"Weren't you listening to me before? I did not adopt you merely in order to establish the wards."

"Well, that's your problem, isn't it?" Harry shot back. "I don't know what made me get so . . . so mental last year, but whatever it was, I'm over it now. I wouldn't let you adopt me no matter what warding needed to be done!"
"You'd prefer to die?"

"So it was just for the warding!"

"No, it was not." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "Harry, I know you don't remember, but we were happy together, you and Draco and I."

Harry ignored that. He had to. It was bloody ridiculous. "You didn't answer me about the Tower."

"My quarters have been warded for your protection. You didn't live in the Tower during most of last year. Not, in fact, until your magic had come back."

"It is back though, right?" Harry held out his hand again. "Right, then. I want my wand."

"It's back, but it can be . . . problematic," said Snape, reaching deep into a pocket of his innermost robe.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think perhaps it would be best to let you learn by experience," murmured Snape. "Harry . . . do try not to become alarmed if your wand is a little . . . resistant when you first attempt a spell."

Resistant? Whatever. Harry snatched his wand with more force than was necessary, but he couldn't help it. He'd lived too long in the wizarding world to feel comfortable without it at hand. His summers locked away from it had been pure torture, especially after Voldemort had returned during the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Harry hadn't known, not then, about the wards protecting him.

His wand felt good in his hand. Solid and dependable, like a friend that could always be trusted. In fact, like a long-lost friend who had finally come home. But that wasn't very sensible. Everyone kept saying that the Bludger had hit him "today," so he couldn't have been out of things for more than eight or twelve hours . . . Maybe he was just relieved that Snape had decided to hand his wand over. He was behaving so strangely that Harry had worried, a bit at least, that Snape would try to keep it for some reason.

"Lumos," he said, raising an eyebrow when the tip of his wand lit up just like it should, with a bright, strong light somewhere between yellow and orange. "Nox. Doesn't seem very resistant to me."

When he glanced away from the tip of his wand, it was to see that both Snape and Dumbledore looked dumbfounded. Or perhaps staggered would be a better word.

Harry wasn't sure what that was about, but he had a bad feeling about the way Dumbledore's eyes had lost every trace of twinkle. A really bad feeling. Snape, he saw, was actually white about the mouth.

Holding back a sigh, Harry lifted his chin, ready to face whatever had them so upset. "Well? What is it now?"

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Fifteen: "Bad Planning"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Bad Planning

Twenty minutes later, Harry felt like his head was spinning. It was too much to take in at once. Far too much. Hell, he'd need at least a month just to get used to the idea that Snape had apparently spent Harry's sixth year adopting students left, right, and centre. That was unbelievable enough. But the news about his magic was actually beyond belief.

As Snape explained things, his magic had come back wonky. Not that Snape had used that word, but that was definitely what he'd meant, since according to him, Harry had just spent months able to cast spells only in Parseltongue. Even stranger, if Harry used his wand when he did it, his spells were phenomenally strong. As in, your-Serpensortia-produced-a-Basilisk strong. So usually Harry used wandless magic. Wandless!

But nobody except a small circle of people was supposed to know he was able to do that, so he'd got used to pretending to use his wand when he wasn't really using it at all. His "dark powers" were also a secret, so much so that Harry had actually been pretending to be a weak wizard whose magic had never come back properly.

But none of that mattered any longer, really, because when Harry tried to cast a spell in Parseltongue--while looking at that horrible crest, since he had to see a snake--he couldn't get anything magical to happen. It didn't matter if he used his wand or not.

His regular magic was the same as before, just as if the year Harry had forgotten had never happened at all.

"It may simply be a matter of the correct incantations," Snape had murmured to Dumbledore after Harry's tenth Parseltongue spell did absolutely nothing.

"Yes, yes, his spell lexicon--"

When Harry had questioned that, they'd explained a bit about how personalised his spells had to be, since his Parseltongue magic had been responding to the way Harry thought about spells when he had first learned them, and not necessarily the way those spells were expressed in Latin.

"I'll try this lexicon, then," he had said, feeling exhausted. "But honestly, I think that Bludger just knocked me back into my normal life." The one where I'm not Snape's adopted son..."I'm not supposed to have powers like that--"

"The prophecy would suggest otherwise. A power the Dark Lord knows not, Harry," said Dumbledore as he peered over the top of his half-moon glasses.

Harry bristled. Yeah, he wanted to win the war, but he wasn't a weapon, and it wasn't his fault if he didn't have these dark powers any longer--

"There are other matters we should discuss," said Snape in a smooth voice. Harry cast him a sidelong glance, wondering what was going on. He didn't really think that Snape had noticed his annoyance, so he must have some Slytherin reason of his own to change the subject like that.

Those "other matters" turned out to be a jumble of isolated facts that seemed to whirl around inside his head, some of them almost doing hand-stands as they clamoured for attention. Harry couldn't really stop to think about any of them in much detail, not when so many of them were jumping up and down and shouting at him.
His crest looked like it did because he was a member of Slytherin and Gryffindor both. All the teachers were calling Malfoy "Draco Snape." Professor Snape had a house out in the country somewhere, and when they went there on holidays, Malfoy and Harry had to share a room. They'd also shared a room in Snape's quarters for months, yet somehow, Harry hadn't been murdered in his sleep. Not even when he'd been without his magic, which had gone on for most of the previous year.

About the only thing he'd heard that made sense was that Malfoy had been expelled. About damned time. It was just a shame that the Governors had decided to let him back in.

"I think that's enough," said Harry faintly when Snape started explaining that Nott was in Azkaban for pushing Pansy Parkinson out of the Owlery. "I can't . . . I don't want to hear any more just now."

It seemed like Madam Pomfrey had been waiting for an announcement like that. "Off with you, then," she said, making a shooing motion with her skirts as she hurried over. Harry wished she'd returned sooner. That way, he wouldn't have had to hear about dark powers or wandless magic. Snape had specifically mentioned that Madam Pomfrey didn't know about any of that; all she knew was that Harry had had some bouts of violent wild magic while he was still healing from a Death Eater attack a year earlier.

Well, Harry wished that he didn't know about these dark powers, either. Even the phrase made him want to shiver. He wasn't a dark wizard, and he didn't care what his crest looked like, he didn't belong in Slytherin.

Not even half-way.

"Off with you, I said," admonished the medi-witch again in her shrill voice. "Mr Potter needs his rest!"

"Yeah, I do," said Harry, sliding down in the bed and pulling the covers up to his chin. "I feel like a troll's been stomping on me."

That was an exaggeration. It was more like a heavy weight was pressing down on him. And his head felt wuzzy enough that if he closed his eyes for ten seconds in a row, he'd probably pass out. The dim lights in the room were going in and out of focus as he stared at them.

As Harry's eyes drifted closed, a hand settled onto his shoulder. He shuddered and told himself it was Dumbledore's. That was better than the alternative, which didn't bear thinking about. So Harry didn't think about it. Or reply when Snape's voice—ugh, too close by—told him that they'd speak more the next day.

He heard footsteps walking away, and then a babble of voices in the corridor. Ron and Hermione, wanting to see him. Oh, God. Malfoy too.

But nobody came in, and before Harry could find a way to say that he wanted his friends to sit with him, the closing door sealed the voices away. It didn't matter, though. He was sound asleep less than five seconds later.

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He woke up twice during the night, flashes of pain wrapped around his head, and gulped down the little vials of potions that Madam Pomfrey pressed into his hands.

When the pale light of dawn began to filter through the curtains over the windows, Harry's eyes fluttered open again. For a long moment he stared at the stone ceiling, his mind completely blank. He didn't even realise that he was in the hospital wing. Then he shifted his head a little and recognised that the lumpy thing he was feeling wasn't a pillow.

He reached one hand up to touch the bandages wrapped around the left side of his head, and that was when the previous night came back to him.

Snape. Dumbledore. Ron and Hermione. That healer... Yatessomething... what if he'd been able to restore Harry's memories?

Harry shook off that thought in a hurry. At first he'd wanted to remember his lost year, but now that he had more of an idea about what he'd missed, he thought it was just as well to skip it. Only a nutter would want to be adopted by someone like Snape, after all. And brothers with Malfoy? Please.

And as for "dark powers"... well, those could be handy when it came to defeating Voldemort. But the way Snape and Dumbledore had described them? Harry didn't like it. They were one more thing that made him different from everyone else. Parseltongue was bad enough. And to think he'd been casting in it!

*That* part hadn't even been kept secret. Everybody knew he'd been doing spells in snake-language! He wondered how many students had backed away from him in class, and how many had taken things a step further and run screaming down the corridor.

Why couldn't he ever be normal? Why couldn't he be just Harry for once in his life?

Well, now he was again. Or was he?

Suddenly worried, Harry snatched his wand from the night table and tried out a few more elementary spells. When they worked just the way they should, he felt a lot better. His charms were evidently fine. Hmm, transfiguration too.

Defence was a little more worrisome since his Patronus charm didn't work, but Harry chalked that up to the fact that he was having trouble concentrating on a completely happy memory at the moment. And of course there was no way to check that he was still all right in Potions, not here in the hospital wing.

Thinking of Potions made Harry jerk slightly as he remembered even more about the night before. Snape had been... well, just weird. Not like Snape at all, in fact. Where was the dark sarcasm? Where were the insults, the constant references to Harry being just like his father?

A half-hysterical laugh escaped through his teeth because as far as Snape was concerned, he was Harry's father now. Harry probably had to scrub cauldrons if he so much as mentioned James.

And the words Snape had used... care, concern... they just didn't make any sense. In fact, they made Harry feel sick inside. He'd always been jealous of Ron for having a real family, and sure, he'd fantasised a time or two about what it might be like to have a parent who was actually alive,
but he didn’t know he’d been as needy as all that. Letting Snape adopt him? It was bad enough putting up with him a few hours a week during class. But Harry had actually lived with the man? For months? And considered himself Snape's son?

Harry clenched his hands under the sheets and shook his head no, no, no. That part couldn't be true. He'd been adopted because the blood wards had fallen with Aunt Petunia's death. Because without magic he'd been vulnerable and in need of new wards. Adoption had taken the place of blood, and Harry had gone along because Dumbledore had insisted.

Just like he'd insisted on those horrible Occlumency lessons.

Yeah, that made sense. Dumbledore had probably told Harry to pretend like he didn't mind the adoption so much. Harry could just hear it now. You have to live with him until your magic returns. For your own safety, Harry. That's paramount. Why not make your time in the dungeons as pleasant as possible? I will prevail upon Professor Snape to treat you reasonably . . .

And the plan had worked too well, that was all. Snape had come to believe that Harry was willing to be his adopted son. As for him seeming happy to be Harry's adoptive father . . . well, that part wasn't hard to understand. It had given him more rights over Harry. Snape would love that. And what better way to get revenge on James, than to see if he could get James' son to think of Severus Snape as his father?

Fuck that, thought Harry. Then he wondered where a word like that had come from. He didn't usually throw around the really bad swear words, not even inside his own head. And he couldn't really imagine that Snape had heard him talk that way and not made him wash out his mouth with some foul-tasting potion.

No matter, though. He was a year older; maybe that explained it.

What mattered right now was the fact that Snape had said he'd be back in the morning so they could talk some more. Well, fuck that too, Harry thought, enjoying the word this time. What was there to talk about? Scary dark powers that he didn't have any longer? The adoption? Snape could talk about it all he liked, but Harry wasn't going to be there to listen. He didn't care what he'd said or done while he'd been a nutter with wild magic pouring out his fingertips, he couldn't have meant it. He wasn't Snape's adopted son, let alone Malfoy's brother. None of that was real, because it wasn't real to Harry.

"Awake already?" asked Madam Pomfrey in her brisk way as she strode towards him. "It's only half-five."

Only half-five . . . and just how early would Snape decide to come lurking around?

Well, at least Harry had a plan now.

"Can I get rid of these bandages?" he asked, speaking as clearly as he could. It wouldn't do for Madam Pomfrey to decide he sounded as woozy as he felt. "I don't think I need them."

She made a clucking noise as she flicked her wand. Apparently the noise was some sort of spell since the bandages began to unwind themselves from his head. Harry stared, amazed at how long the strip turned out to be.

"Huh. No blood," he said when the last of the bandages floated away from him. "The hit wasn't too bad then--"

She banished the bandages and looked at him rather critically. "Oh, head wounds bleed terribly,
Mr Potter. But of course I healed it before applying the linens. Cushioning, you know."

Harry didn't see why his pillow wasn't enough, but he thought that if he asked too many questions he'd seem confused. He didn't want to give her any excuse to keep him here.

"Well, I feel much better this morning. Thanks for those potions during the night. I think they really did the trick."

She peered closely at him. "But you don't remember anything more than you did yesterday."

"No, but the way I understand it, there's nothing you can do for that. And I think my physical injuries are pretty well healed--"

"Allow me to be the judge of that," she said sternly, magic washing over him as she cast a series of spells. "You need a good deal more rest."

"That's it, then," he said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and trying to look like it wasn't any effort. "I'm going back to the Tower. I'll sleep better in my own bed."

"If you don't fall over getting there," she said caustically. "Moreover, I think that your father will expect you to be here when he arrives."

"Don't call him that," snapped Harry. She'd done it yesterday too, he realised now. Ugh.

He looked about for his clothes but of course there was nothing but his Quidditch uniform, neatly folded on the next bed over, that horrible crest facing the ceiling. Oh, well. It was just a drawing, after all. It didn't mean anything. Not to Harry.

He could wear it until he made it to the Tower.

"Do you mind?" he asked the medi-witch as he stood up. "I need to change out of these pyjamas."

She stood there for a moment longer, looking him over, and then sighed. "If you wish to release yourself . . . well, I suppose you are of age."

That's right, he was, wasn't he? She'd said something about that before too, and it hadn't really registered. Now it did. He was an adult at last. He felt like one, too. Maybe he shouldn't, considering that he couldn't remember turning seventeen, but then, he felt like he'd been carrying adult responsibilities for years now. No choice. The Dursleys were the only parents he'd ever really known, but that didn't mean they'd ever acted like parents toward him.

And now the Dursleys were dead.

Like Sirius was dead.

Harry gulped a little, trying not to think about any of that.

"Second thoughts?"

"No, no, just wool-gathering." Now that it seemed like she wouldn't try to keep him here, he felt a lot less cross with her. "Remind me again, what was the spell to conjure one of those privacy curtains?"

"I'll just step into my office while you change, Mr Potter."

Mr Potter. The funny thing was, she could have called him 'Harry' all she liked; he wouldn't mind
it, not from her. Instead it was Snape calling him that.

And Harry did mind it from him. A lot.

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Harry's first new shock that day was what happened when he put on his glasses. He'd found them tucked into a pocket of his Quidditch robes and slid them on by force of habit, only to find out that absolutely nothing in his field of vision changed at all. Startled, he looked around and took them off again. Right . . . the whole room looked just as crisp and clear as before. That didn't make sense; people didn't spontaneously get less near-sighted. Not even wizards. Not that he knew of, anyway. But there was no denying the fact that he didn't need help seeing any longer, so Harry slipped the glasses back into his pocket and started to make his way back to Gryffindor Tower.

He felt a bit naked without something perched on his nose, but he supposed he'd get used to not wearing them.

His second shock was that the corridors in Hogwarts could stretch out for miles when they wanted to. It had never seemed so long from the hospital wing to the Tower before, but then, he'd never tried to walk it with his skull ringing like a Muggle telephone. Harry trudged on, breaths coming with more difficulty, muscles screaming in protest, only to find out when he made it to the Fat Lady that he had absolutely no idea what the password might be.

"Uh . . . amnesia," he tried explaining. "I haven't forgotten the password. Well, I mean, I have, but not through carelessness--" He slumped against the wall and slowly slid down it, clutching at his head. By then it was ringing and throbbing both, and the combination was making him feel nauseous. "Can't you make an exception? Just this once?"

No, she couldn't, so Harry sat in the hallway, drifting in and out of sleep until somebody finally came out the portrait hole and tripped over him. Neville, as it turned out.

"Harry," he said, helping him up.

Harry leaned heavily on him, feeling almost drunk by then, he was so exhausted. "Hallo, Neville. Uh . . . long time no see, I s'pose. I mean, it's been a year for me even though it doesn't feel like it--Er . . . they did tell you, didn't they? Ron and Hermione?"

"Yeah, memory problems. Come on, Harry. Let's get you up to bed."

"Bed," said Harry longingly, his head lolling to the side. "Mmm."

Climbing the stairs to his dormitory was torture even with Neville supporting him, but he finally made it and crawled into his bed. He was vaguely aware of the other boy closing the curtains and saying something, but Harry couldn't even hear what it was through the roaring in his ears.
His last thought before he fainted was to wish he still had some bandages cushioning his head, because his pillow hurt, damn it.

And then there was nothing but a blackness that came from nowhere and swallowed him whole.

Harry wondered later why he'd assumed that Snape couldn't get into Gryffindor Tower. He obviously could, since he was sitting at Harry's bedside, his long fingers flipping through a book. Well, if leaving the hospital wing hadn't worked then maybe pretending to sleep all day would--

"I know you're awake," said Snape without raising his eyes from his reading.

So much for that plan.

Harry sat up and tried to look stronger than he felt. "Yeah, I'm awake. So you can leave now."

Snape laid the book aside. "Speaking of departures, you shouldn't have left the hospital wing so precipitously, Harry. Longbottom told me you looked half-dead when he saw you in the corridor."

"The Fat Lady wouldn't let me in," muttered Harry.

"That wouldn't have been a problem if you'd waited for me."

Oh, wonderful. Snape knew a password that would let him into the Tower. Harry had been thinking he'd have to tell everybody in Gryffindor not to let Snape in under any circumstances, but now that was one more plan down the drain. Well, he'd still tell them not to mention anything about him to Snape. What was wrong with Neville?

The same thing that was wrong with everybody -- Harry's ruse to pretend to be all right with the adoption had worked too well. People thought he really was Snape's son. What a mess.

"Tell Neville I want to see him," he said, looking at the wall instead of Snape. "Do it now. On your way out. Sir."

"I've no intention of leaving at the moment, and Longbottom's not here in any case. When he left my quarters he said he was going to breakfast."

"Oh, you adopted him too?" asked Harry, looking Snape's way again.

"Of course not--"

"Well, then I can't figure out why he'd be chummy enough with you to know where you live or mention his plans for the day!"

Snape's eyes glittered, but his voice remained calm enough. "He visited you while you were living in the dungeons. And he mentioned breakfast in the context of inquiring if he should bring you back something to eat."
Whatever. Harry still thought that Neville had no business running down to the dungeons just because Harry had fainted. Harry was fine, and he didn't need a hook-nosed git of a teacher thinking that he had some say over him.

Harry's stomach took that opportunity to growl. Probably it was the mention of food that had done it.

"I told him I would take care of the matter," added Snape as he snapped his fingers three times in quick succession. A steaming tray appeared, hovering in the air at Harry's bedside. Harry reached for it before Snape could have any reason to come closer.

Then he wondered if he should eat anything that Snape was giving him. It seemed to him now that he'd taken the news about the adoption awfully well, considering. He honestly didn't know if he should blame that on the potions Snape kept insisting he swallow or just general confusion due to his head injury.

Snape raised an eyebrow and then sighed. "You honestly think I would poison you, Harry?"

"Look, I don't know what to think," snapped Harry, though he did. He thought that Snape had probably fed him calming draught on the sly the night before. It would explain a lot. Well, he wasn't calm now, and he didn't particularly want to be. "I just know I'm starving and I can't eat a bite of that no matter what you say. I'll go down to the Great Hall--"

"In your Quidditch uniform?"

Harry flushed. He'd been so tired earlier that it hadn't even occurred to him to change into a fresh pair of pyjamas. Hell, he hadn't even taken off his boots. No wonder he felt so grotty.

"I'll put on regular clothes," he snarled, but when he tried to get up to do it, the floor seemed to tilt beneath his feet. Probably because he hadn't eaten anything in far too long.

"You'll stay in bed," said Snape, enforcing the command with a hand on his shoulder pushing him back down onto the mattress.

The moment the man's hand touched him, Harry's temper exploded. "Don't touch me! Don't ever, ever touch me! You don't have any right!"

"Get back in bed on your own, and I won't," said Snape, staring until Harry did it. "Now, stay there. I'll arrange some food that you're willing to eat. You still trust Mr Weasley, I presume?"

"Don't imply that I trusted you before yesterday, because I know I couldn't have--" Snape just kept staring. "Yes, I trust Ron!"

Snape swept out of the room, presumably to find him. Harry was sorely tempted to sneak away while Snape was gone, but he knew he wouldn't get far. Besides, he had nowhere to go.

"Now to get you into something more comfortable than Quidditch robes," said Snape briskly as he strode back in. When he lifted his wand, Harry flinched, but Snape only used it to banish the tray Harry had refused. A muscle near Snape's mouth gave a violent twitch, but that was the only indication he gave that he'd noticed Harry's reaction to his wand.

"I can dress myself," announced Harry, getting tangled in his robe while trying to shed it. He knew he must look stupid, but he didn't care. He didn't want Snape coming near him. If the man touched him again, for any reason at all, Harry was going to scream.
Having finally managed to get the robe out from under him, Harry reached for the hem of his tight Quidditch shirt. Snape's back was to him, but that hardly made things better. "Get out. Sir."

Snape didn't react to his tone, but merely laid a pair of striped pyjamas at the foot of his bed. Harry didn't recognise them. He had a feeling he'd have to get used to that. Well, at least these obviously weren't Dudley's cast-offs. They looked large to Harry, but not nearly as large as that.

"I'll be just outside if you need help." Snape paused in the doorway.

Now it was Harry's turn to stare, but he didn't have to keep it up for long, because Snape finally left.

Harry wished he could say he felt better once he was in soft pyjamas, eating the food that Ron had carried up from the kitchens, but it was impossible, since Snape was still there.

At least he wasn't saying much. He wasn't even staring any longer. He was just reading his book, occasionally glancing up as Harry ate. Even that much eye contact made Harry shiver.

"Look," Harry said finally. "I don't want you here, and I don't need you here, either. I feel a lot stronger now that I've eaten, and if I get dizzy again I've got plenty of friends who won't let me fall on my face."

Snape snapped his book closed. "You don't believe we have things to discuss?"

"I'm not talking about that."

"Your brother would also like to speak to you--"

Harry scowled. "I'm not talking to Malfoy either, and don't call him that again. Sir."

"I think I'd prefer that you left off any title, rather than call me 'sir' in that tone."

Harry could hardly believe Snape had said that, and not because it went against everything else the man had ever said. No, the surprising part was the message behind the words. Hearing 'sir' bothered Snape when it came from Harry.

_You are handing me weapons . . ._

Weapons that Harry wanted to use, because the anger roiling inside him was demanding that he do something . . .

"Well, I'd rather you leave--"

"Why?"

Harry gaped. "Why do you think?"
"You don't want to talk about what has changed between us, or why it changed."

"I'll lose my temper and you'll take points from Gryffindor." Harry snorted. "For all I know, that's why you're pushing me like this. So you'll have an excuse."

Though when had Snape ever needed one before?

"You aren't only in Gryffindor these days," said Snape heavily.

"Yes, I am. I'm going to owl away for some proper crests so I don't have to keep wearing that ugly thing."

Snape's features cleared of all expression for an instant.

It wasn't until then that Harry realised just how much emotion Snape had been showing. He really wasn't acting like himself. But then, almost nobody was. Not even Remus, if he was living in Malfoy Manor like Harry had been told.

"I was referring to the counters," said Snape a moment later. "Whatever you do with your robes, the castle will continue to regard you as a member of two houses. You lose points from Slytherin and Gryffindor both, these days."

Harry snorted again. "I bet you don't like that at all. What do you do, take points from Ron whenever you want to punish me?"

Something flashed in Snape's eyes.

"You do!"

"I did that once," Snape corrected.

"That's low." And if Snape was going to be like that . . . "Sir."

"I never claimed to be a perfect father." Snape's voice was very quiet when he continued, his eyes shadowed by some emotion that Harry couldn't read at all. "I have made many mistakes with you."

For maybe the first time since the Bludger hit, Harry felt a sense of relief sweeping through him. "So then you agree with me, this adoption thing just isn't working out--"

Snape shook his head, his dark hair swaying lankly. "I didn't say that. Harry . . . no parent is perfect, and I have less experience than most, as well as . . . other issues."

"Like the fact that you've always hated my guts," said Harry dryly.

"I meant my dysfunctional relationship with my own father," said Snape, the words sounding like they were being pulled from him against his will. "You know a little bit about that, even now--"

"Oh, great. Bring up the Pensieve again. Throw me into a wall again too, why don't you--"

Snape pushed his hair out of his face. "I do not hate your guts, Harry. I do not hate any part of you, and I am sorry for my poor behaviour towards you in the past."

Maybe he meant it. It was hard to tell any longer. All Harry knew for sure was that it didn't matter to him. He couldn't overlook all those years of enmity just because some other version of him had pretended they'd never happened.
"Well, I haven't forgiven you."

Snape looked away. "Yes. I know."

"Fine, then. We know where we stand. Could you please leave now, _sir_? My friends are probably getting pretty tired of hanging about in the common room."

Nobody had entered the dormitory since Ron had dropped off Harry's breakfast, a sympathetic look on his face. All the other boys in his year obviously knew that he was holed up with Snape.

To Harry's surprise, the Potions Master actually stood up. About time he took a hint. "Tomorrow is Monday. Do you expect you will feel able to attend classes?"

"Yeah, I think so--"

"Then it is even more imperative that you do nothing but rest for the remainder of the day."

Harry didn't appreciate Snape telling him what to do, let alone the implication that Harry was completely stupid, but if the man was finally leaving, it was a bad time to start an argument.

"Dr Goode will be here this evening to speak with you. I shall come to collect you at seven. We'll floo home where you can be assured of adequate privacy wards."

So much for avoiding an argument. "Floo where?"

"Home--" Snape rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Ah."

"That's right, I'm home already."

"Be that as it may, you will floo with me to my quarters."

"I'd rather not set foot in them, thanks."

"Be that as it may--"

"Do you have to talk like a bad Victorian novel all the time, _sir_?"

When Snape glared, another wave of relief washed over Harry. Finally, that strange light in his eyes had dimmed. The man looked like he was supposed to: angry.

A little bit, at least.

Harry wasn't exactly sure why that was better, but he knew that it was. It made him all the more determined not to agree to what Snape wanted. "If privacy is your concern then I can meet with this doctor person in Dumbledore's office. I'm sure his wards make yours look like candy floss."

Snape didn't rise to the bait, though his lips tightened a little bit. Maybe it was a good thing that Harry could read him so easily, these days. It meant that Harry could tell when he was getting through to him.

Or maybe just getting to him.

"It's rather impertinent to assume that you can schedule appointments in the headmaster's office."

"No, it's not. He always used to tell me I could come to him for anything._ Except, of course, throughout the entire last year when he'd ignored Harry's desperate pleas for help and information.
Or . . . shite. Not last year, after all.

"I still think that home--"

Harry glared.

"My home is the more appropriate venue."

"Too bad. I'm not going there. Full stop."

"Perhaps I should contact the good doctor and cancel the appointment, in that case."

Right. Like Harry was going to fall for that. "Go ahead," he said, crossing his arms as he settled himself more comfortably against the pillows. "I don't believe in head-shrinkers anyway."

He wanted to laugh at the look on Snape's face. "Head-shrinkers? She's a squib, not a witch--"

"She's someone who works with nutters!"

Snape looked somehow torn over that statement, but then his expression cleared and he gave a slight nod. "Very well, Harry. I'll speak to Albus about using his office."

Harry almost jeered, See, that wasn't so hard, but he didn't quite dare. He'd probably pushed Snape enough for one day. Sure, maybe he wouldn't take points off Harry now that they would come from Slytherin, but he could still assign cauldron duty or detentions with Filch or really, any number of nasty consequences.

"So, we're done here," he said instead as he gave the door a pointed glance.

"Almost. I've spoken to all your teachers to inform them that you will need some time to re-aquire the skills and spells taught in the sixth-year programme."

So they all knew he had amnesia. Great. But then, Harry didn't suppose that a thing like that could really be kept a secret. It was going to be bloody obvious, even to people who only knew him slightly. He just hoped it didn't make the papers the way his adoption apparently had.

A terrible thought suddenly occurred to him. So terrible, in fact, that he didn't even care that there was nobody to ask at the moment except Snape. "I won't have to repeat sixth year, will I?"

"No, but you must be prepared to work very hard to re-learn what you've lost."

"Which isn't much, since I wasn't in classes for most of last year, the way you told it."

"True, but you were on an independent study programme that covered the same topics."

"Even though I'd lost my magic?"

"You studied theory until you were able to do a bit of magic," said Snape, moving one palm parallel to the floor as he cocked an ear toward the door.

Oh, right. Harry had to be careful what he said. Not that he could say much. He didn't even remember these dark powers, so he was hardly planning to brag about them. It figured that Snape thought Harry wanted to brag, though, when all he wanted was just to be normal, for once. And that was complicated, wasn't it, considering the way he'd been lying to everybody about the state of his magic . . .
Harry's head started spinning. "People are going to notice that I'm using Latin again," he whispered. "I . . . I don't think I can pretend it's still Parseltongue--"

Of course he couldn't. Holding his wand while he did a wandless charm was one thing. Making Latin sound like Parseltongue was something else. And Harry didn't want to use Parseltongue like that, anyway. He'd rather people forget he could use it at all.

"Yes, people will notice that you are using Latin," said Snape, nodding. "Just as they will notice, as you evidently have, that you no longer need to wear your glasses."

"Let me guess," said Harry wearily. "That happened because I started casting in Parseltongue."

"No, not at all. However, I do not think it wise to discuss that in detail until we can be assured of stronger wards. I will come for you at seven to escort you to the headmaster's office."

Harry bristled. "I know the way."

"Seven," Snape repeated, his gaze boring into Harry's.

"Fine. Seven," snapped Harry, immediately making plans to start his walk over at half six.

Harry had known for years that Hermione could be really irritating. He was coming to appreciate that aspect of her personality all over again as she rattled on about "Draco." It was bad enough that he almost wished seventh-year prefects couldn't enter rooms reserved for the opposite sex.

At least Ron didn't lecture him about being nice to Malfoy. In fact, Ron hadn't mentioned Malfoy all day. He had referred to Snape as Harry's father a time or two, but when Harry glared, he'd stopped talking about Snape completely. Yeah, Ron seemed to understand him a lot better than Hermione did. He could tell that Harry would rather talk about normal things like classes and Quidditch and the fact that there was going to be a Yule Ball this year. Apparently Ron and Hermione had persuaded Dumbledore just the week before.

Harry had waggled his eyebrows. "And are you going to wait until the last minute to ask her?"

Ron's grin had looked like it might split his face in two. "Already took care of that. Though this time she did know that I intended to go with her. We've been going steady for about six months now."

"I thought something like that must be going on!"

"You remember the time we got in trouble for kissing in Hogsmeade?"

Why would they have got in trouble for that? Harry shrugged the question off. "No, but the way you keep looking at each other . . ."

"So who will you ask to the ball?"
"No idea . . ."

Now, Harry couldn't help but miss the easy conversation he'd had with Ron. Maybe if he were here now, he'd be able to keep Hermione from going on and on and on about "Draco." It wouldn't have been right to demand that Ron stay, though. He'd needed to get out to the pitch for the regular post-game strategy session -- which was more important that usual since the match would have to be replayed. "You could watch from the stands if you don't feel up to flying," he'd offered, but not even Harry's reluctance to do anything Snape wanted was enough to make him agree to go. After that morning's walk from the hospital wing, he knew that he really did need to rest.

Not that Hermione was letting him do much of that.

"Won't you just see Draco, Harry? Just for five minutes? He's really worried--"

"Look," said Harry impatiently, since they'd already gone through this three or four times. "If he comes in here I'll end up throwing something at him. Is that what you want?"

"Well, no, but--"

"It's bad enough I'll have to put up with him in class."

Hermione twisted a strand of hair 'round and 'round a finger. "But don't you understand? He's on your side now, Harry."

"Malfoy doesn't know how to be on any side but his own."

"Harry--"

"Hermione, no. And no offence, but shut up."

She drew back as if slapped. "Harry James Potter!"

"Why do you care so much if I talk to Malfoy, anyway?" asked Harry, pushing aside the tray she'd brought up for him. Great. She'd put him off his dinner.

"Well . . ." Hermione flipped her hair back over her shoulders and cast an extra silencing spell on top of the one that was already covering the doors and windows. "He's going through a rough spot of his own, Harry. He just broke up with his girlfriend."

"What's it to you? He calls you a Mudblood!"

"Oh, but you see, he doesn't any longer." Hermione practically beamed. "He understands now, Harry. Truly, he does."

"Yeah," drawled Harry. "He understands that nobody'll believe he's 'on my side' if he keeps using that foul word."

"It was like that at first," admitted Hermione. "Draco was clever enough to see that his chances were better with you than Voldemort. And he is a survivor, after all. But you were good for him, Harry. He couldn't hold so tight to his blood prejudices once he decided to support a half-blood against his own pureblood father, you see? And besides . . ."

Harry didn't think that "shut up" would have any more force the second time than it had the first. Maybe it was like with S.P.E.W. Malfoy was Hermione's new project, and she just had to tell him about it, whether he could care less or not. "Besides what?" he asked, weary of the whole subject
but thinking that if she could just get whatever she wanted to tell him off her chest--

No, he wasn't going to think about her chest. Or mentally compare her again to Ginny, who hadn't
developed nearly so much up top during the year he'd missed--

Hermione summoned quill and parchment and wrote it down, cautioning him first. "You mustn't
tell anyone. It could lead to terrible things."

Well, Harry was getting used to learning things he wasn't allowed to tell anybody. And if Hermione
wasn't even going to trust her own spells when it came to this, it had to be a pretty big secret.

She'd written, *She's a Muggle.*

"Who is?"

She leaned over and wrote on the parchment again. *Draco's girlfriend.*

Harry burst out laughing. "That can't be true."

"Well, it is."

Harry couldn't stop laughing. "I'm surprised he'd even make up a thing like that. Malfoy! Malfoy
and--"'

"He's heartbroken!" said Hermione sharply as she swiftly burned the paper to a crisp and scattered
the ashes on the floor before banishing them. "She meant the world to him, and the last thing he
needs right now is for his own brother to reject him as well!"

"Good thing he doesn't have one, then."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione, tears rising to her eyes. "He loves her. He wanted to marry her. Can't
you understand how he must feel at this moment, thinking that he's losing you, too?"

"Draco Malfoy does not love a--"

"Draco Snape, Snape, Snape! And yes, he *does!*

He hated it when Hermione got like this. It was like she'd found a scab, and she was going to just
keep picking at it and picking at it until he gave in to make her stop. Not that Hermione would ever
pick at an actual scab; she was too sensible for that.

Not sensible enough, however, to drop the subject like Harry had asked.

On the other hand . . . huh. When Harry thought about it, he realised he was a lot more angry with
Snape than Malfoy. It should be the other way around, after the Inquisitorial Squad and all that;
Malfoy had been a much more constant annoyance than Snape ever had, and it was Malfoy's own
aunt who had battled Sirius and caused him to fall through the Veil--

But that was a bit unfair, Harry knew. Malfoy himself hadn't done those things. He'd just been a
petty thug and a coward who didn't show up for duels and a general, all-around pratty annoyance
who always made fun of Harry for having a dead mother.

Not exactly a character reference, but if it would make Hermione *shut up* he supposed he could
agree to see him for five minutes.

"Fine," he said with bad grace. "Send a message to Slytherin if you must."
"Oh, Harry!" She bounced across the room and dropped a kiss on his cheek. "You won't regret it, I promise!"

Harry scowled at her, already regretting it. The feeling only got worse when she bounded to the door, thrust it open, and called out "Draco!"

"What, he's here?" gasped Harry.

"He's been waiting in the common room. I told you that."

Harry guessed she had, but he hadn't thought she meant their common room.

"Hallo, Harry," said Malfoy from the doorway a moment later.

Harry rolled his eyes, and not only because of the name thing. He'd also noticed Malfoy's prefect's badge by then, bright and gleaming and pinned on perfectly straight, just proving how proud he was of it.

Only Malfoy could get expelled but still be appointed a prefect the next year.

"Well, are you coming in or aren't you?" he asked crossly. "Or are you part-vampire and you have to be invited over the threshold?"

Malfoy's white-gold hair gleamed as he shook his head, but he didn't make any effort to enter the room. That was strange. Usually the pointy-faced git was so full of himself that he strode around like the whole castle was his private domain.

"Hermione," said Malfoy in a pleasant tone that didn't match Harry's memories of him at all, "as a senior prefect for Gryffindor, you can tell when anyone from another house enters the Tower, can't you?"

"Well, yes--"

"Have I been in any part of Gryffindor since yesterday's Quidditch match began?"

The frown between Hermione's eyebrows said that she didn't understand Malfoy's game any more than Harry did, but she took out her wand and cast a complex spell. "No, you haven't, except for the last forty minutes in the common room."

"Thank you," said Malfoy, and then, as if those two words weren't shocking enough, he drew his own wand, flipped it to face the wrong way, and extended it to Hermione.

Harry's mouth dropped open.

The Malfoy he knew would throw a hissy fit if a Muggleborn ever, ever touched his wand. Even on accident. He'd complain loud and long that it was tainted now and he'd have to get another one, and then he'd start threatening that his father was going to hear about this . . .

Well, obviously the last bit was out, considering what little Harry knew about Lucius Malfoy's death, but as for the rest?

Then he got it. Trust a Slytherin to always have a trick up his sleeve. Literally, in this case. "That's not your wand, Malfoy!"

Malfoy firmed his jaw and let Hermione take it anyway, though he must have known that the game was up by then. "It once belonged to Severus' grandfather, but it's registered to me, now."
"Oh, you get two wands because you're so sodding special. That figures--"

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione in a tearful tone. "You promised to behave."

Harry hadn't said a word about behaving, but . . . damn it. He hated the look on her face. Fine. It wouldn't kill him to be civil. But if Malfoy started anything, all bets were off. "Did something happen to your other wand?"

Malfoy gave a sharp nod from where he stood; he still hadn't stepped into the room. "Lucius took it away from me when I was expelled."

Oh. Harry didn't want to feel sorry for Malfoy, ever, but he did feel a little twinge of something, hearing that. It couldn't be easy having your own father take your wand away. Though that wasn't much compared to your father bribing people to kill you, which Lucius Malfoy had also apparently done.

Malfoy really had had it rough, thought Harry with a bigger twinge. The Muggle-girlfriend thing was definitely a load of bollocks, though.

"I gave Hermione my wand so you couldn't think I'm up to any funny business," said Malfoy. "Hermione, would you summon the small griffin I gave to Harry as a get-well present?"

She gave Malfoy an odd look, but cast the charm.

A silver-coloured griffin no taller than three inches flew off a shelf and into her hand, where it sat with eyes closed and wings tucked against its body.

"Now, if you'd hand it to Harry . . ."

Harry wasn't so sure he wanted to touch the thing, not if Malfoy had given it to him. But would he still be keeping it on display in his room if it had ever attacked him? Besides, he didn't want Malfoy to think he was afraid.

"So?" asked Harry.

As his breath brushed the griffin, it woke up with a little roar and extended its wings. Startled, Harry nearly dropped it. When he steadied his hand he saw that the griffin appeared to be engaged in some sort of guard duty. Its bright green eyes were darting left and right as if searching out enemies.

Malfoy finally stepped into the room and approached, stepping right up to Harry's bedside. The griffin narrowed its gaze and appeared to sniff him before returning to guard duty.

Malfoy slowly extended his hand, bringing it within range of the griffin's jaws. The little statue padded closer and sniffed Malfoy again, this time more deeply, then purred and began rubbing the side of its face against his finger.

"So, a toy you gave me likes you," said Harry scornfully. "Big surprise."

Malfoy stared down at him, his grey eyes intent. "There's more to it than that, but I don't delude myself that you'll believe anything I have to say about it. Not now. Hermione?"

She shook her head. "I don't know anything about this griffin."

"Pity," drawled Malfoy fixing his gaze on Harry again. "Well, I'll have to hope that you told
"Weasley about the hex it carries. Because then, you can ask him to report your own words back to you. After that, maybe you'll believe what the griffin does."

"You still call him Weasley. He calls you Draco," said Harry, wondering what would happen if he prodded a little.

"Mmm, I have him rather at a disadvantage. Malfoy's not my last name any longer, and he has a marked aversion to calling me Snape, so . . ." Malfoy's expression looked like the thin edge of a smile. "May I have a seat?"

Well, Harry had decided he could be civil, and Malfoy seemed like he also knew how, so . . . "Yeah, all right."

Some things hadn't changed; Malfoy still fussed with his robes until they were draped in elegant folds falling from his knees. "How are you feeling?"

No matter how he tried, Harry couldn't find any kind of trap in that question. "Better," he said cautiously.

Malfoy nodded and clasped his hands.

It took Harry a minute to figure out that the other boy was waiting for him to lead the conversation. "Why did you ask Hermione to verify that you hadn't been in here lately?"

"For the same reason I gave her my wand. I didn't want you able to think that I'd changed the spells on the griffin between the Quidditch match and right now. But . . . best to ask Ron about that."

Harry eyed him suspiciously. "I've been hearing a lot of strange things about the last year, though. For all I know you can do--" Transferring the griffin to his left hand, Harry wriggled the fingers of his right hand in what he hoped was a significant manner.

"Oh, that," said Draco after a moment. "No, I can't do that."

"Well, if you could, would you admit it to me?"

"Yes, though I suspect you won't take my word on the matter."

Harry smiled a little grimly.

Malfoy, for some reason, laughed. "I hope you realise, Harry, that this is a bizarre sort of reversal. Even before we learnt to get along, you knew how much I liked to brag. Yet now you've convinced yourself that I wouldn't boast about a special magical talent I'd discovered within myself?"

Harry had to admit, things didn't make much sense when put like that. Malfoy did love to brag. Which reminded him: "Are you really in the D.A. and planning the meetings?"

Malfoy shifted on the chair and shoved both his hands into his pockets. "Yes, but I shouldn't have put it quite like that. We generally plan them together. The students from last time elected you to head the sessions, but you appointed me to do it in your stead."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You can imagine how unlikely I find that."

"Yes, I can imagine," drawled Malfoy, lifting his chin. "And there you go again, thinking I could have some reason to make up a story about how I only came to prominence in the D.A. on your sufferance. If I wanted to lie, wouldn't I claim that they elected me unanimously because they
could discern my marvellous leadership skills at a single glance?"

When Harry said nothing, Malfoy sighed. "There were any number of Gryffindors in attendance. Ask one of them how I ended up leading the meetings."

Harry would, but not with Malfoy around. "Were you the only Slytherin there?"

"Of course not. Haven't I just mentioned your own vaunted presence?"

"Shut up," said Harry immediately. "Shut up and get out. I'm not listening to blather about being in Slytherin."

"So I take it you won't be sleeping in your bed there any time soon?"

Nobody had mentioned that. "I don't sleep in Slytherin--"

"Yes, you do. A bit less than half the time, but you do. Ask the people you still trust."

"Get out before I throw your damned griffin right at your pointy face!"

"Déjà vu," murmured Malfoy, rising from his chair. "I think we've probably spoken enough for one day. I'll see you tomorrow in classes if you're well enough to attend."

He slid smoothly from the room, nodding to Hermione as he took his wand from her on the way out.

"God, what a pretentious git," said Harry loudly, waving his wand to slam the door.

"Oh, Harry. I thought he was very pleasant, all things considered."

"Throwing around fancy French phrases is not pleasant."

Hermione smiled. "Déjà vu means that--"

"I know what it means!" Shaking his head, Harry checked his watch. Uh-oh. "I need to change for my appointment."

Hermione nodded. "I'll just fetch your clothes before I go, then."

"I think I can walk across the room on my own--"

By then she was at his wardrobe, flipping through hangers and humming. Girls.

"Oh, no," said Harry when she saw the robe she laid on his bed. "No way. No fucking way."

"You haven't forgotten Draco's bad influence on your language. What's wrong?"

Harry ripped the Slytherin prefect's badge off his robe and threw it at the nearest wall. Too bad the window wasn't open. "I am not wearing that."

"Harry!"

"I am not a Slytherin prefect!" shouted Harry. "I'm not in Slytherin!"

At least she didn't tell him that the counters said he was.

The dual-house crest was harder to get off his robes, but Harry managed it after a couple of
minutes of violent tugging. So what if he ripped the fabric beneath it in the process? There was always *Reparo*.

After he cast that, he burned the crest in the same way Hermione had burned that scrap of parchment.

Hermione watched him sadly and didn't argue again, but she was shaking her head as she left him alone to dress.

Harry made short work of it and flung open the dormitory door when he was ready to leave. He only made it to the common room before all his plans were shot to hell. Snape was just coming through the portrait hole, his dark eyes glimmering when he fixed his gaze on Harry. "Ah, leaving early, are you? I somehow thought you might."

Harry knew when he was beaten, but he still affected a little shrug for the benefit of the students scattered on chairs and sofas. "It's a long walk and I'm a bit tired. I thought I'd give myself plenty of time."

"Did you."

Harry raised his chin. "Yeah. I did. Sir."

Snape's robes flared as he strode closer, stopping three feet shy of Harry, who had to repress a strong urge to back up the stairs. "How remiss of me not to explain that we will be flooing. Tomorrow is soon enough for you to begin traipsing about the castle."

His narrowed gaze said how much he disapproved of the long walk Harry had taken that morning.

Flooing instead of walking all that way sounded divine, but Harry argued anyway. "Students aren't allowed to use the castle's Floo connections."

"A fact which hasn't stopped you in the past." Snape quickly waved a hand as though to erase that comment. "You have a teacher's permission. Come along."

"We'll be too early--"

"The headmaster would like a word, in any case."

Harry bristled. He'd rather talk to Dumbledore than Snape, but much better would be not to see much of either one. As far as he was concerned, they were both to blame for Sirius dying. Just like Harry was to blame, but there wasn't much he could do about avoiding his own company.

In the circumstances, though, he knew he did have to talk to Dumbledore. He was a member of the Order, and there was probably more he had to know about what had happened during his missing year and what he was and wasn't supposed to tell people about it.

Harry took a pinch of powder from the box Snape was extending and flooed away without another word.

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other:*

Chapter Sixteen: "The Good Doctor"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"Have a seat, Harry," said Dumbledore in an easy voice. "Lemon sherbet? Ah, there you are, Severus."

Snape took the chair next to the one Harry had chosen, sweeping his robes out of the way as he sat. "Headmaster."

"Licorice, Severus?"

Snape only scowled in reply.

"Your father noticed earlier that you weren't wearing your glasses," said Dumbledore. "And I see that you aren't wearing them now, either. Has anyone remarked on that yet?"

"No, and don't call him my father. I stayed in bed all day. Slept a lot."

"Good," said Snape approvingly.

"Look, I don't want you to act like my father any more than I want to hear you called that. It's none of your business what I do."

"In some respects it is, given that Severus and you are both loyal Order members," said Dumbledore, leaning over his desk a little as he peered more closely at Harry. "The matter of your glasses, for example. Will you go back to wearing them?"

"When I don't need to? Not likely."

"Then what will you tell people who ask where they are?"

"I don't know, do I?" asked Harry, exasperated. "Nobody's bothered to tell me why my vision's got better."

"Your eyes were seriously injured last year and when they healed, they did so completely," said Snape.

"Quidditch accident?"

"Lucius Malfoy blinded you, Harry," explained the headmaster. "You were kidnapped and tortured in a Death Eater ritual. Severus rescued you just as Voldemort was attempting to sacrifice you in a rather nasty bit of blood magic."

Wonderful. Harry owed Snape. He could hardly stand the thought. In fact, waves of revulsion started crashing through him. It wasn't right that Snape should be the one to save Harry from anything. It just wasn't.

"Nice of you to wait until the very last minute," he snapped, grabbing a sherbet lemon out of the dish he'd ignored earlier and biting down on it so hard his molars hurt.

"That's hardly an appropriate response," said Dumbledore in what was, for him, a rather stern tone. "Severus had no choice but to wait until the anti-Portkey wards had fallen, which didn't happen until your own wild magic obliterated them."

Harry didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. Part of him didn't know what his
problem was. He really ought to thank Snape for saving his life. He knew that, but he just couldn't do it. Maybe because a part of him suspected that Snape had enjoyed seeing Harry be tortured. The man definitely knew how to be sadistic. Or maybe Harry was embarrassed that Snape had seen him like that.

Or maybe, nothing Snape had done for Harry could make up for what he hadn't done for Sirius.

"I think the point was supposed to be my glasses," he said when it seemed like nobody else was going to step into the silence. "Why have I been wearing them if my vision was already perfect?"

"It was part of a subterfuge to keep the key to your magic a secret," said Snape, tapping his fingers together on his lap. "As we discussed this morning, it was common knowledge that you had to cast spells in Parseltongue. What is not generally known is that you need to see or at least hold a snake in order to speak their language. Last year, without a snake or the representation of one, you were rendered powerless."

Harry made a face. "That's why you made me wear the dual crest?"

"I did not make you wear it. That was your choice."

Yeah, because Harry had been pretending to like being adopted! And anyway . . . "The crest wouldn't have been nearly stealthy enough to keep the secret, and I guess taking my snake to class all the time would be pretty obvious--"

Snape raised one thin eyebrow. "Have you spoken with Sals?"

Harry shook his head. "He was asleep most of the day." And when the little maroon-and-gold snake had been awake and looking at him . . . well, he'd never particularly wanted a pet snake, anyway.

"She."

"Yeah, Ron mentioned that, too." Harry cleared his throat. "And he said that . . . uh, Sals was only there because you brought him, I mean her, up to Gryffindor early this morning. I was wondering why you did that."

"You don't often leave Sals in Slytherin when you are sleeping elsewhere. There's a second-year named Larissa who is entirely too fond of her, even though she now has a snake of her own. Also, I thought that something familiar might help to jog your memory."

"Well, it didn't. And neither did Malfoy's stupid little griffin thing."

Snape's dark eyes gleamed for a moment, but he didn't react to the name "Malfoy" the way Hermione had. Other than the look in his eyes, he didn't react at all. "As for your Parseltongue casting practice . . . if you examine the inside of your glasses carefully, you will find a tiny image of a snake etched into the lens. You wore them in order to have such an image secretly available at all times."

Harry sighed and swivelled his head to look at Dumbledore. "So I have to wear my glasses again? Is that the point?"

"I think not, considering what we discovered about your magic yesterday." Dumbledore stroked his beard. "However, we don't wish others to know about the snake emblem, so I suggest the official story should be that your eyes have been gradually improving for months and your glasses were charmed to adjust to your changing eyesight. You were so used to your glasses that it simply didn't
"Until I woke up and was surprised to be seeing so well." Harry frowned a little. "Well, I was hardly going to tell people about the snake image. I didn't know about it myself."

"Ah, but you spent most of last year convincing me that you do better with more information rather than less," said Dumbledore with a slight smile that seemed more directed at Snape than Harry.

"Is that why I was allowed to join the Order?"

"In part."

"And why was Malfoy allowed to join?"

Snape was the one to answer that. "He proved his loyalty beyond all question."

Harry didn't believe that for a second; Malfoy was loyal only to himself, full stop. "Yeah? How?"

"He defended you against his own father."

"I thought you were his father," sneered Harry. Then it came to him that he'd been told that Lucius Malfoy had died. Harry suddenly paled. "Oh, shite. Malfoy killed his dad?"

Well, if he had, he certainly couldn't have done it for _Harry_--

"Language," said Snape, lacing his hands together. "And no, that is not how Lucius Malfoy met his well-deserved end."

Harry opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, only to find that he didn't want to. He didn't know why he didn't want to, but even the idea of talking it over was making shivers run up and down his arms.

Snape spoke before he could in any case, sharp, clipped words that seemed to slice through the cool air in the room. "Headmaster. I do believe you were intending to discuss the lexicon."

"Yes, yes, of course," murmured Dumbledore, his blue eyes seeming to measure both Snape and Harry as he looked them up and down. He pushed a worn, leather-bound journal across his desk and gestured for Harry to take it. "This is the list of spell translations you produced over the summer, Harry. You will see that you noted a wide variety of effects possible for each spell, depending on the incantations you used and the degree of power you allowed to flow through your wand during the casting."

The pages were blank when Harry riffled through them. "I don't see anything at all."

"Your password was 'sunlit meadow'" said Snape. "Albus and I have our own passwords to view the text, but they won't work for you unless one of us holds the journal while you read."

Harry nodded his understanding and tapped the tip of his wand to the book's front cover. "Sunlit meadow!"

Nothing. No flash from the end of his wand, and no words inside the journal, either.

"That's just brilliant," said Harry, curling a lip. "Now I've lost my light magic again!"

"I don't think so," murmured Snape. "I am sorry, Harry. I should have realised . . . the incantation was 'sunlit meadow' in Parseltongue. You couldn't perform magic in any other language."
"And now I can't perform it in Parseltongue. So I can't read the lexicon." That was almost a relief. He didn't want to cast spells so strong that everybody would forever after be afraid of him. Not that such a thing was likely. Those dark powers just didn't sound much like him. Harry didn't think they were coming back, lexicon or no lexicon.

"I will add you to my password," said Dumbledore swiftly, swishing his wand through the air as his eyes focussed on the journal so hard that his irises seemed to glow. After a moment he gestured for Harry to lay his wand and hand on the book's cover. "There. Try 'Diffindo.'"

"Diffindo'll rip it to shreds!"

"Yes, quite an unlikely choice of password," said Dumbledore as he popped a sweet into his mouth. "But do try it, Harry. The journal will know the difference."

The headmaster was right about all of it, Harry thought a little resentfully. And now that the lexicon was open, he was going to have to read it and try the spells.

He wasn't sure why he was surprised when he started reading, but he was. "This is all in English."

"Of course. Parseltongue sounds like English to you."

Harry shuddered. He'd rather it didn't. One more thing that made him different. If he had to be able to speak like a snake, couldn't he at least hear the same hissing noises that people had described to him?

"Weird English," added Harry, skimming through a few pages. Is this really how he thought of spells? Legs like broken eggs for the jelly-legs jinx?

His eyes almost bugged out of his head when he got to the incantations that controlled the Marauder's Map. "Show me everything to help me hide from the big-nosed horrible oily man?"

"And 'Done being Slytherin' to erase the map," said Snape calmly.

So he did know all about the map these days. Harry scowled. "Yeah, well I am done being Slytherin, sir. I want to be re-resorted."

"You were never resorted to begin with. I explained why you are in two houses."

"Effing school charter," muttered Harry.

"Language!" said Snape, more forcefully than before.

And that steamed Harry, it really did. Snape had no right to tell him how to talk. They weren't in class now, and anyway, what Harry had said wasn't so bad. Plus he was of age!

"What? I said 'effing,' you know. Not fucking!"

Snape looked like he was grinding his teeth. "Twenty points!"

Harry sat back and smirked. "Ten of them from Slytherin."

"Twenty points and a deten--"

"Now, now," interrupted Dumbledore. "I think the points are quite enough, Severus."

Snape's features were still taut with anger. Maybe that was why Harry had escalated things. He
almost preferred Snape angry. It made him act like he was supposed to. "Albus, you never did this boy any favours by letting him ignore the rules that apply to everyone else. Harry has told me most specifically that he prefers to be treated like any other student--"

"Which means one house," said Harry. "I'm not in yours."

"Any other student in your situation would have dual house affiliation!"

"I think that's enough on that subject," said Dumbledore in a smooth voice. His eyes were twinkling, though. He was enjoying this? Well, Dumbledore always had been a bit of a nutter--"Your magic, Harry," the headmaster continued. "Now that you have your own incantations in hand, would you be willing to try a spell or two in Parseltongue?"

"Wandlessly," added Snape.

"I did understand about the wanded spells being dangerous," said Harry coolly. "I do actually have two ears and a brain in between."

"Understanding the extent of the danger and appreciating it are two different things," retorted Snape. "A single wanded Lumos of yours destroyed several stone walls in a row and would have immolated anyone in its way."

Oh, that sounded just perfect. If Harry could accidentally kill people just because he needed a bit of light, he had so much reason to want these "dark powers" back. Dark sounded about right.

"No wand unless I'm using normal spells. Got it," he snapped, throwing his down to the desk. Snape and Dumbledore both winced.

Harry's first impulse was to try out a few wandless hexes. Was it his fault if he needed a wizard to hex, and Snape was sitting right there, a perfect target? Not even Harry's growing desire to keep Snape angry was enough to make him that reckless, though.

Reparo would have to do.

"Sorry about this," he murmured, taking a lemon sherbet from the dish and after he stood up, smashing it under his heel. After that he held out his right hand, not even sure how to go about casting without a wand. It felt all wrong, like brushing his teeth with a finger instead of a proper toothbrush. He fixed his gaze on the large Hogwarts crest mounted on the wall, focusing on the emblem for Slytherin, and tried the least powerful of the incantations he'd seen in the lexicon. "Go back the way you were!"

Snape and Dumbledore exchanged that worried look again, because of course nothing had happened.

"I could have told you this was a waste of time," said Harry, grabbing his wand and swiftly casting a regular Reparo. He summoned the sweet and tossed it in the bin, though part of him wanted to eat it just to see the look on Snape's face.

"Why would you consider it a waste of time?" asked Snape, very quietly.

"Because I can't believe I really had those powers," Harry shrugged.

"Harry," said Dumbledore in a ragged voice. "We would not lie to you about a thing like this."
"No, you don't understand. I don't think you're lying." He struggled for a way to explain. "But it's like hearing that . . . well, take the fact that Great Britain used to rule practically the entire world. That's true, but it doesn't have anything to do with the way I understand the country I've lived in all my life. On some level it's not real to me. It's just . . . information."

Snape and Dumbledore looked so dumbfounded that Harry had to ask, "You did know that Britain used to have a big empire, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Snape. "It's more that your explanation was . . . succinct. So you feel that the issue is psychological?"

Harry shrugged again. "I don't really know. Um, what I do know is that my Patronus charm wasn't working this morning. All the other magic I've done seemed all right. Not that I've tried very much. Just bits and pieces as they occur to me."

Another worried glance.

"Expecto Patronum, if you would, Harry," said Dumbledore.

Harry tried to think of a shining memory, a moment of perfect happiness that glowed brightly enough to drive every other thought from his mind. Flying, soaring high over the pitch. No, no . . . the time he'd played chase with Hedwig out there . . . "Expecto Patronum!"

A dazzling silver stag leapt out the end of his wand and charged around the room before coming to a halt before Harry. It stared at him for a moment, bent its head to nuzzle his fingers, and then vanished into a thin mist. "Oh. Well, I suppose I was having trouble concentrating earlier."

"That, at least, is a relief." Dumbledore peered over the top of his glasses. "Perhaps your dark powers will begin to seem real to you if you take a few minutes each day to practice casting in Parseltongue."

"Wandlessly--"

"I know!"

Snape's dark eyes glittered, but he didn't say anything.

"And in secret," added Dumbledore. "Severus' quarters would serve."

"That's not happening. I'll find a place and I'll ward it before I start, every time."

"You'll have someone with you, every time," rasped Snape. "Someone who can summon help if needed."

"Fine," snapped Harry. "Ron, Hermione, or the headmaster. I know the list."

"Or myself, or Draco."

"That's not happening, either."

Before Snape could reply, a knock sounded on the office door.
"Harry," said the short, brown-haired woman who entered. "I'm Dr Goode, but you'll put me at ease if you call me Marsha."

Harry blinked. She wasn't anything like what he'd expected. He supposed he'd had someone more like McGonagall in mind. This woman's face was only slightly lined; she looked to be about forty, Harry supposed.

"It's good to see you again, Severus. And you must be Albus Dumbledore. I recognise your photograph from the Daily Prophet."

"A pleasure, madam," said the headmaster as he shook the hand she was extending. "You've had a long journey. Can I offer you a cup of tea? Or anything else, anything at all?"

"Just some privacy, I'm afraid. I'll need to speak with Harry alone."

"Of course, of course--" Albus smiled. "Harry, you may use my Floo to return to your common room tonight."

Harry nodded. It wasn't lost on him that Snape shot the headmaster a nasty look. Well, he'd probably been planning to force his presence on Harry again. Though if he wanted to insist, there was nothing stopping him from entering Harry's room in the Tower. Or even waiting for him there.

Harry shuddered.

He didn't know this Marsha, but it was still a relief to be left alone with her. Harry thought that spoke volumes. "I'm surprised they would leave," he admitted. "They didn't before, when a Healer tried to bring back my memories."

Marsha took the seat nearest Harry and neatly arranged her skirt. For some reason her fussiness didn't bother him the way Draco's had. "They're well aware that I'm a squib. They don't need to worry that I'll use advanced magic in some inappropriate way."

"They might, though. Listening charms, eavesdropping spells . . ."

"Oh, that is true. I hadn't thought of that." She crinkled her forehead. "Good on you, Harry. If you could remember me, you'd know that patient confidentiality is of great concern to me."

"So . . . you mean I should already know you?"

"Yes. We conducted quite a few sessions last spring and throughout the summer."

Harry wished the floor would open up and swallow him. "I'm a nut-case?"

"Of course you aren't. You've simply had troubles adjusting to a few things. Small wonder, with the life you've led."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're talking about that rag of a newspaper. They lie about me all the time, just so you know."

"Yes, I know. I also got to know you personally last year."

"I can guess what I was having trouble adjusting to then. Because, well, I don't know how much I
told you, but I've loathed Professor Snape for years, and--"

She held up a hand. "I think I'd like to be assured of our privacy before you complete that thought. Have you any ideas? I've obviously never been to Hogwarts before. I must say, that train was magnificent . . ."  

"How did you get onto the platform?"

"Oh, your father assisted me."

Harry sighed. "He's not my father."

"Very understandable that you would have that point of view."

She was the first person to admit that, out loud at least, and Harry instantly liked her better for it. "Why didn't Snape Apparate you here? Uh, Apparition is when you--"

"I'm familiar enough with magic that I understand the most common terms. He did offer, but I told him I needed time to review my files, in any case."

"My file, I think you mean."

She crossed her ankles. "Are you aware that you're procrastinating, Harry? It's as though you don't want our session proper to begin at all."

Harry thought about that. "Yeah, all right. I suppose I don't. You're here to help me remember."

"And you don't care to," she said, very softly. "Well, well. We really shouldn't go any farther until we can be confident of our privacy. You never answered me, before. Have you any ideas?"

Harry glanced at the fireplace and. "I'm not sure if it's safe for squibs to floo. We'd better walk if we're going somewhere else."

"You can't simply wave your wand and secure this room?"

Harry laughed. She didn't know as much about magic as she thought. "I wouldn't trust a spell of mine to override one of Dumbledore's. But I can cast a Disillusionment charm over you. That'll keep anyone from wondering who you are if they see you walking with me. I mean, it'll keep them from seeing you at all. Unless the idea alarms you?"

"Not a bit. Where shall we go?"

Harry didn't want to walk far, and he needed a room that was as private as possible by nature . . . "Oh. Um, this'll sound a little strange, but there's a prefect's bathroom not too far from here. There's nowhere to sit but some stone benches, but it should do."

"You can't conjure some chairs?"

"I could, but they might not hold our weight." Harry shrugged. "I'm pants at Transfiguration. Um, a friend of mine told me earlier today that this year is harder than all the others put together. We're studying the Animagus transformation. That's . . ."

She was nodding like she already knew.

"I'll have to get the password, though," said Harry. "I'll be right back. Um . . . don't touch anything. You might get bit."
"Traps?"

"No, just Dumbledore's sense of humour. Be right back."

It took him less than five minutes to floo to Gryffindor, get the password from Hermione, and floo back. She took the opportunity to pertly remind him that the prefect's bathroom was for prefects. Had he changed his mind? Harry managed not to tell her to shut up, but neither did he explain. Not where anybody could overhear and start spreading the word that Harry Potter needed to see a head-shrinker.

Though . . . he supposed that wasn't such a big deal. Amnesia was a pretty good reason to need that kind of help.

The doctor was standing almost exactly where he'd left her, which made Harry feel a bit bad, but better than she stick her hand into a bowl of licorice snaps. He drew his wand. "Ready?"

She shimmered into nothingness the moment he'd cast the charm.

"Follow me and if you have a problem, tap my shoulder."

He couldn't see her nodding that time, but he could feel the magic following him as he walked to the door and preceded her down Dumbledore's winding staircase.

"Well," said Marsha Goode, walking around the prefect's bath while Harry locked and warded the door. "This looks like a bathroom designer's decadent dream. Is your bedroom as luxurious?"

"No. But this is just for prefects," said Harry.

"And you are one."

"No," said Harry sharply. Too sharply, as it turned out.

The doctor seated herself on a stone bench and waited until Harry had done the same. "Your reaction to the suggestion is rather extreme. Don't you think?"

"No," said Harry, but he didn't volunteer anything else.

"I read over the notes the mind-healer made about your situation. He specifically ruled out any attempt at magical healing. How do you feel about that?"

Harry crossed his arms. "I'd assume he knows what he's talking about."

"Is that your only reaction?"

"No, I suppose my main reaction would be relief." When she just waited, Harry shifted on his bench. "Those notes must have told you how I started screaming in agony from the one healing spell he tried. It felt like I was being punched in the brain, and then like my brain was a dishrag being wrung out. He seemed to think that any magical healing might produce a similar result."
"But based on what you said upstairs, you were relieved for other reasons."

"Not then I wasn't. Now, yeah. Of course."

"What changed?"

Harry snorted. "Can we not play this game? You heard what I said up in the headmaster's office. *He's not my father*, that bit? And you said my feelings were entirely understandable."

"Yes. Waking up to find yourself a member of a family you can't remember must be difficult indeed."

"It's not just that. You must know the truth."

She put her palms on either side of her on the bench. "What truth is that?"

"Well, that I was pretending last year, of course--"

"Pretending," she said, making it sound like two separate words.

"Yeah. To be all right with the adoption."

"Why would you have pretended that?"

Harry blinked. "You mean I didn't tell you about it? When you said I was having trouble adjusting last year to things that had happened to me, I thought you must mean the adoption. Isn't that why I needed therapy, because the strain of pretending all the time was getting to me?"

"You never said a word about any pretence."

Harry felt sick. Last year must have been sheer torture, if Dumbledore had forbidden him to be honest with his own . . . whatever she was. Muggle mind-healer was the least upsetting phrase he could think of. Well, this certainly explained why Ron and Hermione seemed to accept Snape as his father. Dumbledore must have told him to share the truth with absolutely no-one at all.

"If you weren't the one person I could really . . . vent to about what was being rammed down my throat, then why did we have sessions at all?"

"You know, Harry, my task now is to help you remember the past year. Answering every one of your questions will be counter-productive to that goal."

"But everybody's been--"

"Yes, I have gathered that much." She pursed her lips. "Healer Yatesborough's notes indicated that he'd given his sanction for others to fill in the gaps in your memory. And of course, a certain amount of that is unavoidable. But you have the broad outline in place now. Your mind must be allowed to seek answers inside itself, Harry. That won't happen if your curiosity about details is immediately satisfied via outside means."

"But--"

"I'll be speaking to the headmaster and Professor Snape about the matter," said the doctor in a decisive voice. "They must stop telling you random facts willy-nilly at once."

"What, I'm supposed to just flounder about and not know what everybody around me knows?"
"Yes, because the discomfort that will generate will provide motivation for your mind to heal."

"That's ridiculous--"

"There will be exceptions to the rule, of course. Things you must be made aware of for your own safety or that of others, for example."

Dark powers, Harry thought.

"Or when a misunderstanding is causing serious disruptions in your quality of life." She looked like she was struggling not to smile. "That is why I am willing to clear up one small matter for you."

"Why I didn't tell you I was pretending?" asked Harry hopefully.

"The fact that you were indeed, not pretending, Harry," she said in a low, calm voice as her gaze held his. "You were genuinely a part of your new family. You thought of Professor Snape as your father and Draco as your brother and you were happy to spend the summer in their company."

We were happy together, you and Draco and I . . .

"That . . . that can't be true," said Harry, his voice little more than a croak. "I . . . I've hated both of them for as long as I've known them."

"It is true."

"And they hate me--" Harry cleared his throat. "Well, they hated me, anyway. Now they're just acting weird. Malfoy was trying to make a point with some stupid little toy he gave me, but he wouldn't tell me what the point was. And Snape . . ." Harry turned his face away. He didn't want to think about Snape.

"I still think I had to be pretending," he said finally. "Nothing else makes sense."

"Perhaps other possibilities will begin to make sense when you begin remembering more."

Harry shook his head. "But if I'm wrong, and all that was real . . . I don't think I want to remember it. It's not real for me now. And . . . I don't want it to be."

At least she didn't tell him that he'd feel differently later.

And she wasn't telling him what he should or shouldn't feel right now.

"All the more reason for those around you not to fill in the gaps in your memory," she murmured. "Their experiences won't make this situation feel real to you. Only your own can do that."

Harry realised he was fidgeting and tried to stop. He told himself it was the cold, hard stone beneath his bum and not the question he had to ask. "And you're . . . you're going to help me get them back?"

"When you're ready. The mind can't be forced. Right now you're a bit like a smoker whose wife has referred him for aversion therapy. There's simply no point in starting any, not until the smoker himself has a desire to change his addictive behaviour."

"I'm addicted to the amnesia?"

"No," she said gently. "You're here because the people in authority over you have referred you for help. But this is the sort of help that you must want for yourself. I believe that that pain you felt
when Yatesborough tried to heal you was a direct result of the fact that right now, you have no desire to remember. Any methods I employ with you could be hurtful as well if you aren't ready for them. Your mind, and perhaps even your magic, will find a way to drive the unwanted help away."

Harry frowned. Something was wrong with her logic. Something basic . . . Oh. "But Snape didn't claim I was his adopted son until after that healer's spell failed. When he was trying to treat me, I didn't yet know why I didn't want to remember. So then, what was making me fight him?"

"I don't know, but Harry . . . if you have at least accepted that you don't care to remember, that in itself should tell you something."

"What, that I actually did think those two Slytherins were my family? It's a lot more likely that I don't want to remember lying to my closest friends for a whole year. What sort of person does that make me, that I let Dumbledore manipulate me like that?"

"I don't know that he did manipulate you. Would that match what you can remember of him?"

Harry had to think about that. He knew that he was very angry with Dumbledore, but would he call him manipulative? Maybe so. He'd more-or-less played games with Harry for a whole year, pretending he was too busy to see Harry instead of explaining why it was a bad idea. He'd had his reasons, but it had still been manipulative. The year before, he hadn't been the one to trick Harry into the tournament, but he certainly hadn't worked very hard to get Harry out of it. And what about the year before that? *Three turns should do it*, he'd said, instead of saying loud and clear what he wanted Harry and Hermione to do about Sirius. "Yeah, I think so . . ."

"Then assuming that he did indeed tell you to lie to your friends, your family, and your therapist, which strikes me as highly unlikely, would he have done so for good reasons?"

"Oh, yeah," said Harry a little bitterly, since he was thinking of Sirius. "He always has good reasons. They just don't always work out the way he thought they would."

"As with this, perhaps? Is it possible that he told you to begin by pretending, but somewhere along the way the pretence became real?"

Harry curled his toes. Better that than clench his fists, since she would see that and think it meant something. Harry could tell already that Marsha Goode didn't miss much. "Yeah, I think so . . ."

"Well, let me tell you something that is not just possible but is actual fact. Whatever you were doing last year, your father and brother were not pretending, Harry. They both care about you a great deal, even though that sometimes gets lost in the way you and Draco behave towards one another."

"I knew it. We insult and hex each other all the time, don't we? I knew that Malfoy was being too nice today in my room--"

"You behave like brothers. With all the sibling rivalry that implies. You compete for your father's time and attention--"
Harry couldn't stand the thought of that. He had wanted Snape's attention? Or at least pretended to? Well, he didn't want it any longer. All he wanted now was to stay away from the man. Far away.

And he wanted away from the subject, too. "So Malfoy's your patient too, not just me? That makes sense. I can think of about six thousand reasons why he would need a head-shrinker."

She gave him a very thin smile, like she knew what he was up to. His strategy still worked, though. She gave him a short lecture on patient confidentiality instead of going on about his "father."

"So you can't confirm or deny if Malfoy's seeing you, even though a non-amnesiac version of myself would already know the answer." Well, Harry had needed a good laugh.

"I can't confirm or deny that any patient of mine is such unless that person gives permission for me to share that information," she said in a cool voice.

"Wouldn't 'any' person already have done that?"

"In a case like this I would seek to re-confirm any such permission."

Harry laughed again, wondering if they were really only talking about Malfoy. "I bet Snape saw you too! I'm right, right?"

"Harry," she said gently, "this stopped being amusing about five minutes ago."

"Well, you called him 'Severus' just like you're calling me 'Harry.' Are you on a first-name basis with all your patients?"

"Are you aware that you're trying to drive me away?"

Harry was, but he hadn't thought it was obvious. She really didn't miss anything. "Well, I don't want to talk about them."

"That's fine, as I don't, either. When I come to see you, it will be to talk about you," she said as she stood up. "I think that's about enough for now, however. Will you walk me back to the headmaster's office?"

Harry cast a longing glance at the prefect's tub. He felt loads better than he had that morning, but he still thought that a long hot soak would do wonders for his muscles, which still felt bruised from his accident. Of course he had to walk her back, though. She couldn't even get into the headmaster's office by herself.

As it turned out, that wasn't a worry. Snape was standing by the gargoyle when they arrived. It seemed too coincidental to Harry, unless Snape had been waiting there for the better part of half an hour.

Snape splayed his hands out and murmured the password, but not so low that Harry couldn't catch it. *Triple chocolate coconut ice cream.* Huh.

"Come up," he said to Harry. And to the doctor too, Harry supposed, though Snape couldn't see her.

Harry didn't want to. "I'll just make my way back to the Tower from here--"

"You'll floo and save yourself the walk."

Harry shrugged and stepped onto the winding staircase. When they were in Dumbledore's office he
cast a *Finite* to end the Disillusionment spell. Snape was staring at him in a strange way. Almost accusing, though Harry hadn't done anything wrong. Oh. "We had to leave Dumbledore's office. There might be listening spells in here, and we wanted privacy."

Maybe the look was more sardonic than accusing. "You don't think there are listening spells in place in the prefect's bathroom?"

"Why would there be--" *Oh.* Harry promptly blushed.

"Yes," drawled Snape. "A rather predictable place for that sort of activity. Particularly when prefects believe they're entitled to special privileges beyond the officially sanctioned ones."

Well, at least he hadn't said anything about Harry being a prefect. Harry knew he'd have to warn Ron and Hermione about the listening spells, though. He wasn't sure how far they might have gone, but better safe than sorry. "I cast a couple of strong wards," he said, hoping that Snape would tell him if that had been enough, so he could pass the information along to Ron.

He didn't.

"I'm more concerned about your Disillusionment strategy. You didn't account for sound."

Shite. That was right. Harry had heard the click of high heels following him all the way to the prefect's bathroom. He'd heard, and he hadn't thought anything of it. That was an inexcusable mistake. The kind that could get you killed in battle. He gulped, hating the fact that he was wrong and Snape was right. There wasn't even anything he could say to defend himself, since he wasn't going to start using amnesia as an excuse for acting like a brainless twit.

"I'll remember next time," he said instead, glancing at Marsha. "If there is a next time."

She gently nodded, but her keen eyes and ears were taking in every detail of his conversation with Snape.

"Next time you will speak to Dr Goode *in my quarters,*" said Snape, his robes billowing as he took two quick strides toward Harry. "There will be no need there to worry that the headmaster is listening in. I do know how to ward my home against intruders."

"I told you, I'm not going down there. Especially not considering that you'll be listening in!"

"Harry." Snape waited until Harry looked him in the eyes. "I will do no such thing."

That was also good for a laugh, but Harry didn't feel like laughing. "I think you can assume, *sir,* that I've got no reason in the world to trust your word."

Snape leaned down a little, his black gaze seeming to bore into Harry's. He looked fierce, angry, and ready to wash his hands of Harry completely. But the moment the man spoke, Harry knew that he must have misread all that. Snape's voice was heavy with determination, and maybe even some regret.

"I will swear an Unbreakable Vow."

That might have meant more to Harry if he had any idea what Snape was talking about. "A what?"

"Ask Miss Granger to explain," said Snape tightly. "Or find the information in the library if you are in the mood not to trust your friends, either."
Harry blinked. "You could just tell me."

"I'm not in the habit of wasting my breath. Moreover, I have other duties to attend to. Dr Goode--"

"Marsha, please."

A muscle in Snape's cheek spasmed as though he didn't appreciate the interruption. "I will escort you home. Would you prefer to walk outside the gates of Hogwarts and Apparate with me to Surrey, or floo to London and secure Muggle transport from there?"

"Squibs can floo?"

Snape tapped his foot with impatience. Whether at her lack of answer, or Harry's question . . . probably both. "I would hardly suggest any means of travel that would injure the good doctor."

"Yeah, well I didn't grow up with a wizarding family who could fill in all these little gaps, you know--"

"What I know is that you have such a family now," retorted Snape. "You may ask me anything, and I feel quite certain that Draco would also be pleased to answer your questions."

"Oh, yeah, Malfoy would just love that--"

"Why don't you return to your quarters, Harry," said the doctor in a tone Harry thought was meant to calm, or maybe even soothe, when what she ought to do was tell Snape to stop throwing Malfoy in his face. "I don't know when I will see you again, but something will be arranged."

Yeah, by Snape.

"I will see you in class tomorrow," added Snape as Harry reached up to get some Floo powder. The comment startled Harry so much that he almost knocked the box off the hearth. He knew he had Potions tomorrow. Ron had already said so. Did Snape have to taunt him with it?

"Good-night," said Harry to the doctor, giving her a little bow so Snape wouldn't think he was talking to both of them. "Gryffindor Common Room!"

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Seventeen: "Commotion in Potions"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"Where's Hermione?" asked Harry, directing the question to the students in the common room.

"She went up to our room about fifteen minutes ago," said Lavender from her seat in the corner. When Harry glanced her way, he saw that she was batting her eyes at him.

"I told you, you have to stay still," said Dean, a charcoal crayon in hand. "Do you want this to look like you, or like a great smudge?"

"I want to talk to Harry right now, anyway," she retorted, jumping up and flouncing over to him. Harry wasn't sure why, but he had a strong urge to back away from her. Maybe there was something he'd forgotten that would explain it. Or maybe he just didn't like the look in her eyes, though he didn't know what it might mean, either.

"Hallo, Lavender," he said weakly.

"Is it true you can't remember a whole year?"

"Yeah, that's true."

"Awwwwww." She made the sound last for almost ten seconds.

"Yeah, bit rough," said Harry. He didn't know what else to say, since he wasn't going to start telling Lavender the kinds of things he might tell Ron or Hermione. She'd spread his words around Gryffindor Tower in thirty minutes flat, and then she'd start making sure that the rest of Hogwarts knew everything, too.

She reached up and trailed her hand down the side of his face, her fingertips barely grazing his skin. It tickled. "Are your glasses giving you a headache after the terrible blow you took?"

"No--" He was about to explain the cover story they'd agreed on, that his eyes had been getting gradually better but he hadn't realised until his injury that he didn't need glasses at all. Lavender, however, didn't let him get more than a single word in before she was speaking again, her voice very, very soft.

"You look so handsome without them, Harry." Her eyes went wider and seemed to sparkle a little, even in the dim light. "You were always very handsome, of course, but--" She covered her mouth with the three fingers she'd been using to touch him and looked like she was trying her best not to smile. Trying and failing.

"Uh . . . thanks, Lavender." Harry cleared his throat, suddenly aware that he'd been looking at more than just her eyes. He was a bit annoyed with himself, actually. Every girl he ran into, he kept doing the same thing. Noticing how curvy they were up top . . . it wasn't really his fault that he noticed that, though, was it? The simple fact was that one more year of growing up had changed the girls a lot more than it had the boys.
"So green," she said, sighing. "I don't think I've ever seen such a beautiful shade of green. It's just lovely. I'll have to see if I can have a dress made in that colour. For the Yule Ball."

Dean made a soft gagging sound and started to put away his art materials.

"Uh . . . yeah. You do that. I mean, if you like green. Well, it's late, and--"

Lavender's lips tightened, but only for a single instant. Then she laid a hand on his arm, her fingers curling around his sleeve. "It was just dreadful, Harry, watching you get shoved straight into the path of a Bludger. I think my heart sank right down to my toes."

Wait. Wait. Shoved into the path of a Bludger? "Who shoved me?"

Somehow, Lavender had managed to step closer without Harry noticing. Now, she was so close that if he just leaned forward a little, their robes would touch.

"Oh, who else?" Lavender tossed her head in a way that made her curly hair cascade over one shoulder. "Draco Snape. He'd been going on for weeks about how he planned to prove, once and for all, which one of you is the better Seeker. I didn't know he meant to prove it by taking you out of the game, though."

Malfoy. Of course it had to have been Malfoy. Harry should have known. Things made better sense now. After all, he knew how to keep an eye out for Bludgers. He'd never been hit hard by one except for the time he'd had to deal with a rogue Bludger. But if he'd been shoved right into the path of one . . . yeah, it all made sense.

Except for one thing. "But he didn't prove himself the better Seeker. The way I heard it, he stopped playing as soon as I fell."

Lavender tossed her head again. The movement looked a little funny. Sort of like she was a horse. Harry was pretty sure she didn't mean it that way. But how did she mean it? It made him wonder again if there was something he ought to know.

"Well, he overplayed his hand, didn't he? He probably thought you'd swerve in time to avoid a serious hit. Maybe he assumed you'd end up with a broken leg and be in too much pain to be serious competition."

"That still doesn't explain why he grounded his team."

Lavender smiled. "Oh, that's not hard to understand. If he'd gone on to catch the Snitch while you were out cold from an injury he'd caused, Snape would have killed him."

"Killed him?"

"Well, not literally. But I'm sure that your father would have made his life miserable for a long time to come. He might even have taken another thousand points off Slytherin."

Harry blinked, too surprised to remember to object to the word father. "Another . . . but Snape never takes points from Slytherin-- Oh. He took two thousands points from me, you mean? And half of them came from Slytherin?"

That made some kind of sense, he supposed, but it certainly didn't sound very cunning. Particularly not from someone like Snape.
"Oh. That's right, you don't remember," said Lavender with yet another toss of her head. "Theodore
Nott tried to kidnap you in Hogsmeade last year so he could hand you over to You-Know-Who.
Ron saved you. He got hailed as the 'Hero of Hogsmeade' . . . it was all very dashing. Ron turned
Nott over to Professor Snape, who called in the Aurors. Nott's in Azkaban."

It came to Harry then that Lavender was doing exactly what Dr Goode had said people shouldn't
do: filling Harry in on all the details. Not that Harry blamed Lavender; she didn't know any better.

Harry knew better, though. Some small part of him was aware that he should put a stop to this . . .
but he wanted to know what he'd missed. This time, at least. She wasn't going on about how
wonderful Malfoy was or how Harry had been so happy to be in a real family at last.

A real family. Wasn't that a joke?

"Nott went to Azkaban for killing Pansy Parkinson, I thought--"

"Oh, he did that too. But your father took those thousand points from Slytherin because Nott had
attacked you, Harry."

"That . . ." Harry's mouth felt dry. "That doesn't-- Snape wouldn't--"

"Well, he did," said Lavender pertly. "We were all stunned too. It was the talk of the Tower for
days and days, and that was after we'd already seen him acting fatherly toward you."

"Fatherly," croaked Harry.

"He likes to tell you to 'be good.' It's rather sweet, actually." Lavender widened her eyes. "Oh, but
please don't ever tell him I used that word about him. Or that I was talking about him at all!"

"I won't tell him." Not too hard to promise that. If Harry had his way, he wouldn't be telling Snape
anything at all. Though he did think that Lavender had given him a few things that bore thinking
about. A thousand points because a Slytherin had attacked Harry Potter?

Or maybe a thousand points because a Slytherin had attacked a fellow Slytherin. Harry could
understand it better when he thought of it that way. Not that he liked to think of himself as a
Slytherin, but it did seem that Snape thought of him that way. He must, to have made Harry a
Slytherin prefect.

"I knew I could trust you, Harry." Lavender moved a fraction of an inch closer. "It must be so
difficult, waking up a year older."

"Yeah," said Harry, trying to edge away from her. She matched him move for move and made it
difficult.

"What was it like when you looked in the mirror and saw yourself looking so dashing without your
glasses?"

Harry had been more surprised that his reflection was taller than he was used to, and that the image
in the mirror had been so crisp and clear. He was used to things looking blurry when he was
washing. But his face was just his face. "I don't know, I guess I thought I still looked like myself--"

"Mmm, you do. Yes, you do--"

When she reached a hand up like she was going to stroke his cheek again, Harry darted around her
to the stairs. "G'night, Lavender."
"Good-night. Sleep well--"

Just as he was turning away, she blew him a kiss.

Harry hurried up the stairs to get away.

Ron was lying on his bed, flipping through a Quidditch magazine.

"Hero of Hogsmeade, eh?" asked Harry, poking Ron in the shoulder.

A low flush began to creep up Ron's neck and face. "Yeah," he said, but something in his voice was off. It was like he didn't want to talk about that, but why wouldn't he? Ron loved attention--

That was when Harry noticed that Ron's eyes were darting from left to right, left to right, like he was trying to tell Harry something. It wasn't too hard to figure out what. Seamus was on his bed to one side, and Dean, drawing again, was on the other. Ron didn't do subtle so well--

*Ron doesn't do subtle, Ron doesn't do subtle . . .*

The words felt like a snake coiling inside his head, poised to strike. Weird. Harry did his best to shake off the strange feeling. Right now what he had to concentrate on was a way to let Ron say whatever it was that Dean and Seamus weren't supposed to hear. A privacy spell seemed a bad idea. Harry had already spent a year away from his friends; he didn't want to start excluding them in obvious ways. That would only make him seem even more of a stranger than he must already.

"I know you already talked me through my timetable for tomorrow," he said, trying hard not to pitch his voice too loudly, "but maybe you could write it down." He summoned some quill and parchment. "I'll just title it . . ."

What he wrote after he sat down on Ron's bed, though, was, *What did you want to tell me?*

Ron threw him a grateful look and started writing.

*I'm not really the Hero of Hogsmeade. You are. Nott attacked you but you won the duel and kept him prisoner until your father could get there. I'm the cover story so people didn't find out how strong your magic really is."

How strong it was, thought Harry.

"Great," said Harry, pretending to read a timetable. "Double Potions is my last class on Mondays. I get to dread it all day long."

"Oh, you don't complain about Potions nearly as much as you used to," said Ron, shrugging. "Snape doesn't pick on you and try to make you mess up. I don't think you love brewing, but you don't hate it any longer, either."
"I'm getting an earful of Snape-the-good, I hope you know," said Harry dryly.

Ron laughed. "Yeah, that does sound strange, doesn't it? But he really has been all right as your father, Harry."

Ugh. Harry couldn't go there, couldn't think about that. "Not trying to make me get my potion wrong hardly makes Snape a good person, let alone a good teacher," he said, nodding his head. "He should never have been doing that at all!"

Was it Harry's imagination, or did Ron give a tiny sigh?

"Just give him a chance, Harry. I know you can't remember him as anything but a greasy git, but . . . just give him a chance."

Harry shrugged and scooted a little closer. "He said to ask you about something."

"Me?"

"Well, he said to ask Hermione, but I think you probably know more than she does, since you grew up in the wizarding world."

Ron preened. "Ask away."

"What's an Unbreakable Vow?"

"Don't take one," said Ron quickly. "The twins tried to trick me into one when I was little. Mum yelled at them for weeks, 'cause once you take one, you can't break your word. Literally."

"Yeah, the name does give that bit away."

Ron smiled a little wryly. "Yeah, all right. Sorry. An Unbreakable Vow is a binding magical contract, Harry. If you start to break it, the vow will kill you before you can finish."

Harry drew in a swift breath. He hadn't expected to hear that. He felt like he was falling down a long abyss, wind rushing through his ears, all his senses filling up with the sensation of having no ground beneath his feet. Had Snape been serious? Offering to take a vow like that merely so that Harry would feel comfortable talking to his therapist?

"Oh . . ."

His voice sounded like it was coming from a long way off.

"Even if you start to break one by accident, you'll end up dead. They're really dangerous," added Ron grimly. "Who's been asking you to take an Unbreakable Vow, Harry? And at a time like this, when you can't even think straight? No offence. But who is it? I'll hex him into next week before I report it to Dumbledore--" Ron suddenly narrowed his eyes. "Wait. Snape said to ask Hermione? I'm sure he knows more about Unbreakable Vows than she does. Why didn't he explain about them himself?"

"He said I wouldn't believe anything he said."

"And he was right, huh?" Ron shook his head. "Well, he still should have explained. What if you'd been persuaded to take this vow before you'd had a chance to find out more about it?"

Harry lowered his voice. "But nobody's been asking me to take one. It only came up because Snape offered to take one."
"Bloody hell," murmured Ron, his mouth dropping open. "Why would he do that?"

"Uh . . . so I'd believe him about something."

"He really did adopt you, Harry," said Ron firmly.

"I know." Harry didn't doubt that, not the way people seemed to think. And now that he knew what an Unbreakable Vow was, he was feeling worse by the second. "It wasn't about that. I think he just wants me to trust him."

"You should. He's your father."

"Would you please stop calling him my father?"

"Sorry," said Ron, but he didn't look it. "You really liked it last year when I got over my issues and started calling him that."

"I think I was just pretending to be all right with the idea--"

"No, mate," said Ron, sitting up a little straighter on the bed. "No. I've hardly ever seen anybody more sincere than you were about all of us accepting Snape as permanent part of your life."

"Well, then I'm a better actor than you thought. Or I was under a befuddlement charm. Or--"

Ron held up his hands. "Just don't let Snape take an Unbreakable Vow, Harry. It wouldn't be right. If something went wrong he'd end up dead. I know how much he loves you, but that's . . . well, an extreme way to go about proving it."

Harry's stomach suddenly twisted. "Snape does not love me. Don't . . . don't say that."

Even Snape hadn't said that. He'd used words like care and concern. Those were bad enough. But this one? Harry couldn't listen to it. He breathed rapidly in and out, trying to make his stomach untwist, grateful that Ron looked back at his magazine instead of staring.

"I had something else to ask you, anyway," he said when he felt like he could manage a normal voice. Flicking his wand, he summoned the little griffin Malfoy had shown him earlier. Harry held it in his hand and blew on it, his stomach relaxing further when the griffin woke up stretching and yawning. He couldn't help but like the griffin, even though he'd got it from Malfoy, of all people.

"What do you know about this?"

"Draco gave it to you . . ." Ron wrinkled his forehead. "I think you said he gave it to you twice, because you wouldn't take it the first time. You didn't trust it not to have some horrible dark magic worked into it. But then you started getting on with Draco a bit better, and you let him give it to you."

"No, I meant, did I ever tell you what it's good for? Malfoy implied that it's more than just a decoration."

"Draco gave it to you . . ." Ron wrinkled his forehead. "I think you said he gave it to you twice, because you wouldn't take it the first time. You didn't trust it not to have some horrible dark magic worked into it. But then you started getting on with Draco a bit better, and you let him give it to you."

"Oh, right." Ron lowered his eyes for a moment, looking sheepish. "Look, Harry. We're all right again, so don't take any of this wrong, but you and I fought for a couple of months last year. I . . . it was bad of me, and I can see that now, but I felt like I was getting crowded out of your life and I . . . I reacted badly."

"It's all right," said Harry. He couldn't even blame Ron for feeling crowded out. It made perfect sense. Harry must have laid it on really thick, about liking the adoption and all that. "What does
any of that have to do with this griffin?"

Ron laughed, very softly. "Well, that's how I found out what it does." He reached out a finger, carefully stroking an unfurled wing while the griffin arched and stretched, clearly enjoying the attention. "Once you were living in Gryffindor again, you showed this to me and said that you'd been tempted to use it on me, but you never had, because you knew that I was your friend the whole time, even if I was acting like the world's biggest prat."

"Use it on you?"

"Oh, yeah. It's a little like a Foe Glass, except instead of just showing you your enemies, it's supposed to attack if anybody comes near who means you harm. Draco was trying to prove that he didn't intend to hurt you ever again. We had a good laugh over that, because if you didn't trust him, you were hardly likely to trust his word about what the griffin did."

"Good point."

Ron had to ruin it, though. "By that time, though, you did trust Draco. Really, I thought you should have used the griffin last year when Nott was making nice to you, but you said you didn't need to because you definitely didn't trust him anyway, and using something like the griffin on him would give that away to him, and destroy any chance you had of Slytherining the truth out of him."

Harry did his best to ignore the "Slytherining" part of that. "So I've never seen it growl at anyone?"

"Not that I know of."

Harry's nostrils flared. "That's it, then. It's probably charmed to cuddle up to everyone it meets."

"Test it on Zabini, then. He's not too fond of you."

"I wouldn't give Malfoy the satisfaction."

That time it definitely wasn't Harry's imagination when Ron sighed. "Snape's not going to like hearing him called that."

Harry snorted. "Why did Malfoy change his name, anyway?"

"I don't really know. I suppose he wanted to." Ron suddenly couldn't meet Harry's eyes. "Uh . . . why don't you ask him?"

Yeah . . . Ron definitely didn't do subtle. "Or talk to my father about it, I suppose?"

"Uh . . ." Ron gulped and looked down at his hands. "Well . . . he is, you know."

No, Harry didn't know. He didn't want to know. He smoothly slid off Ron's bed and walked back to his own, picking up his Defence text and holding it up in front of his face. He had to try to catch up before he had class first thing in the morning, didn't he?
"And that's Maura Morrighan, the new Defence teacher," said Seamus the next morning as a tall woman wearing fringed leather trousers and a tight-fitting leather blouse walked between the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw tables on her way to the head table.

Harry dropped his fork and very nearly choked on the bit of bacon he was eating, he sucked in his breath so fast.

Hermione gave him an irritated glance but pounded on Harry's back until he coughed and was able to breathe again.

"Yeah, I know," said Seamus with a wink. "Unbelievable, isn't it, a teacher dressed like that? Built like that? I can only concentrate one minute in five in that class. The rest of the time I'm thinking about--"

He made a rude gesture using both hands.

"Ten points from Gryffindor for unacceptable comments about a staff member," said a deep voice just behind Harry.

It was a good thing Harry hadn't taken another bite, because he might just have choked again. Where had Snape come from? When he'd been missing from the head table, Harry had hoped to avoid seeing him completely. Or at least until he had to put up with him: in class.

"Sorry, sir," mumbled Seamus, hurriedly shoving both his hands under the table.

"Are you quite all right?" Snape asked Harry.

Harry almost replied with What's it to you? but thought better of it. The last thing he needed in front of the entire Gryffindor table was for Snape to answer that Harry was his son. Snape would probably enjoy rubbing it in.

Instead, he said something that he thought would bother Snape even more. "Yes, sir."

Snape looked like he didn't know how to respond to that. Maybe he didn't. "Take smaller bites," he finally said, and strode off without another word, his billowing robes sweeping the benches to either side of him.

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione sadly. "He's trying. Can't you see that he's trying?"

"I don't want him sneaking up on me. I'm not going to act like I do," said Harry, taking a large, soothing swig of pumpkin juice. He knew a better way than that to forget about the ache in his throat, though. Harry shifted to the side and fixed his gaze on Morrighan again. "She's really something. Is she any good?"

Seamus spewed bits of scrambled eggs all over the table.

"Boys," muttered Hermione, scooping her books back into her school bag. "You're disgusting, the lot of you. I'll see you in class, Harry."

"I meant," said Harry tightly once she had left, "is Morrighan any good at teaching Defence."

"Yeah, I think she is," said Ron through a mouthful of half-chewed toast. "She doesn't assign readings or essays. You can imagine what Hermione thinks of that. But I approve. It's all practical
work in that class. She's got something against Draco, though. She's been a right bitch to him--"

There was really only one thing that Harry could say to that. "I like her already."

Defence this year looked to be all right, Harry thought. Morrighan certainly seemed competent enough. She spent about ten minutes on lecture and demonstration, and then began circulating throughout the class assisting students during their practise duels.

The only drawback to the class so far was that Malfoy was in it. Harry was used to that, of course. What he wasn't used to was having the other boy pay so much attention to him. Malfoy's usual pattern in class was to ignore Harry unless he was sabotaging or insulting him.

Not today. First, Malfoy planted himself next to Harry during Morrighan's lecture. Harry solved that by moving so that Ron was between them and then glaring every time it looked like Malfoy might try anything. Then, when it was time to choose duelling partners, Malfoy was suddenly standing right in front of Harry.

"Where's your crest?"

Harry had opted for plain black robes until he had a chance to get a proper Gryffindor crest. He still couldn't believe he'd ever agreed to wear that awful snake-and-lion one. That was taking the pretence too far. "I burned it."

Malfoy leaned close, his grey eyes narrowed. "Severus designed that himself, I'll have you know. For you, and despite the fact that any form of art brings up an entire vault's worth of bad memories. You should move the crest from your Quidditch robes onto your school robes, and you should do it before you have Potions later."

"Thanks, Malfoy," said Harry with a vicious smile. "I'd forgotten about the one on my Quidditch robes. I'll go up to Gryffindor at lunch and burn it to a crisp, too."

"You arse--"

"Says the boy who shoved me into a Bludger."

"I did not--"

"Actually, you did," said Blaise Zabini in a smooth voice as he walked past with Daphne Greengrass.

"Shut up, Blaise," muttered Malfoy, before turning back to Harry. "All right, I did, but it wasn't like that. We were both shoving each other all over the place, Harry. Both determined to win--"

"I won," said Harry coldly. "Not the Snitch. Something much better. I got to forget a year in your company. A year in Slytherin. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to start catching up on things that matter, so get lost. I want to duel with Ron."
Malfoy drew back as if slapped, but rallied quickly enough. "Duel with me. Do your best to hex me inside-out. Get even for what happened at the Quidditch match--"

"Don't you get it? I don't want anything to do with you. Fuck off."

Hermione glared at Harry briefly before she laid a hand on Malfoy's sleeve and guided him to the other side of the classroom. They exchanged a few words Harry couldn't hear before backing away from one another to begin a practise duel. Harry knew that Hermione could take care of herself, but he still watched them carefully, in case Malfoy tried something sneaky.

"Harry," Ron was saying in an undertone. "I know you can't remember, and yeah, Draco's never going to be my favourite person, but he is actually your brother--"

"My brother who shoved me into a Bludger."

Ron suddenly grabbed Harry by the shoulders. "Do you trust me to tell you the truth?"

Harry scowled. What sort of question was that? "Well, yeah. Of course. But it doesn't matter, because I really do think I must have been pretending to like being adopted last year, and you didn't know--"

"You weren't pretending, but I'm not talking about that," said Ron, giving him a little shake. "I want to tell you about the Quidditch match. I wasn't far from you and Draco when the accident happened. That's what it was, Harry, an accident. He did shove you, but he didn't see that Bludger coming up from underneath."

"Oh, how could you know what Draco Malfoy did or didn't see?"

"I saw the look on his face when he saw what he'd done, that's how." Ron let go of Harry's shoulders and brandished his wand, probably because Morrighan was passing close by. They had to at least look like they were going to get to work. As soon as she was in conversation with Neville about something, Ron started talking again, his voice pitched low. "Harry, I'm the last person who wanted you to be brothers with Draco--"

"No, I'm the last person."

"Shove up," said Ron fiercely. "This isn't easy for me to say, and you'd better believe I'm saying it for your sake, not mine. So listen. Draco's been a decent brother to you, Harry, and not only because he thinks he needs you. I didn't believe it myself until the Quidditch match, but I've got no doubt at all now, and I'm not going to lie to you to make you feel better. Draco wants his brother back because he loves you."

"Shoving me into a Bludger was a great way to demonstrate it," snarled Harry.

"I told you, that was an accident. Either you think I'm a liar or you stop using that as an excuse to hate him."

"Fine," said Harry tightly. "I have plenty of other reasons to hate him."

Ron gave him a disgusted look. "But he's your brother!"

As if that meant anything. Sometimes, even blood ties didn't mean much. "So if Percy waltzed in here you'd be delighted, would you?"

Harry was startled to see Ron's whole face sort of crumple for an instant. Then his pride came
roaring in and he lifted his head, his eyes blazing. "I would, yeah. I'd forgive him every stupid thing he did and I'd knock myself out trying to make things right between us. But I don't get a chance to do any of it. Percy's dead."

"Oh, God." Harry swallowed. "I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry."

"You didn't know." Ron turned his face away for a moment. "But it goes back to what I was trying to say. Your brother's alive, mate. Just . . . just think about what you're doing."

Harry flicked another glance at Malfoy and Hermione. "The Bludger thing was really an accident, huh?"

Ron nodded.

Harry sighed. "All right, then. I won't throw that in his face again. Thanks for straightening me out."

"You aren't exactly straightened out--"

Harry shook his head until his hair flew in all directions. "I can't think about it right now. Let's just duel like we're supposed to."

Half-way through the Defence session Morrighan drew Harry aside and reviewed about a dozen spells with him, things the class had covered earlier in the year. She smiled when he could do most of them on the first or second try.

"I expect that a great deal of the magic you've forgotten will come back with very little effort," she told him. "You'll just need a reminder that somewhere inside, you do already know it. And now, of course, you'll be able to use the same incantations as the rest of the class. One less complication for you."

"Thanks," said Harry, trying to ignore the way her leather clothing seemed to cling to her curves. It wasn't easy. He kept thinking about . . . well, not things as bad as the ones Seamus had lost points for, at least. Probably best if he got his mind on Defence and kept it there. "I'm going to work my way through Hermione's notes from last year, too, as quickly as I can, so I'm completely caught up."

"If you wish, but I think you'll acquire the material more quickly still if you practise the spells instead of reading about them. Not solo practise, either. It's always best to have an opponent to defend against."

"I'll ask the students in D.A. to help me out. Good idea."

"Actually," she said in a tone that sounded deliberately diffident, "I was thinking that you could work with Severus. He could give you much better guidance than a fellow student, since he's fully
qualified to teach Defence. And--" The fringe beneath her right sleeve swayed as she flicked her wand to deflect a stray hex coming too close for comfort.

"And?"

"And it might help you a great deal to work with Severus in particular."

"What, because he's my father?" Harry scowled. "I'm not a little boy who needs time with his dad, Professor."

"Perhaps not, but he does know you better than any teacher here--"

"He does not!"

"No? I know you can't remember the last year in particular, but before that, wouldn't you say that your relationship with Severus was leading naturally towards an adoption?"

Harry blew his breath out through his nose. "No, I wouldn't say that. In fact, I would say that it was more likely to lead to him expelling me."

"Really."

"Oh yeah, really. He hates my guts."

Or did, at least, Harry's conscience reminded him. The Snape he'd known since waking up in the hospital wing was a lot harder to understand than the one in his memories. Harry still hadn't figured out why the man would offer him an Unbreakable Vow. Harry's trust couldn't possibly mean that much to him.

Morrighan arched one of her delicate brown eyebrows, her voice turning sardonic as she continued. "For some reason, I had the idea that you and he had always got on well."

"He treated me worse than dirt," said Harry bluntly. "At least dirt would only be got rid of. It wouldn't also get insulted along the way. And this went on for five long years. I could never do anything right in his class, and he'd do his best to make me nervous and tongue-tied so I'd look stupid and incompetent in front of his precious Slytherins. The one time I did manage to make a perfect potion he deliberately dropped my assignment on the floor so he could give it a zero. My very first day ever in class, he asked me a bunch of questions he knew I couldn't answer and then made fun of me for not knowing anything about magic. And all this because he hated my father and I look a lot like him. My real father, I mean."

"Oh." Morrighan looked flabbergasted. And more than a little intrigued, which struck Harry as distinctly out of place.

For his part, Harry felt a lot better. It was good to be able to say all this to somebody who didn't instantly blather about how much Snape cared about him and all that rot.

"Severus told me that he had managed to put aside his animosity for your father well before you arrived at Hogwarts."

"Yeah? Ask him to say that again after three drops of Veritaserum."

"Ah, but you were with him when he made the claim," said Morrighan softly. "And you supported it."
"Then I apologise for lying to you," said Harry, more convinced than ever that he must have been under instructions to pretend things that weren't true. Why else would he have let Snape tell a new teacher that he and Harry had always got on? "I've forgotten one year, not six. I don't think there's a Bludger hit hard enough to make me forget how completely horrible he's been, all along."

"Well, I still think you should ask Severus to practise last year's Defence spells with you," said Morighan, her eyes glinting. "But for a different reason, now. You're very angry. Duelling with him would help you release some of that in a controlled way."

It wasn't very different from what Harry had thought of himself, up in the headmaster's office. Hexing Snape . . . the idea had a lot of appeal. More than it should have, Harry thought. Snape had been petty and cruel for years and Harry had never had such a violent urge before. Why would he have it now, when even he could see that the man was making an effort to be decent to Harry?

Because of the adoption, Harry told himself. Because I know that was forced on me and I had to pretend to like it. I was probably angry all along and it's just now bursting forth.

Maybe his anger wasn't only about the way Snape had treated Sirius and took pleasure in his death.

Morighan suddenly turned to one side. "Wands in your non-dominant hand, everyone! Now, continue!"

For all her voice had been fierce, her eyes were kind when she returned her gaze to Harry. "Remember that when you practise, however you choose to do it. In a true duel, your opponent will do his best to destroy your wand hand. Knowing how to cast with your other hand can mean the difference between life and death."

Harry suddenly shook his right hand a little; it felt a bit like it was burning, the sensation spreading out from one of his fingers to engulf his whole hand in flames. Odd . . . but the feeling passed after just a second.

His urge to ask her something that had been niggling at him didn't pass nearly so quickly. "Um . . ."

"Yes?"

"Do you always call him Severus like that? In front of students?"

"No. But this is a private conversation with his son."

"I'd rather you think of me as just a student."

"I'll refer to him more formally in future, then." Morighan taught him a few more spells, and then turned away from him and abruptly clapped her hands. "Class dismissed! Draco Snape, please stay behind. I'd like a word."

Harry hurried out before Malfoy could try to say anything to him.
His next class was N.E.W.T. charms. Hermione and Ron weren't in that one, since it was a combined session of Slytherin and Ravenclaw. They walked him to the door of the classroom, though. Harry didn't think about it at the time, but once he was sitting down between Padma and Terry, he started to wonder about it.

The way Ron had explained the schedule, seventh year Gryffindors had a free period. Why hadn't Ron and Hermione gone to the Tower or the library and left Harry to find his own way to the Charms classroom? He knew his memory was impaired, but it wasn't like he'd forgotten everything!

And anyway, Harry should be having a free period right now, too. It wasn't right that he'd been given a Slytherin schedule. He didn't fool himself that he'd get anywhere talking to Snape about it, but maybe McGonagall would see things his way and let him switch into the Gryffindor sections where he belonged.

"You look very good without your glasses," said Padma, her teeth flashing in a bright smile. "Your eyes must have finally healed completely?" She didn't let him answer. "How are you feeling otherwise? All recovered from that Bludger hit?"

Truth to tell, Harry was still a little sore from the fall he'd taken, but it wasn't too bad. "Yeah. Everything except my memory."

"Oh yes, we heard." Her smile turned sympathetic. "You never do have a typical year."

Daphne Greengrass, sitting behind them, was apparently eavesdropping, since she leaned forward in her chair. "Maybe your memory will return before the Yule Ball. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Harry didn't know what the Yule Ball had to do with anything. "Er--"

"What does it matter if his memory returns before then?" scoffed Zabini from across the aisle. "It's not like Potter will remember how to dance."

"I'm sure that Harry dances much better now than he did then," said Padma, flashing Harry another one of those brilliant smiles. "Would you make sure to save a dance for me?"

"You're too short for him," said Daphne, tapping Harry on the shoulder until he turned around. "Oh, your eyes are very green, aren't they? I thought so in Defence but they're even more striking up close. You'll have to save a dance for me, Harry."

"Er--"

"Maybe his date will object," said Padma sharply. "Have you asked anyone, Harry?"

"Er--"

Zabini burst out laughing. "Merlin's beard, I think he's forgotten how to speak anything but Troll!"

"Shut up, Zabini," said Malfoy as he slid into a seat next to Daphne. "Hallo, Harry."

Harry had a strong urge to tell Malfoy to fuck off again, but after what Ron had said, he couldn't quite force the words up his throat. He gave a curt nod instead.

Malfoy acted like Harry had returned a perfectly pleasant greeting. "We're up to chapter four in this class but I'm sure you can catch up in no time. I'll be happy to take you through the charms you'll need to re-learn."
Civil, Harry reminded himself. Malfoy was managing; so could he. "I don't think I could learn from you, Malfoy."

"I tutored you for months last year, and that was when you were blind and without magic--"

"Oh, Draco's got a marvellous knack for teaching. I've learnt ever so much since I joined the D.A.," Daphne chimed in before laying her left hand on top of Draco's right one. "What did Morrigan the Harridan want, then?"

Harry turned back around to face the front. He didn't care what Morrigan had needed to say to Malfoy. Was it his fault that Malfoy's voice carried and Harry couldn't help but overhear?

"Hmm. I don't know," said Malfoy slowly. "It was rather odd. I think perhaps she was trying to apologise and didn't know how. But then, she spends so much time with animals that I'd be surprised if she knows much about speaking to actual people."

"Well, at least she didn't harass you today--"

"Perhaps she was too busy tutoring ickle Potter," spat Zabini.

"Perhaps you're annoyed that you couldn't use her to make Daphne jealous today," said Malfoy in a cool tone.

Daphne giggled. "Oh, Draco. There's nothing between Blaise and me!"

"That's right, nothing," said Zabini in a tone of voice Harry couldn't read at all. "Not even a thin, silk sheet. Just skin-on-skin--"

Daphne suddenly leaned forward and spoke over Harry's shoulder. "He's lying, and it makes me remember why I broke up with him in the first place. You know, I think I need a boyfriend who's a little less Slytherin."

Beside Harry, Padma rolled her eyes before she suddenly turned around in her seat and pinned Daphne with her gaze. "So that explains why you always save the seat next to you for Draco. He's a little less Slytherin than he used to be, isn't he, now that he's joined Harry's side in the war? Maybe you should ask him to the Yule Ball so you can stop pestering Harry over it."

Harry didn't understand what happened next. Malfoy suddenly got up from his seat and took one on the other side of the Charms classroom.

Daphne huffed. "He's been so moody lately."

"The girl he asked to the Yule Ball last time was brutally killed," said Terry, who'd been silent up until then. "If the two of you would stop fighting over Harry for ten seconds, you'd realise that the last thing Draco wants to think about is another Yule Ball."

_Fighting over Harry? He pushed that thought aside for the moment. "Since when are you so sympathetic toward Slytherins?"

Terry scowled. "I'm not, but Draco's been all right leading the D.A. He knows a lot about dark magic, and he's been able to show us some us some ways around it. And then there's the fact that you're in Slytherin, though I guess you're not too fond of the idea, now. Where's your crest?"

Harry could have said that he'd burnt it, of course, but he found that he didn't want to get into that with Terry. It seemed personal. Though that didn't explain why he'd told Malfoy, of all people, did
“I’m not too fond of the idea, right,” said Harry.

He never found out what Terry might have said to that, because Flitwick came in then and started explaining the basics of research charms. Not a subject that thrilled Harry, but at least it was a completely new topic for the class, which meant that he wasn’t already behind.

When class let out, Harry went up to the front and spent a few minutes talking with Flitwick, finding out which catch-up topics he should focus on first. The classroom was empty when their conference was over, not that that meant much, since Malfoy was waiting for him in the corridor. "I'll walk you to lunch."

"I know the way--"

Malfoy flicked a silencing bubble around them, even though the corridor was empty. There weren't even any portraits around. "Yes, you do. And you know that we're both in the Order. I don't think you want me to disregard the instructions I've been given, which are to make sure you aren't alone between classes. Ron and Hermione aren't here now, so you're stuck with me."

So that was why Ron and Hermione had stuck close by him earlier! "I don't think your instructions apply any longer," he told Malfoy. "I went walking alone last night--" Well, not alone, but without protection, at any rate. "--and Snape knew all about it and thought it was fine."

"I'm still walking with you until he tells me that it's fine," retorted Malfoy.

There wasn't much Harry could say to that, not that he had a chance anyway. Malfoy dissolved the bubble as quickly as he'd conjured it.

"For now, then," Harry said grudgingly as he kept his eyes on the corner they were approaching. "But it's not necessary any longer and you know it."

Malfoy didn't say anything until they'd turned the corner. "We have our free period after lunch today. Would you rather revise Defence and Charms, or try to catch up a bit in Potions? I think we can cover a lot of ground in two hours--"

"Look," said Harry sharply, "we're not mates. As far as I'm concerned, we're not even housemates. If I need help in my subjects I'll ask the people who are. Am I getting through to you? Because I really don't want to have anything to do with you, Malfoy."

"Snape."

Harry ground his teeth. "I can't call you that. I'd feel like I'm talking to the professor."

"I think that's why most people have started to call me 'Draco,' actually."

"That's not on, either."

Malfoy shrugged. "I suppose not. After all, Severus had to take points last year to make us use first names."

Harry started walking faster, deciding that the best thing he could do with Malfoy was ignore him.

"What are you going to do with your free period, then?"

So much for ignoring him. "I told you. I have a crest to burn."
"Severus does not deserve that."

Malfoy sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth, but Harry didn't glance at him to verify the impression. In fact, he sped up again. Finally, the doors to the Great Hall loomed ahead.

Harry stopped just outside them, so suddenly that Malfoy shot ahead of him and had to turn around. But then Harry said it. He didn't want to, but he thought it was the right thing to do. "I'm sorry I accused you of shoving me into that Bludger on purpose. Ron says you didn't."

"Oh, Ron said so--" Malfoy closed his eyes for a second, looking like he was reaching inside himself for some kind of strength. "I'll see you in Potions, then."

Harry gave him another curt nod and headed over to the Gryffindor table.

"No, Mr Potter, I will not adjust your timetable," said McGonagall as she wrapped her tartan cloak more closely about her. "You have been in the Slytherin sections since term started, and I see no reason to change that now."

"No reason? "I don't want to be in Slytherin, Professor."

"I'm afraid that can't be changed."

"Fucking school charter. "I understand, but I'm sure my classes could be changed," Harry said in his best attempt at a wheedling voice.

He didn't know why he bothered. Tactics like that had never once worked on McGonagall. "You consented to your timetable, Mr Potter. You arranged it in consultation with your father, and I, for one, am loath to interfere with decisions that were entirely acceptable to you before your recent setback."

"Well, they aren't acceptable to me now--"

"Then that is something you will have to work out with Professor Snape," she said calmly.

"But you're my head of house."

"So is he. Now, if you'll excuse me, Potter, the third-years are waiting. You may have a free period at the moment, but I do not."

Sheer desperation made Harry try one last-ditch tactic. "If you won't help me, I'll go to Dumbledore--"

"You may speak to Professor Dumbledore, certainly. I believe that he will merely instruct you to discuss your programme with the teacher who helped you schedule your classes in the first place. Good day, Potter."
She swept out her office door and began speaking to the third-years in her typical strident, no-nonsense way. The same way she'd just spoken to him. Harry sighed and made his way through the classroom, walking along a wall in order to avoid disturbing the students.

Harry ended up arriving fifteen minutes late to Potions class.

It wasn't deliberate. He'd gone up to the headmaster's office as he'd threatened. He'd even given the "triple chocolate coconut ice cream" password and seen the gargoyle leap aside.

Then, he found that he didn't want to step onto that winding staircase and let it carry him up to see Dumbledore. Maybe it had something to do with the way Snape and Dumbledore seemed to be teamed against him just now, both of them expecting him to accept the adoption with no questions asked. Maybe it went deeper than that, and Harry was thinking of the way he'd destroyed so many magical artefacts in Dumbledore's office the year before.

Or . . . the year before the year before.

Harry didn't know for sure. He just knew that the idea of talking to Dumbledore alone was more than he could bear. Anyway, McGonagall was probably right. Harry wouldn't end up getting his programme changed unless he cleared those changes with Snape. And he would never agree. He obviously liked having more control over Harry.

In the end, Harry had closed the entrance to Dumbledore's office and trudged back to Gryffindor Tower. Exhusted from walking here and there all day -- damn it, Snape would have to be right about Harry tiring himself out -- Harry had fallen asleep. He hadn't even remembered to burn his crest.

He woke up five minutes after his Potions lesson had started, and groaned. This was all he needed. Snape would think he'd done it on purpose. Harry stuffed his Potions text into his school bag and ran the whole way down to the dungeons, his leg muscles screaming in protest before he was even half-way there.

It wasn't lost on him that he wasn't supposed to be alone in the corridors, and that he had been, ever since Ron and Hermione had left him at McGonagall's office. But that rule couldn't really apply any longer, could it? Ron and Hermione had probably just walked with him out of habit, and as for Malfoy, he was using the rule to his own advantage in hopes that Harry would talk to him.

God only knew why Malfoy would want a thing like that. It wasn't as though Harry had anything pleasant to say.

And anyway, the rule was bloody stupid. He'd been pretending to be a weak wizard just like he'd been pretending to be Snape's son, but neither one was actually true. Harry could take care of himself in the corridors, and now that his magic was back to normal, there was no reason to act as though he couldn't.
"--obviate the need for a fairy stone, Miss Granger?"

Harry slipped through the door and slid into a seat at the very back just as Snape was finishing the question.

"By making sure that only half the heather used was harvested during a new moon, sir."

"Very good. Five points to Gryffindor."

Wait. Had Snape just complimented Hermione and given points to Gryffindor? That didn't happen, not in any universe Harry had ever lived in. He didn't like that it was happening now. It made him feel like he was tumbling head over heels down a steep slope, earth and sky changing places so quickly that he couldn't tell which direction was up.

Snape strode up the aisle and stopped beside Harry's desk. "You are late, Mr Potter."

Harry's teeth started chattering. He wasn't sure why; it wasn't as though Snape's complaints usually cowed him. But the look in his eyes now was nothing Harry could recognise or identify. It should be outrage, fury, imminent doom . . . but it wasn't.

"S- sorry, sir," he said, using the title without thinking, that time. "I-- I fell asleep during my free period."

"Ah. Your tardiness will be excused considering the severity of the head injury you sustained on Saturday, in that case."

The tumbling feeling got worse. Snape wasn't going to take points? He wasn't going to do anything? Snape never excused lateness, never.

*Just like he never takes a thousand points from Slytherin?* asked a mocking voice inside his head.

"Please sit in the front, Mr Potter. I believe that there is a free seat next to Mr Snape."

*Mt Who?* It took Harry a second to realise he must mean Malfoy.

And yeah, there was a free seat there, but Harry ignored it and sat next to Neville, who gave him a sympathetic smile.

Snape's lips tightened in clear irritation.

Strangely, it was an expression that suited him. It made him look like he was supposed to look. Even with his hair a sleek black that was much less oily than it used to be, the expression made all the difference and turned him into the Snape that Harry remembered instead of a stranger who clearly thought of Harry as his son.

The way Snape was calling him "Mr Potter" helped, too. Better that than "Harry."

The tumbling feeling slowed to a smooth roll and then stopped. Harry didn't think about it much; he just knew that the minute Snape looked annoyed, the whole world made better sense.

"I don't want to sit by Malfoy," he said, interrupting Snape's lecture on the uses of fairy stones in potion-making. "Sir."

The comment was unnecessary since Snape had already allowed Harry's small defiance to stand. But that was the whole point. Harry wanted to see Snape angry. Really angry. He'd even welcome being thrown against a dungeon wall again, since it would mean that things were back to the way
they used to be.

The way they should be.

Snape's lips tightened again. "Do not interrupt, Mr Potter."

Harry waited two minutes before he launched his next salvo. By then, Snape had finished explaining the three principal types of fairy stones. "Now, as to particulars. Fairies will often attempt to hide their stones underwater. While this can make finding them problematic--"

"I know you said there wouldn't be any foolish wand-waving in this class, sir," drawled Harry, "but hasn't it ever occurred to you that one good Accio could make finding these stones a lot less difficult?"

"Fairy stones resist wizard magic, Mr Potter, which is why they must be thoroughly tempered and treated before they can be of use in potion-making. Topics which we have already covered this year."

"But you'll excuse my ignorance on account of my head injury?"

Snape pushed a hand through his hair. "Yes, Mr Potter. Now, to continue--"

"Like you just excused my tardiness," said Harry in the smuggest voice he could muster.

"Harry!" hissed Hermione from the other side of Neville, who shifted a few inches away on the bench. When Harry glanced at him, he was shaking his head a little.

"I do believe that I can manage the class without your interference, Miss Granger," snapped Snape. "Mr Potter, if you interrupt me again I will deduct points. To continue, then, fairy stones that have been underwater for more than three hundred years will have reached a level of potency that--"

"That's a long time," said Harry loudly.

Snape's lips thinned to a single, long line for a moment, before he parted them to speak. "Ten points, Potter."

Harry knew he was on the right track if he'd got the man to switch to plain "Potter."

"Great. I love it when Slytherin loses points, sir."

Snape's expression evened out into a smooth mask. "The instructions for this afternoon's potion are on page 133 of your textbook. If you have done the required reading you should already be well-acquainted with the salient characteristics of fairy stones. Begin."

He turned on a heel, his robes billowing dramatically as he strode to his desk and sat down, apparently to begin marking papers.

"You lose points from Gryffindor too, Harry." said Neville quietly as he began to set up his cauldron. Harry couldn't help but stare; Neville was setting out ingredients and lighting his fire without any apparent nervousness. He looked like he knew what he was doing. "But I'll still partner with you."

Harry nodded as he fetched his textbook and opened it to the correct page. "Visual Projection Potion?"

"One swallow and you have fifteen seconds to cast any illusion you like. Useful in battle for
misdirecting the enemy, even if the illusions vanish in under a minute. It might be the minute that
saves your life."

Harry quickly consulted the instructions. "I'll go get the--"

"Better let me." Neville gave him another one of those sympathetic smiles. "Best if you don't run
into Draco in the supply cupboard, I expect."

Harry rolled his eyes but let the other boy go.

They were well into the brewing before Snape got up from his desk and began to circulate. "A little
more heat before you add the fairy stone," he said to Luna, who smiled brightly and waved at
Harry when she saw him looking her way.

"What's Luna doing in this class?" asked Harry under his breath.

Neville carefully tapped the dust off his chopped vervain before he tipped it into the bubbling
cauldron. Only then did he answer Harry. "I sometimes wonder that myself. She spends a lot of
time staring into space."

"No, I meant, she's only a sixth-year--"

"Eh, N.E.W.T. Potions this year is a combined section for anybody past the O.W.L. level."

That explained the few students Harry didn't recognise, he supposed . . .

"You have your fairy stone ready?" asked Snape.

Harry shivered. He hadn't seen him moving towards them, but then, he'd been distracted.

"Yes, it's right here, sir," said Neville in a voice that quavered, but only a little.

Snape peered closely into the cauldron. "This would appear to be . . . adequate. Remember the
precaution about splashing. A properly prepared base will be caustic."

Harry was tempted to pick up the fairy stone and drop it into the cauldron from three feet up, but
not even to piss off Snape would he be that reckless. Best to stick to verbal jibes. "I thought you'd
take points for me not being in uniform."

That didn't work the way Harry had planned. Snape's black gaze remained impassive. "Your lack
of any crest, I presume you mean."

"I'm going to get a Gryffindor one."

"As you wish. You are, in fact, in Gryffindor as well."

Damn. The man was supposed to be getting angry by now, not looking at Harry like he thought the
conversation was tedious.

"I'm in Gryffindor only."

"Your base will become inert in less than three minutes if you don't add the fairy stone now."

Well, Harry knew what would do the trick, didn't he? He'd found out in the night before, in
Dumbledore's office. "Fuck the fairy stone!" he shouted.
Even that didn't get the reaction Harry wanted. "Twenty additional points and a detention," said Snape, just as calmly, though there was an undercurrent of something furious in his voice when he went on. "A detention with me, Mr Potter, to commence as soon as class is dismissed."

Harry tried to grab that undercurrent of fury and fling it straight at Snape. "I won't serve it! Sir!"

"You will--"

"I won't!"

"Harry!" shouted Hermione from across the room. "Stop it!"

Malfoy began stalking forward like he planned to use more than words when he reached Harry. Like he planned to shove Harry, in fact. The way he'd shoved him during the Quidditch match! Who cared if the Bludger thing had been an accident? The shoving part of it definitely hadn't been!

A wall of fire suddenly seemed to roar up inside Harry's mind, so hot that he could feel the flames licking at his thoughts, driving his anger higher and higher until all he wanted to do was snatch up the fucking fairy stone and fling it at both Malfoy and Snape--

And then the fire abruptly vanished, wiped clean out of existence, because there was another presence inside his head. A stronger presence, one that twined itself around his mind and squeezed like a boa constrictor killing prey. Only this time, Harry was the prey . . .

The boa constrictor suddenly bit his scar, sinking its fangs deep and then deeper still. Or maybe it was an adder, because now it felt like pure poison was being poured into his scar, making it burn and blaze until Harry's whole head felt on fire--

_Harry Potter_ . . . The voice slithered through Harry. All of him, not just his mind. _It's been too long, Harry. Far too long. Why, we haven't spoken since the Tragedy of the Thirty-First. Such a shame, all that death and dying, and on your birthday, too--_

Harry didn't know what the voice was talking about, but he would recognize those slimy, mocking tones anywhere. Even without the pain in his scar. He tried to speak, but his lips felt frozen, his body no longer under his own control--

_And now it's your turn, Harry,_ said the voice, malice pouring through the words to become a physical sensation inside him.

With that, it began.

Pain. Soul-splitting pain far worse than the Cruciatius had ever been. The snake inside his mind squeezed more tightly still, sending a crashing wave of agony through Harry's every cell.

He screamed, a long, thin wail that felt like razors were dragging it out of him. He collapsed to his knees and then fell to his side, some part of him aware that he was kicking and thrashing like a man possessed. Exactly what he was. Just like at the Ministry, the whole world becoming nothing but pain and more pain until it seemed that the only possible escape was death itself.

Harry tried to push Voldemort out, to concentrate on love, to become a place where Voldemort's consciousness couldn't dwell, but he couldn't find any love inside him. Whenever he reached for it, he saw only billowing robes and dark, dark eyes that seemed to look for his soul and find it. And that wasn't right, that wasn't real, that wasn't _love_. Harry's wails grew more frantic, his fingernails digging furrows in his palms--
And then the pain suddenly vanished as a sea of clean and soothing water rose up inside his mind to drown it. An ocean of love and caring, and Harry was drowning in it, too, his head going under completely, the water cushioning and welcoming him as he was plunged beneath it.

His thrashing stopped, to be replaced by twitches he couldn't control.

Someone knelt close beside him and brushed his hair away from his forehead.

Harry's eyelids flickered, but he was too drained and exhausted to open his eyes. He needed to rest for a moment, just for a moment . . .

That was his last thought before he fainted dead away.

--

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Eighteen: "Like It or Not"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

--
Many thanks must go to Kim, clauclauclaudia, Keira, Diana, and Susanna. These tireless ladies read over my drafts after draft and point out things that really improve the story. They keep me going.

Harry blinked several times, his hand fumbling out to reach for the glasses he kept on his night table. They weren't there, but after a few seconds he remembered that he didn't need them. He would have figured that out soon enough in any case, since the ceiling he was staring at was in perfect focus.

It was made of stone, like most ceilings in Hogwarts, but something about it was different enough that Harry knew he wasn't in his room in Gryffindor. Or the hospital wing again. And yet he was sure he must have been given some kind of potion. He felt like he'd had a strong pain-killer or at the very least a calming draught. In fact, his limbs felt kind of light, as if they might float up off the bed if he wasn't careful.

Thinking of potions made him remember class, and the reason why he'd passed out.

*Voldemort.*

Harry bolted upright and nearly fell out of bed. His sense of balance wasn't right. Huffing, he grabbed the far end of the mattress and hauled himself up again, flopping onto his back.

"Ah, you're awake," said Snape's deep voice as footsteps crossed the stone floor.

The fact that he was in the room was alarming. Harry edged away from him, though after what had just happened, he had enough sense not to make any sudden moves. "What did you give me?"

"A mild nerve tonic to stop your spasms."

"Not mild enough," muttered Harry.

When he glanced over, Snape was sitting in a chair three feet from the bed, his dark eyes concerned, his eyebrows drawn slightly together. "I possibly gave you too much, then. My apologies."

There he went again, being some stranger instead of himself. "Sir--"

"Would you like some water?" Snape held out a tumbler made of amber-coloured glass.

Harry carefully scooted up on the bed until he was half-sitting, leaning back against a couple of fluffy pillows. Even that manoeuvre made him so woozy that he had to close his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them, Snape was still extending the tumbler. Harry was thirsty enough to take it, but not enough to drink the contents unquestioningly. "Is there anything in here but water?"

"No."
Harry still peered at it suspiciously while Snape waited. Finally, he gave it up as a bad job and drank the whole thing down. If Snape had wanted to give him something funny, he'd have mixed it with the nerve tonic he'd mentioned.

Once the water was gone, Harry didn't know what to say. Probably some kind of apology for disrupting Snape's class over and over, not to mention telling him to-- Oh, God. Harry felt sick when he remembered just what he'd said for Snape to do with the fairy stone. What the hell was wrong with him? In his rational moments he knew that Snape didn't deserve to be treated that way. Yeah, yeah, he wasn't the nicest person in the world and he'd been disgustingly cheerful that Sirius had died, but it wasn't as though Snape had killed the man, or helped Bellatrix to do so.

And it hadn't been Snape's idea to lure Harry to the Department of Mysteries that night . . .

Which brought Harry right back to the main point. Trying to put it off was probably stupid. "So," said Harry slowly, "Voldemort."

Even though he'd heard the Potions Master say the name himself by then, it was still a shock when he didn't get yelled at.

"Yes."

Harry wasn't sure what made him start talking. Maybe it was because Snape wasn't saying much, wasn't telling him what to think about what had happened in class. Maybe it was the slightly dizzy feeling in his head, or the fact that there was nobody else to say these things to. And they needed saying. "I thought . . . I thought he was going to kill me."

"It did look that way."

Harry slid down in the bed again and waited for the room to stop spinning. Staying perfectly still was probably best. "I tried-- I tried something to make him leave, but it wasn't working. Why did he stop?"

Snape remained silent for a long moment. "Occlumency."

Harry closed his eyes again, feeling sick as he remembered those terrible sessions."But I don't know any." That time, Snape's silence lasted so long that it struck Harry as significant. "Do I?"

The man gave a long sigh. "Dr Goode sternly cautioned me against this sort of thing."

"Yeah, me too," admitted Harry, cracking his eyes a little. "But I think this is one of those quality-of-life exceptions, sir."

Snape looked away, clearly considering that, and then met Harry's gaze again. "You did, in fact, become a proficient Occlumens last year. More than proficient, I would say. You successfully resisted eye-contact Legilimency from Voldemort himself when you were captured."

Harry wasn't sure what shocked him most: the compliment, the idea of being able to Occlude at all, or the easy way Snape had said "Voldemort." He didn't think he'd ever get used to that.

But he didn't want to get used to it, he hurriedly told himself before getting back to the thing that mattered.

"But about what happened in class, sir . . . I can't remember pushing Voldemort out."

"Your subconscious is aware of things your conscious mind cannot access, Harry."
Oh. Well, that would explain it, Harry supposed. Even so, the idea struck him as bizarre. He'd been so terrible at clearing his mind . . . but he couldn't think why Snape would lie about a thing like that. He was more likely to berate Harry for his failures, than make up imaginary accomplishments. Besides, Voldemort had stopped torturing him. That was evidence that Snape was telling the truth.

Still, Harry couldn't stop himself from asking, "I really learned to Occlude?"

"Yes, you really did."

"Do you think if Voldemort tries anything again, I'll be able to . . . uh, make him leave?" Harry shuddered. "Because if I can't . . ."

It was too terrible to contemplate, so of course that was exactly what Harry started doing. What would Voldemort do if Harry couldn't get rid of him next time? Hold Harry in that terrible state of pain until he lost his mind the way Neville's parents had? Torture Harry until his heart gave out from the sheer stress and he died?

"There are shields in place around your mind now," said Snape firmly. He leaned forward and reached out a hand, but appeared to think better of it and drew back without touching Harry. "Erected for the sole purpose of keeping Voldemort out of your mind. Strong shields, Harry. He will not get through them again."

Harry could hear confidence in that deep voice, but he couldn't share the feeling. "How can you know that I have shields up at all, or that they're strong?"

Snape crossed his legs at the ankle, a hint of a smile playing about his mouth. "Come now. I know you haven't forgotten that I am a Legilimens."

"But I haven't felt you attack--" Harry's eyes narrowed. "Unless you were messing about while I was out cold--"

"I don't need to attack to know that you are well-protected. Like it or not, our minds are rather well attuned these days."

Harry shuddered and inched away from Snape, even though the man was sitting back in his chair, making no effort now to come any closer. "Not. Sir."

"He is in Azkaban, as I told you."

A half-hysterical laugh tried to up Harry's throat, but he ruthlessly pushed it back down, as far as it would go. He couldn't lose it, not in front of Snape. "No, I meant, you said like it or not, so I said not."

"Ah."

Those eyes. It was like they could see right through him, and the sensation had nothing to do with Legilimency. Looking away wouldn't help . . . Harry knew what that must mean, but he couldn't think about it. Definitely, time for a new subject. "Where am I?"

The glint in Snape's eyes answered the question before words could.

"Oh. Your quarters."

"Specifically, your bedroom in my quarters."
That was practically guaranteed to make Harry look around a little bit. Thankfully, he was feeling less woozy by then and was able to turn his head without feeling like the room was tilting. Huh. "You actually let me have Gryffindor colours in here?"

"Yes, and it may surprise you to learn that Draco chose the décor."

"He did not--"

"He did. He wanted you to feel at home."

"If he wanted that, he'd have cut out all the silver and green," muttered Harry, even though he didn't care about something as stupid as house colours. *Malfoy* would care, though--

"Ah, but he wanted to feel at home as well."

Harry managed to sit up and swing his legs over the edge of the bed. "Well, thank you for taking care of me, sir. Though I suppose you didn't have much choice. I'll be going now--"

"Harry," interrupted Snape. "Please do not be so foolish."

Harry tried to stand up and found that his legs felt distinctly wobbly. He hated to ask Snape for anything, but walking all the way to the Tower would be as idiotic as Snape had said. "Er . . . I don't suppose you have a Floo connection here?"

"I do, and you may use it when you're fit to leave."

"And until then, we do what?" asked Harry weakly as he sat back down. Oh, God. He was going to have to hang about in Snape's quarters. *Snape's*! "Play Scrabble?"

Snape shot him a look that was fierce, sudden, and very, very intense.

Harry swallowed. Obviously, flippant wasn't the right note to strike. And no wonder. He'd been a complete bastard during his Potions lesson. After that, he deserved much worse than to be put to bed until he was fully recovered. In Snape's own home, no less! "Sorry, sir," he murmured. "About interrupting you in class and yelling at you and the f-word and everything else. Though I didn't mean to arrive late. Honestly."

"You did mean to do the rest, though." The way Snape said that, it wasn't a question. But then, why would it be?

"Yes," admitted Harry. Maybe telling the truth wasn't the best decision at that moment, but Harry didn't have any illusions. Snape wasn't going to be fooled by a lie, no matter how clever. And Harry wasn't feeling clever, anyway. He just felt tired and mixed-up and sick of his life.

He stared down at his own hands, twisting his fingers together as he waited for Snape to start yelling.

The screams and insults he was expecting never came, though. Instead, Snape gave a dry chuckle. "Well, at least now I know what you're like when you decide to be disruptive, Harry. It puts things in perspective."

Harry glanced up. "Things, sir?"

"Five years worth of things, but I won't mistake your honest confusion in class for defiance again." Snape cleared his throat. "I . . . I am very sorry for the way I used to treat you, Harry."
Used to must be right, thought Harry. He couldn't imagine Snape apologising, otherwise. Actually, he couldn't imagine that at all, even though he'd just heard the words himself.

"Um... yeah," he said slowly. "I... I don't suppose this time can count as my detention? I know I'm not popping toads' eyes out of their sockets, or..."

Snape leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers together. "Well, I did say directly after class."

Harry brightened a little. "You did, didn't you?"

"However, I'm not disposed to count the time you were unconscious."

Damn.

"And you'll need to be doing something that I consider useful."

Harry levered himself to his feet again. "You have a table around somewhere, I'm sure--"

"Sit down," said Snape. "Lie down, in fact. You need to rest."

Harry bristled, but at the same time his legs were feeling less and less like taking his weight, so after a second he did as Snape had said. "Well, you don't want me to get flobberworm guts all over your bed, do you?"

"It's your bed, you--" Snape cleared his throat. "I don't need any potions ingredients prepared. I thought we could talk."

Harry snorted, because he got it then. "You're going to make me talk to you. Well, that'll make sure I never mouth off to you in class again."

"That's not why I wish to talk." Snape's hair swayed as he shook his head. "Then why?"

"I think you know the answer to that."

Harry flinched back, even though the sudden motion left his head reeling. "I told you, that's not real to me."

"Yes. I understand." Snape pushed his hair away from his face. "It is, however, real to me."

The half-hysterical laugh couldn't be pushed down that time, because Harry could tell that yes, the adoption was real to Snape. There was no other reason on earth why the man would want to spend time talking to Harry Potter. "I-- I suppose you want me to tell you why I was so rude in class today--"

"That, or anything else you would care to say."

"But I don't want to say anything to you," said Harry, turning his face toward the wall. Odd... the surface looked a little runny. But what could melt stone? He had a terrible feeling that he knew. Hadn't his Lumos blasted through stone walls? I just want things to go back to the way they were before.

"Why don't you tell me about your day?"
What was Harry supposed to say to that? That he didn't understand Malfoy at all, any longer? That three girls in the last twenty-four hours had brought up the Yule Ball out of the blue? That Maura Morrighan really ought to wear some robes over her tight-fitting leather clothes? That--

"You told Professor Morrighan that we'd *always* *got* on!"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You're remembering things, then."

"No, I'm not," said Harry crossly. "She told me. She said I'd even backed you up. Any particular reason why you were lying straight to her face?"

"I didn't want her to use my own conduct to excuse her vindictiveness toward Draco."

"Yeah, well I sure didn't see any vindictiveness in class today--"

"Good."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. He didn't have any reason to like Malfoy, but he wasn't so far gone that he'd wish an Umbridge on him, even if he did deserve it.

Snape tilted his head slightly as the noise of a door opening and closing drifted into the bedroom. "That will be Draco. I sent him to eat in the Great Hall."

Sure enough, Malfoy appeared in the doorway a moment later. "Feeling better, Harry? You gave us all quite a scare."

"Yeah, I'm all right. Except I can't leave because somebody gave me too much potion--"

Malfoy smiled. "You can't really blame Dad for that. Nerve tonic is notoriously difficult to dose perfectly, and anyway, last year your potions requirements were all over the place--"

Hearing Malfoy call Snape his dad was even more unnerving than Snape saying "Voldemort," Harry thought.

"Draco," said Snape in a stern voice. "I told you what the good doctor said about such comments."

Malfoy shoved his hands in his pockets. "Yes, you did." His gaze swept the room. "It looks like you haven't eaten, Harry. Shall I fetch you something?"

Harry stared. "You're offering to go all the way to the kitchens. For *me*."

"We usually order food through the Floo, actually--"

"Draco--"

"What, Severus?" Malfoy took a step closer to Snape. "I'm telling him what's true now, not what happened last year. You did notice the use of the present tense?"

To Harry's shock, Snape rubbed a temple and murmured, "You're correct, of course. This is all much more difficult than I anticipated."

"I don't think that Marsha's right about that, anyway. We ought to be telling Harry anything he wants to know. How else is he going to get comfortable with us again?"

"I don't want to get comfortable with you--"
Snape spoke at the same time, directing his comment to Malfoy. "Nobody asked for your opinion."

The Slytherin boy crossed his arms and widened his stance a little. "I noticed that. But then, nobody asked for my opinion about his magic, either, and I was right about that, wasn't I?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean that you are right about this--"

"What about my magic?" asked Harry.

Malfoy opened his mouth, but shut it when Snape glared. "Just see to dinner, Draco. I will have Dover sole poached in court bouillon, as well as rice pilaf and steamed asparagus."

"And you, Harry?"

Harry couldn't shake the feeling that this was somebody else's life. Snape apologising, and then admitting that a student had known more than him about something? Malfoy being so . . . so friendly? "Uh . . . whatever the elves want, I suppose."

Malfoy chuckled. "Harry, they're house elves. What they want is to please you."

"They already made dinner for hundreds of people. I don't want to put them out."

That only made Malfoy more amused. Harry could tell. All the other boy said though, was, "I'll have them prepare whatever suits."

-----------------------------------------------

Dinner was an odd affair. Harry managed to make it to the table, but his legs still felt very strange. Too relaxed. He didn't like the way Snape walked right beside him, ready to catch him if he started to topple. But he didn't like the idea of falling on his arse in front of him, either. Especially considering that he'd already done that once today.

Malfoy joined them at the table, sipping a glass of wine that was almost clear; it had only a faint yellow tinge.

Their food appeared as soon as Harry and Snape were both seated. Harry's turned out to be a generous portion of shepherd's pie and a tall glass of orange juice, with apple crumble for dessert. Harry drained the juice straight away, trying his best not to smack his lips as the citrus flavour burst across his tongue. *Mmmm*. Orange juice had always been one of the things he missed most during the school year.

Sort of a sad comment on his life, that. When other students were whinging on about missing their families, Harry's biggest regret had been the fact that pumpkin juice, good as it was, did tend to pall a little bit after months and months.

It was to distract himself from such morose thoughts that he asked his question. "They actually served orange juice in the Great Hall tonight?"

"Of course not," said Malfoy. Harry couldn't be completely sure, but it looked like the other boy was hiding a smirk. The smarmy expression would be completely in character, of course. The
hiding it, though? That part wasn't like Malfoy at all. "I told you I was going to order whatever suits."

"The elves, I thought--"

"It means whatever suits you."

Snape looked like he might say something critical, but changed his mind. His voice was very mild when he spoke. "Draco. Why don't you tell me about your day?"

Maybe Snape didn't do subtle, either. It wasn't lost on Harry that that was the exact same question he'd posed earlier -- to Harry. It was like Snape was trying to make a point. Maybe that Malfoy and Harry were both his sons. Or that he treated his sons equally.

Which would be stupid of him if it were true. Malfoy and Harry were very, very different, so why should they be treated the same?

Malfoy's lips curled in a sly smile. "Well, all the girls turned into outrageous flirts around Harry. But of course, I knew all along that leaving off the glasses would have precisely that effect--"

"I asked about your day, not your brother's."

Harry wanted to cringe at the word brother thrown out so casually. He covered the reaction by diving into his shepherd's pie with more enthusiasm. It wasn't hard. It was just what Harry would have asked for if he'd given the matter more thought. Which was the point of "whatever suits," he supposed.

Malfoy gave a laconic wave. "I mentioned the flirting to let you know that Flitwick doesn't have nearly the classroom control that you do, Severus."

What a total suck-up. Well, that proved that the real Malfoy was still inside this boy who went about calling himself "Draco Snape" . . .

"Yes, my classroom control was quite in evidence today," said Snape with a sidelong glance at Harry.

Harry flushed. He'd wondered when they'd get back to this. A bit of talking, after all, wasn't going to satisfy Snape that Harry had been punished for using such a disrespectful word in class. He really didn't want to know about the rest of his punishment, though. "Classroom control had nothing to do with the flirting thing," he said quickly. "Flitwick wasn't even in the room when Padma and Daphne started--"

Harry suddenly gulped. What was he doing? He didn't want to discuss this, or anything at all, with Snape! He didn't even know why he'd begun to, unless it was because he was embarrassed to have made such an utter berk of himself during Potions class. Interrupting over and over like that, and using that word--

God. Hermione was going to kill him. And when she finished that, she'd probably try to kill him again.

"Do my friends know where I am?" he suddenly blurted. Two seconds later, he realised how stupid that question was.

Nobody made fun, though. Snape merely nodded before turning his gaze back to Draco. "Your day?"
"Whatever you said to Morrighan appears to have had an effect. The only thing she said to me during class was that I needed to step out with my left foot when casting a double Protego. But then, she spent a good deal of class time talking with Harry."

"All the teachers have been instructed to find time this week to work with you individually," said Snape.

Harry gulped again. "All" the teachers included Snape, of course. One-on-one instruction in Potions?

Remedial Potions!

Harry lost it, then, but not the way he had in class. He started laughing hysterically, because it was either that or burst into tears, and he knew he couldn't bear that. Not in front of Snape and Malfoy. He laughed so hard he started to hiccup, and then damn it, he started to cry too, just a bit.

Harry clenched his teeth to get himself back under control and tried not to think about the fact that he was probably going to sick up every time he remembered humiliating himself like this. In fact, if he wasn't careful he might vomit all over Snape's table. His stomach was certainly beginning to object to the shepherd's pie he'd eaten.

Harry violently shoved his plate away.

If it had been Ron sitting across the table from him, Harry would have said something like Go ahead, have my crumble. Malfoy would sneer at the idea of eating off somebody else's plate, though. Particularly Harry's.

But that would be good. Harry wanted him to sneer, wanted him acting like his normal, snotty self.

"Go ahead, Malfoy. Have my crumble," he said, the words emerging between hiccoughs.

Then he waited for the inevitable insults.

To Harry's surprise, the other boy merely looked surprised. And then uncertain. He glanced at Snape as though asking for advice, but it didn't look like he got any.

"Sure," said Malfoy finally. He deftly transfigured the salt cellar into a fork, and began to eat.

"Thanks, Harry."

Harry almost lost it again. He managed to avoid that by taking refuge in anger. "You were supposed to sneer!"

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "I was?"

"Yes! You were supposed to stick your pointy nose in the air and tell me that you're too good to touch a plate a half-blood has eaten from!"

Was it Harry's imagination, or did Malfoy take a larger bite than before just then? He chewed thoroughly and swallowed before he spoke, anyway.

"I'm grateful that you're a half-blood, Harry."

"Yeah, because you think it makes you better than me!"

"No," said Malfoy, very calmly, his grey eyes steady as he gazed at Harry. "Because if your mother had been anyone else, you would have died when you were just a baby. And then he would have
taken over, and we'd all be in a world of trouble."

Harry managed not to gape.

"I am actually on your side. Ask the headmaster if you don't believe me."

"If?" Harry made the question deliberately mocking.

Draco pushed the cobbler away. "However, it's poor form to eat someone else's leavings. I did it anyway because I didn't want to offend you, but since I can see that you have no such compunctions about offending me--"

"Sit down," said Snape when Malfoy began to get up. "You haven't finished telling me about your day."

"What is there to say?" Malfoy gave a little shiver. "I tried doing what you said, but I can't concentrate, not properly. Practicals are better, but during lecture? It's hopeless."

Snape steepled his fingers. "You appeared to be paying close attention during the lecture portion of Potions, today--"

"Well, yes, but that was because Harry had evidently decided to play the-- the--"

Huh. Maybe Malfoy really didn't want to offend, if he couldn't even finish that sentence.

"Yes, I can see how that would take your mind off your petite amie."

"Don't call her that," muttered Malfoy.

To Harry's vast shock, Snape reached a hand across the table and covered one of Malfoy's, squeezing it once as if to give him some kind of courage.

"What's a petite amie?" Harry blurted.

Malfoy looked down at the table and didn't answer.

Snape did, though. "Girlfriend," he said quietly.

"Parkinson?"

The minute Harry said it, he knew he'd made a mistake. Worse, a stupid mistake. It wasn't like with Ron, when Harry genuinely hadn't known that Percy was dead. He'd been told more than once about Pansy dying the previous year.

No wonder Malfoy was so upset, if he couldn't stop thinking about that--

"No," said Malfoy, speaking just as quietly as Snape had. "Her name is Rhiannon."

"Draco--"

"Present tense!" snapped Malfoy just before he rose to his feet. "If you'll both excuse me, I think I'll shower here before I return to Slytherin for the night. Harry . . . never mind."

The minute the bedroom door closed, Harry pushed his own chair back. "Well, I should be going too--"
"In a short while."

"My detention isn't over yet?"

Snape sighed. "If needs be. Harry . . . you were quite upset a few moments ago. I thought it best not to comment on it at the time, but now, I must ask if you would like to take some single-dose vials of Calming Draught back to Gryffindor."

Harry bit his lip. The offer made him uncomfortable on about ten levels at once. "You just gave me too much of that nerve tonic, and for all I know you did it on purpose so I'd have to stay here a while, so, no. I don't think so."

"As you wish," murmured Snape. "Madam Pomfrey can also supply you with some, if you should decide you would like to have the draught on hand in the event of . . ." He cleared his throat. "There is another matter to discuss. Have you given any thought to the offer I made last night?"

For a moment, Harry had no idea what he was talking about. Then it came to him. "Oh. You mean the Unbreakable Vow? I . . . uh . . . I can't let you do that."

Snape let out a breath. "I suppose that is something, at least."

Harry cocked his head to one side. "Did you offer because you knew I'd refuse?"

Snape's robes fluttered as he gave a small shrug. "I offered because you need a place where you feel you can be candid with your therapist."

*His therapist.* The casual way Snape said that gave Harry the creeps. He didn't want to be the kind of person who couldn't handle his own problems, who needed a therapist . . .

"And for that you're willing to die?" The question came out a little bit mocking, but not on purpose this time. It was just such a strange thing to think about, let alone ask. The whole concept was utterly foreign. But then, Snape caring about him at all felt that way, too. And yet . . . he obviously did.

"I'm willing to take a vow that will kill me if I don't give you the privacy you need," answered Snape. "There's no risk of death since I have no intention of breaking the vow. Nor any desire, for that matter. Speaking to Dr Goode will be . . . good for you, and whether you like it or not, Harry, I want only what is good for you."

That time, Harry didn't reply with "Not." It would be too petty.

He had a feeling that Snape's idea of "good for Harry" and his own probably wouldn't match too closely, however.

"There is a risk of death," he pointed out. "Ron said that accidents can happen."

"A small risk, then," acknowledged Snape with a slight nod. "But if that is what it takes . . . well, suffice it to say that I truly do want you to have a place where you feel you can speak freely with Dr Goode."

"But you could swear this Unbreakable Vow and I still wouldn't feel that way," said Harry, blowing out his breath. "That's just how it is. So there's not much point in any vow. And even if there was, I wouldn't let you do a thing like that. So . . . can I go now, sir?"

Snape watched him for a moment, his eyes hooded, and then gave a slight nod.
Harry knew he ought to thank Snape again for helping him after the attack, but he couldn't find the words a second time. He also couldn't leave without saying anything at all. Not after the way he'd behaved in class. "Good night, Professor," he managed.

Snape glanced up, clearly surprised. "Good night, Harry."

"Harry," said Hermione, jumping up from a chair the instant he flooed into the common room. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," said Harry, brushing soot off his robes. His legs still felt a tiny bit shaky but all he probably needed now was a good night's sleep.

"We were really worried." The common room was nearly deserted, but she pulled him to a secluded corner anyway, and spoke in a hushed tone. "It was Voldemort, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Harry more-or-less collapsed into a chair. "Snape says he won't be able to make a habit of it, but . . ." He shook his head. He didn't want to talk about Snape.

Too late, though.

"How could you treat him like that? Using that word! In class! And then you should have seen him when the attack hit. He didn't care in the least that you'd been so horribly disrespectful. Snape really cares about you, Harry, and he doesn't deserve--"

"Could you just stay out of it?"

"Harry!"

"Well, it's not really your business, is it?"

She jutted her chin out, a sign he recognised. He thought about telling her that "mulishly determined" wasn't a good look on her, but really, it wasn't his goal to piss off all his friends.

"It is my business," she told him then. "Because you aren't in a state of mind in which you can know what you're doing."

"Like the elves don't know what they really want, either."

That made her glare, but it didn't make her stop.

"And what do you want, Harry? What did you want when you decided to disrupt Snape's class like that?"

Harry turned to stare at the night sky visible through the window. "I just wanted him to start acting like his normal self, that's all."
Hermione blinked. "Oh."

"Hmm?"

"Well . . . I was positive you were going to answer that you didn't know what you wanted."

Harry shrugged, the motion tense and uncomfortable. "You're the one who doesn't know, Hermione. What this is like for me, I mean. The only time that things feel right is when Snape starts acting like he should. The way I remember him. But he won't do it unless I make him angry. Otherwise he's just . . . just . . ." Harry shuddered.

She twirled a bit of hair around her finger for a long while before she replied. "Is that what happened when he took you home? You worked on keeping him angry with you?"

*Home.* Damn it. The word called up years of deprivation and longing, all those years before he knew he was a wizard. And now to have people calling Snape's quarters his home? It was wrong, clear through.

"No," said Harry shortly. "I couldn't. Not after I'd just been such a toerag in class, only to have him take care of me like none of it had happened. Besides, he gave me this nerve tonic that ended up relaxing me way too much. If not for that, I'd have left a lot sooner."

"He took care of you like none of it had happened?"

"Pretty much." Harry shaded his eyes, though the starlight was hardly hurting them. "He said I could serve my detention by talking to him. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never did."

Her smile was sympathy itself. "Did you have a good talk?"

"No." Harry's breath felt harsh, like it was scraping the inside of his lungs, scouring him. "I can't have a good talk with him. I don't know him. And I don't want to. He-- he--" Harry swiped at his eyes and then went back to hiding them. "He practically killed Sirius."

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione sadly. "That's not true. Snape was playing his role as best he could. He couldn't openly help Sirius, because he couldn't be seen to be acting against Voldemort. But as soon as he was able, he sent a message to the Order telling them what was happening."

"I know--" Harry hated the way his voice was starting to break. "But Snape was happy when Sirius got killed and I-- I-- I can't forget that, and it makes me so angry and you don't have to tell me that the whole thing is my stupid fault anyway, for rushing off to save him, and-- and--"

Damn it. He was not going to cry. He just wasn't.

Hermione moved her chair closer, her wand weaving a privacy spell as she leaned over to whisper into Harry's ear. "Would you like to talk to Sirius about it?"

Harry went rigid for a second, before a wave of pure contentment seemed to crest through him. "He came back as a ghost, after all? Nick said he probably wouldn't, but . . . oh, *Hermione!*"

She shook her head and kept whispering. "No, he's not a ghost. But you found a magical mirror that lets you speak to Sirius beyond the Veil. It was located in a junk room here at Hogwarts because it had been broken for decades. You spent months working out a way to fix it, but you finally managed to become the mirror's master. It obeys you and only you."
Harry stared at her. The obvious parallel with the Mirror of Erised came straight to mind. "It's just a fantasy?"

"No, no. You've really spoken to Sirius. Unfortunately, something stops your parents from coming to the mirror, but you can send them messages through Sirius."

Harry surged to his feet. "Where it is?"

Hermione lifted her shoulders. "I don't really know. I've never seen it, in fact. You'd have to ask your father."

Harry sat back down. "I knew there'd be a catch."

A second later, he was back on his feet. What did he care if he had to deal with Snape to find this mirror? Seeing Sirius again would be worth it. That would be worth anything. Anything at all. "I don't suppose you have some Floo powder?"

"Harry, you have some. All the prefects do." She gave him another one of those assessing glances. "Although, if you're determined not to be a prefect any longer--"

"Shut up," said Harry, but not in a mean tone. "I don't want to spend half an hour looking for my supply. Lend me some of yours?"

"It's supposed to be used only in case of emergency."

"Hermione--"

"And without a bona fide emergency, you need a teacher's permission to travel through the Floo network at all--"

"Hermione--"

Her face softened. "All right. Just a moment."

It took her a little longer than that to dash up to her dormitory and come back down with the Floo powder. Harry spent every second of the wait figuring out what he was going to say if she'd changed her mind. When she returned, however, she had a tiny pinch of silvery powder in her palm. She tipped it carefully into Harry's hand, and then regarded him rather solemnly.

"What?"

Instead of answering, she shook her head.

Bemused, Harry waited a minute, but she just kept looking at him.

"Thanks," he said, giving her a brief smile before heading to the hearth. Strange . . . just this morning he'd have sworn that he would never, ever do a thing like this. Going to Snape's quarters voluntarily?

The truth though, was that the idea was a lot less intimidating now that he'd already been there once. And besides, Sirius was worth it. Seeing him again, talking to him . . . that would be worth any sacrifice. Even this one.

It briefly crossed his mind to wonder if he was going to floo straight into a granite wall, since he couldn't believe that Snape wouldn't think to ward his quarters against students trying to get in and make mischief. But then Harry shook his head a little. As much as the thought rankled, he knew he
wasn't merely a student to Snape.

The man thought of Harry as a son; he referred to his quarters as Harry's "home." He'd definitely have added Harry to his wards sometime during the previous year.

Taking a deep, deep breath, Harry stepped into the fireplace and threw down the Floo powder as he announced his destination.

"Severus Snape's quarters!"

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Nineteen: "Slytherin"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Many thanks must go to Kim, clauclauclaudia, Keira, Diana, and Susanna for reading over my drafts and offering me their suggestions.

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Special Note: A kind woman named Lauren has thanked me for what *Year* has meant to her personally, and has asked that I share with you the link to the National Marrow Donor Program: http://www.marrow.org/ As we know, a bone marrow transplant can make all the difference to someone suffering from leukemia. The site has information and assistance for people considering becoming donors.

Harry stumbled as the Floo spat him out, but he managed not to sprawl headlong into Snape's living room. It turned out not to matter much if he fell, though: the Potions Master was nowhere in sight.

That left Harry in a quandary. He felt uncomfortable enough about barging in like this. Waking Snape up was something else again. Although . . . it wasn't very late yet. How likely was it that Snape was asleep already? Maybe he was behind one of two doors that Harry could see. Or down the corridor that led to . . . well, somewhere, anyway. Harry wasn't sure where.

Why hadn't the noise of the Floo summoned Snape, though? The wards here would be good enough, certainly, to let him know when anyone entered his quarters. Or maybe not, when the person entering was Harry, who used to live here if the stories could be believed.

Which they could, of course. There was no other way to explain the way Snape had acted earlier.

Belief alone, though, didn't make the situation real. Not to Harry.

Well, he'd dithered long enough. "Professor?" called Harry, at first tentatively and then in a much louder voice.

Nothing.

Harry went into the bedroom he'd rested in earlier and looked around briefly, but Snape wasn't in there, of course, or in the small attached bathroom. Which left the other door off the living room.

Harry knocked, but there was no answer.

Very slowly, wand out in case the knob was hexed, Harry pushed open the door. He wasn't sure what he'd find behind it. He was sure that he didn't want to see Snape's bedroom. He was also sure that if the Professor was here, he would have answered Harry's call by now. He'd certainly had enough time to throw a robe over his sleepwear, if that was the reason for the delay.

And if Snape wasn't here, that meant that Harry had to decide what to do. Should he wait for the Potions Master, or return to Gryffindor?

It wasn't too hard to decide. He'd lived here for the better part of a year, after all, and the place looked completely unfamiliar. Was it so wrong to take a look around, now that he had a chance? At
least now, Snape wouldn't be hovering over his shoulder.

The second door off the living room led into a potions laboratory. *Yeah, real surprise there,* thought Harry. He walked around a little, wondering if he'd ever brewed anything in here during those months when he hadn't been allowed in classes. The idea gave him the chills and had Harry hurriedly backing out.

There turned out to be two doors at the end of the short corridor that led away from the living room. Both were warded, though, and Harry had no doubt what that meant. He'd die a messy, painful death if he tried to enter either one. Just as well, since one of them was sure to lead to Snape's bedroom.

Besides, he didn't want to pry where he clearly wasn't wanted. No doubt Snape would never admit it, but Harry had learned something from the Pensieve incident.

He went back out to the living room, running his gaze over the furnishings, trying to see if there was anything that looked remotely familiar.

A drinks cabinet stood in one corner of the room. Harry glanced inside but didn't try to open the glass doors. Huh. He'd never even heard of half the stuff in there. Three bottles on the bottom shelf were so insanely tall that the shelf above them had been cut away. Curious, Harry leaned down lower and peered at the labels.

Huh. Galliano, whatever that was. Well, Snape must like it an awful lot--

Either that, or he hated the stuff and someone kept giving him more bottles of it.

Harry's nostrils flared as it came to him that Dumbledore would probably do exactly that. He'd think it was amusing to give Snape the same thing year after year, knowing Snape hated it . . .

Rising back up, Harry continued his survey of the room, focussing this time on the bookshelves. Nothing too interesting there. Just yard after yard of Potions books, and some on other forms of magic, and a small, square box just about the size of . . .

Stepping closer, Harry grabbed the box and stared at it. It couldn't be, could it? Only one way to find out . . . and anyway, this was just a box. It wasn't the same as looking in a Pensieve at all. Harry carefully pried the lid off and stared down at the contents.

A broken mirror.

One he recognised, though it looked to him like some pieces of it were missing.

Damn it, why was this down here instead of up in Gryffindor where it belonged?

On the other hand, this mirror was supposed to let him talk to Sirius, wasn't it? And Hermione had been talking of a mirror that would do just that, but she'd made it sound like that one was a different one. Still, the parallel pulled at his mind, niggling at him. Maybe the two were connected somehow.

Otherwise, it seemed a rather large coincidence that *this* mirror would be kept down here, where Snape would have access to it.

Harry carefully closed the box and patted it before slipping it into a pocket. Then he continued his survey of the room. Really, there wasn't much else to do while he waited for Snape.
The next thing to catch his eye were the six goblets that occupied a place of honour on the mantle. They gleamed like they’d been recently polished. When Harry drew close enough to make out the names inscribed on them, he gasped.

**POTTER. BLACK. SNAPE. SNAPE. BLACK. MALFOY.**

What the hell?

Harry moved a little closer, trying to work it out. Maybe they were heirlooms of some kind, but they didn't all belong to Snape, obviously. The middle two would, but why would Snape have family tokens from the Blacks? The outer goblets must belong to Harry and Malfoy.

Harry suddenly felt sick. This was all wrong. Those cups, all in a row up there like Harry, Snape, and Malfoy really were a family, and three hooks by the front door, and three chairs around the dining table, and his mirror, kept down here . . .

He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. He didn't want this. He didn't want them. He just wanted Sirius again, and he couldn't even have that, because Sirius was dead!

Tears pricked at his eyes. Harry furiously blinked them away, and took a deep breath, trying to get himself under control. He’d known since he was little that crying didn't do any good. Besides, even without counting the amnesia, he ought to be used to the fact that Sirius was gone forever. He’d had the whole summer to come to terms with it. Not that he had. Maybe if he’d had someone to talk to, that would have helped. But there hadn’t been anyone. His family wasn't the type to inspire confidences, and anyway, they’d been acting strange all through that summer. Aunt Petunia hadn't even been home much, and the house had been like a mausoleum, wrapped in quiet misery.

It had suited Harry. It had suited his mood.

And now Aunt Petunia was gone too. Dead, just like Sirius, even though Harry couldn't remember anything about it. Uncle Vernon, too. Dudley was the only one left.

Harry shuddered, and then he shook his head. No, no. That wasn't right, and it wasn't true. He had a little bit of Sirius left after all. The Mirror of All Souls . . . well, a mirror that would let him talk to the dead would be a poor substitute, but it was better than nothing at all.

Definitely, it was better than this, better than the thought of having Snape in his life. Snape could never be a stand-in for Sirius, and it was sickening that Harry had ever let him so much as try. Or pretend to.

He'd waited down here long enough. He wanted to talk to Sirius now, and that meant he had to know where this mirror was. And that meant that he had to find out where Snape had gone off to. Luckily, that shouldn't be too difficult.

He'd just nip back up to Gryffindor and get his dad's map so he could look for the tiny dot labelled Severus Snape.
The Marauder's Map wasn't in his trunk.

Harry hated to think what that might mean. Snape had known the passwords; at some point in the past year Harry had obviously shown him the map. And now it was missing.

Harry really only saw two possibilities. Either Snape had demanded the map and Harry had grudgingly complied, or Snape had taken it without Harry's permission. That's probably what had happened with the little mirror, after all.

Or . . . maybe there was a third possibility. If Harry had been sleeping in Slytherin half the time the way everybody said, then he probably kept some of his stuff there. Would he really have left the map there, though? In Slytherin?

There was only one way to find out.

Harry took the stairs two at a time as he made his way back down to the common room. Hermione wasn't around, but Ron waved him over to the fire where a few of the Quidditch players were debating strategy for the upcoming match against Hufflepuff.

"Listen to this," Ron said. "Dean's got an interesting idea about how to distract their Beaters--"

"Can I hear about it later?" asked Harry, even though he was relieved at the implication that he was still on the team. After his accident, he wasn't sure the others would think he ought to fly again so soon. "I need to go to Slytherin."

Ron's mouth dropped open. "Uh . . . okay . . . well, I heard about what happened to you in Potions today, and Hermione said that Snape took good care of you afterwards and that you'd even gone back to talk to him again, so . . . I guess that means you're going to start trading off again?"

"Trading off?"

Ron looked like he was bracing himself even as he nodded. "Yeah. Between here and Slytherin."

"I don't think so," said Harry dryly. "I just want to check on something. Would you come with me?"

"All right." Ron turned to the other players. "Same time tomorrow."

Once they were in the corridor, Harry took charge of the conversation. "Just for the record, I didn't ask you to come with me because of Snape's stupid rule about never being alone in the halls. I'm going to talk to him and make him take that back. But it would be insane to stroll into Slytherin all by myself, so--"

Ron snorted. "You didn't think so a week ago. Listen, Harry . . . they don't all like you. Crabbe and Zabini don't, that's for sure. But I don't think even they would take you on. Nott was an idiot to think he could get away with attacking his head of house's son."

"That word is even worse than 'father.'"

Ron ignored that. "You have friends in Slytherin now, Harry. That's what I was trying to say. I mean, friends besides Draco--"

"Would you stop?" asked Harry, impatience making his voice a little harsh. "I'm sick to death of
hearing you go on about Malfoy. You used to not be able to stand the pointy git!"

"Well, it's not as though I like him--"

"Then why do you keep bringing him up like that?"

Ron tapped his wand against his thigh as they headed down the first series of staircases. "Because I like you, you bloody great prat. And you were happy with Draco for a brother. You even told me that the best part was that you got to be a brother, and you weren't going to be a bad one, even if Draco was a total prat."

"So you agree he's a total prat," said Harry, feeling vindicated.

"Eh, well . . . he's still rich and stuck-up and full of himself, but he's not as bad as he used to be, I guess," muttered Ron. "He never uses that nasty word about Hermione any longer, for one thing."

"Yeah, because I'd hex his arse. That doesn't mean he's changed. It just means he's not stupid enough to make the Order hate him, now that he's supposedly 'on my side.' Hell, I bet Snape told him that using the M-word was bad strategy."

"Maybe, but then he fell in love with . . . um . . ."

"Hermione told me. That can't be true."

"What other reason could he have for asking Hermione for advice about it? She . . . uh, the girl, not Hermione, didn't want anything to do with him--"

"Clever girl--"

"And he wrote to Hermione for help, Harry. Does that sound like the Malfoy who used to call her names? He actually went down on his knees and apologised for offending her and begged her to help him get her back."

"And you just believe him about that? Or did Hermione tell you about it?"

"I saw him do it."

Oh. Harry shivered. That did sound interesting, didn't it? It still couldn't be mean what it seemed, though. "Well then, it was some ploy of his to make you believe he'd had a change of heart, I suppose. Don't forget that he's a Slytherin."

Ron shook his head. "Well, you always have had a stubborn streak. I just think--"

"Yeah, got it," interrupted Harry. "I know what you think. Drop it, would you? I already have a therapist, apparently. I need you to be my friend."

"I am being your friend."

"Be a better one," snapped Harry. "Now . . . was it left or right here? I can't remember so well from second year."

Sighing, Ron steered Harry to the right and led the rest of the way to the entrance to the Slytherin dormitories.

Once there, the password was a problem.
Not much of one, though. Harry banged with a fist until somebody came. It seemed to take a long time. Maybe he was as stubborn as Ron had said, since he just kept on, ignoring the rumblings of the portraits in the corridor.

"Yes?" asked Zabini when he finally opened the door. "Oh. It's you. Hail the prodigal son."

"I want to see Malfoy," said Harry brusquely.

"Who?"

"Malfoy."

"Who?" That time the question was openly mocking.

"Cut it out, Zabini," said Ron, stepping closer to the open door. "You were one of the worst last year about 'forgetting' Draco's new name."

"That's a bit rich, coming from you." Zabini's smile turned smug. "Though how anything from a Weasley could be rich is a contradiction in terms, eh? Do you live in a burrow, really?"

Harry shoved Zabini out of the way and found himself in a common room that looked vaguely familiar. That was probably from memories of sneaking in here and not anything that he'd forgotten, though. Huh... the common room was deserted, and come to think of it, Zabini was wearing a night-robe over his pyjamas. "Where is Malfoy's room?"

"Who?"

"Either you tell me or I go door-to-door waking everybody up."

"I should let you," snarled Zabini. "Though it's hardly necessary. We've all heard about what you said to Snape today. So you love it when Slytherin loses points, do you? I hope you also love it when the whole house hates your Gryffindor guts."

"Boo hoo," said Harry in the most insincere tone he could manage. "Everybody in Slytherin hates me. I don't know how I'll survive."

"You will survive," said Malfoy's cool voice from a stairwell. "I'm going to make sure of it. And for the record, Harry, it will never be true that everybody in Slytherin hates you. No matter what stupid things you say or do."

Harry had no idea how to reply to that. It briefly crossed his mind to make some sort of complaint about the fact that Malfoy had just called him stupid, but that would probably just make him look stupid. In front of Ron.

"Go back to bed, Zabini," ordered Malfoy in a terse voice as he descended the rest of the steps. He didn't speak again until the other boy had left. Even then, he cast a couple of spells first. "We won't be overheard, at least. Hallo, Ron. Thank you for bringing Harry by."

Ron inclined his head and moved to lean against a stone wall, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Did you want to see your room, Harry?" Harry didn't know why Malfoy's voice sounded a little hopeful until the other boy went on. "In case it might jog your memory?"

Harry snorted. "That's a good reason never to see it. But I suppose I'm stuck. I'm missing
something. I need to look through my things here."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes. "A good thing I wasn't under the illusion that you might need to see your brother."

"You aren't my--"

"Come along, then," interrupted Malfoy. "I'll show you where our-- I'll show you where the seventh years sleep."

When it looked like Ron would hang back in the common room, Harry gestured for him to follow.

Malfoy led them into a dormitory with five beds, three of them occupied and one of them mussed. A stout black trunk was alongside the last bed, which looked like it hadn't been slept in recently. A strange shiver coursed through Harry as it came to him that this must be his bed. How on earth had he ever managed any sleep here, surrounded by Slytherins?

"That's your trunk," said Malfoy, gesturing. "Though you keep some of your clothes in that armoire. What are you looking for?"

"None of your business," said Harry, kneeling in front of the trunk. His heart sank when he saw the initials on it. S.S. He'd evidently borrowed a trunk from Snape. He didn't like that idea. It seemed... well, he didn't know, never having had a father, but it struck him as paternal that Snape had lent him his own trunk instead of buying Harry a new one, or telling him to buy his own.

"It's warded to open to your touch alone," said Malfoy, acting like he hadn't just got the brush-off. The helpful act was really getting old, in Harry's opinion. "Zabini tried to break the wards and got bright blue hands for his trouble."

"Shut up," said a voice muffled by closed curtains.

"Do Slytherins always turn in so early?" asked Ron as Harry popped the lid of the trunk open.

"It's over an hour past curfew," answered Malfoy. "You were at the last prefects' meeting."

"That only means that students have to be with a prefect if they leave their house, not that they have to go to bed."

It was weird to hear Ron and Malfoy talking without any insults or rancour, thought Harry as he kept pawing through the clothes and books. Just as well he'd come, really. He would need his books for tomorrow. He drew out a transfigurations text he didn't recognize; just beneath it was one on ethics. "No book for Magical Creatures this year?"

"You usually leave that one at home," said Malfoy.

"I was talking to Ron," said Harry tersely. "You aren't even in that class, are you? I remember you never seemed to like it very much."

"A hippogriff trying to rip my head off does tend to have that effect," drawled Malfoy.

"It was your own fault for not being respectful," Harry shot back. "Though that's a tall order for a person like you, I'm sure--"

"Some of us are trying to sleep," shouted Zabini from behind his curtains.

Ron shook his head. "This is unreal. In Gryffindor we'll still be up for a couple of hours, at least."
"That's because your head of house has a rather laissez-faire approach to house governance," said Malfoy.

"Yeah, that's right," said Harry, his legs aching a little as he stood up. "Insult Gryffindor like you always do. It's actually a relief to hear you talking more like yourself, Malfoy."

Malfoy blinked. "Insult? What insult?"

"Well, I don't know, do I? I don't speak French. But I know you, so it had to have been an insult--"

"It means 'hands off,'" said Malfoy quietly.

"Sure it does."

"Harry," said Ron, clearing his throat. "It's not like he called McGonagall a bitch--"

"I don't need your help to get along with my brother," snapped Malfoy.

"Fine, fine," said Ron, holding up his hands as he backed up to the wall and leaned against it.

"I'm not your brother," spat Harry.

Malfoy sighed. "But I am yours, Harry. Are you going to tell me what you were looking for so I can help you locate it?"

"Just tell me where Snape is."

"I don't know for certain." Malfoy's forehead wrinkled. "The most likely places would be his quarters or the office adjoining his classroom. He might have gone on rounds, but it's a little early for that."

"Harry," said Ron slowly. "I thought you remembered everything from years ago. If you want to find Snape, don't you think you should--"

Harry abruptly drew his wand and cast a privacy ward. "Tell all of Slytherin about it, why don't you?"

"Draco already knows about the map."

Harry gnashed his teeth. "Yeah?"

Malfoy's reply was very mild. "We used it to explore the castle this past summer."

"Did you steal it?"

That got a glower, at least. "No."

"Then where is it?" exploded Harry.

"Oh, now you need something from me?" asked Malfoy coldly. "Maybe I'm not in a helpful mood any longer, you egotistical prat. And anyway, with the mood you're in, why would I want to help you find Severus? He doesn't deserve the shite you've been dishing out."

"You know where my map is," said Harry, narrowing his eyes. "Don't you?"

Malfoy didn't answer for a moment. "Yes," he finally said, sounding like he'd come to some sort of
a decision.

"Well?"

"I want something in return."

"You see?" asked Harry, turning to Ron. "I told you he was a Slytherin. Well? Well?"

Malfoy paused again. Then he swallowed. "Call me Draco."


"No, I meant . . . call me Draco from now on."

Harry rolled his eyes. "For fuck's sake. You act like I don't know you, Draco. You aren't that sensitive!"

The other boy clenched his fists, and then suddenly shoved both of them into the pockets on the sides of his night-robe. "Maybe not," he said stiffly, "but to be quite frank, hearing 'Malfoy' makes me remember a charming man of that name, one who offered bribes to kill me, and then decided I should be kidnapped instead so I could be tortured before I died. My own father! Who ended up capturing and torturing me himself, in the end. So if you don't mind, I'd rather not hear his name a hundred times a day!"

Oh. Harry swallowed. If Malfoy really remembered all that every time he heard his name . . . Harry didn't like the feeling that he'd been so cruel. He knew what it was like to feel ashamed of his father, after all. "Sorry," he said gruffly. "I'll try to break the habit and call you . . . er . . . Draco."

"Thank you," said the other boy, his expression shuttered. "As for your map, Severus has it. He keeps it locked up in his private office."

"I knew it!" exploded Harry. "Has he got my invisibility cloak, too?"

"Yes. But you don't really need it any longer, do you? You're allowed to be out after hours now, though it's proper form to wear your prefect's badge--"

"Fuck the prefect's badge!"

Malfoy winced. "I think I understand now why Severus objects to my language."

Harry ignored that. "I bet he uses the map and my cloak when he goes on his rounds! He uses them to catch Gryffindors in the corridors, so he can take points!"

"It might cross his mind, but he wouldn't actually do it. He'd know that sort of thing would come between him and his son."

Harry snorted. "That just means that he wouldn't be brainless enough to gloat about it. Come on, Ron. I think we're through here."

"Good-night," said Malfoy. "Harry . . . I'm glad you came here tonight, no matter what brought you." He waved his wand again, murmuring something that moved the privacy ward so that Ron was now excluded from their conversation. "If you want to come back, the password is 'geese and sheep.'"

"Geese and sheep?" Harry scoffed. "Who thought of that one?"
"Severus."

"It's pretty stupid--"

"No," said Malfoy softly. "It's not."

Snape had his map and his dad's cloak. *Snape had his map and his dad's cloak!*

By the time Harry and Ron got back to Gryffindor, Harry was beyond fuming. How dare that greasy Slytherin take his personal possessions away! To keep them locked in his office!

Well, at least one thing was explained. Snape probably wanted to keep the mirror in his office too, but it was a bit inconvenient because it was in use all the time. It *must* be needed in some way to make this other mirror work; Harry was more convinced of that than ever.

The only puzzling part was the implication that Snape was willing to let Harry talk to Sirius, a man he loathed. At least it was proof that Harry hadn't let Snape walk all over him. Harry might have let Snape get away with taking the cloak and map, but he'd put his foot down when it came to the mirror. He'd demanded it be kept out in the living room so he could use it whenever he liked.

Like *now*.

Of course, he had no intention of asking *Snape* where this other mirror was kept. After finding out that the man had taken away all the stuff he'd ever got from his dad, Harry didn't care if he never talked to Snape again. How dare he!

Harry was of half a mind to skive off Ethics class tomorrow. Anything would be better than being in the same room with *Snape*. Besides, who in their right mind would assign a Slytherin to teach ethics?

Too bad he couldn't skip Potions, too. He needed a N.E.W.T. in that to qualify for an Auror's Apprenticeship. Somebody like Hermione could probably learn it on her own if she had to, but Harry knew he wasn't good enough at Potions to pull that off.

Well, he'd find a way to bear Potions. Somehow. Without yelling at Snape, either. It had felt good at the time. He wanted to be called Potter, not Harry. He wanted Snape to take points, even. They weren't supposed to have any kind of relationship that would stop him, after all. And anyway, half the points coming from Slytherin wasn't a bad thing at all.

But making Snape angry hadn't been worth the aftermath. Harry had felt terrible. Guilty, and more immature than a three-year old. That feeling had been made all the worse by the way Snape had taken care of him after the attack, but Harry thought he'd have regretted his behaviour in any case.

Besides, it had made Harry look mental in front of his friends. Neville had been concerned, he knew, and Hermione had been both concerned and angry. With good reason. Snape had treated him
with respect for once. The least Harry could do was return the gesture.

It didn't mean that he would be a son, as the man seemed to want, but Harry thought he should be able to remain civil. Cold courtesy was probably the right note to strike. Snape would know that Harry hadn't changed his mind about anything, and Harry wouldn't look insane with rage, the way he had today.

"I'll go with you to look for your father, if you like," offered Ron as they were nearing the portrait hole.

"He's not my father!"

All right, so Harry was still insane with rage. Damn it, Snape had no right to take away all of Harry's most precious things!

"I know it's hard for you to think of him that way, but--"

"It's impossible," said Harry shortly. "Go inside. I need to go to Dumbledore's office, and I don't need a chaperon."

"But your father said--"

Harry bared his teeth.

"If something happens--"

"I can take care of myself!"

"Yeah, I know, Harry," said Ron, sounding miserable. "But I don't want another Howler. The last time I left you alone, Snape threatened bodily harm. I know that nothing'll happen if you walk alone, but you know, you do look a little shaky on your feet after all this walking--"

"I'm fine!"

"It's only Monday night," said Ron. "You were hurt on Saturday, for Merlin's sake, and then there was that vicious attack earlier today. You wouldn't be human if you weren't affected by all that!"

"Fine," said Harry. Ron had a good point, really. "I'll Floo."

"Into the headmaster's office? Uninvited?"

"He always says I can come to him about anything, any time." Harry shrugged.

Ron still looked aghast. "I know you wanted to talk to Snape, but can't it wait until the morning?"

"I don't want to talk to Snape ever again, except to get my things back. But I do want to talk to Dumbledore."

"Why?"

Harry shrugged again. "He'll know where the mirror is. Hermione told me about it. The mirror that lets you talk to the dead?"

"The Mirror of All Souls?" Ron smiled. "Is that what you wanted, Harry? To talk to Sirius? Why didn't you say so? I can take you there! Oh . . . but you'll need a shard from that little mirror you broke in fifth year. I think you keep it at home--"
"I have it here," said Harry coolly, lifting the edge of the box from the outer pocket in his robes. His voice warmed as he went on. "You can tell me what to do, can't you?"

"Yeah, I've seen you do it." Ron's voice broke. "You . . . you were trying to get Percy for me, but I guess the mirror can only bring forth people that you loved, so it didn't work. But . . . but . . ."

"What?"

"You used Parseltongue."

"So? I can still speak it."

"But it was more like a spell, Harry."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip. "Well, I have to try, and I can't wait until tomorrow. I guess I need a snake-"

"Wear your prefect's badge like Draco said; it's got a snake on it--"

"Very funny. Anyway, I threw it away--"

"I found it on the floor and saved it for you."

"You can keep it for all I care. So . . . a snake. I suppose I'll go get . . . er . . . what was her name again?"

"Sals."

"Right. Sals." Harry knew he'd been told that already. He ought to be able to remember it. "I'll be right back."

The little snake was curled up in the corner of her clear box. Harry hesitated for a second; he'd had more bad experiences than good with snakes, after all, and he'd hated the way the school had treated him when people had found out he was a Parselmouth. On the other hand, he'd apparently been casting in Parseltongue for months without losing all his friends over it. And with the way the girls had been smiling at him today . . . yeah. They couldn't have found the snake-language-thing too off-putting.

Harry bent down, fixed his gaze on the sleeping snake, and whispered. "Sssals. Sssals . . ."

One tiny eye flickered open, and then Sals began moving. Stretching a bit, it looked like. "Harry?"

"That'sss right." He supposed a pet he could talk to wasn't the worst thing in the world. Feeling better, he lifted up the box and looked for a way to open it, but there didn't seem to be a door or a hinge anywhere. No need for one, he supposed, since Sals proceeded to crawl out one of the small holes in the side. She slithered out onto the back of his hand, and when Harry set the box down, began weaving in and out between his fingers.

It tickled, but not enough to make him laugh out loud. After the first few seconds, the sensation shifted, seeming to soak through him somehow. Harry didn't understand what had happened, but he suddenly knew without a doubt that he'd felt this before. Her flickering tongue was familiar, too.

For the space of a single second, he thought he was actually remembering something. Inside his mind, an image blossomed. He was in the dungeons, standing in the bedroom Snape had said was
his, and Sals was weaving between his fingers as he grinned at Malfoy, who cringed a bit. Then he realised that Dudley was in the vision too. He was staring at Sals, and he looked ill.

Dudley at Hogwarts? Right.

Sals slithered up the sleeve of his robe and emerged out the collar, her little tongue flickering out again. "Harry sssmells different."

Harry thought that was likely due to the potion Snape had given him earlier, but when he tried to explain, what came out was, "I was hurt and had to have sssome no-hurt-watersss."

When he thought about the words, they made some kind of sense. Snakes didn't brew potions and probably didn't have any specific word for them. Anyway, it gave him an idea why the spells in his lexicon used such wonky incantations.

"Harry is ssstill hurt?"

"No, I'm better, excccept . . . my yesssterdays are misssing. Er, sssome of them."

Sals curled around the back of his neck and settled in, her head on one shoulder, her tail hanging off the other one. "Like after a long sssleep?"

Harry reached up and tickled the top of her head. "Like that, yeah."

Snakes had more important things to do than fuss over memory loss, Harry learned then. "Harry isss warm," hissed Sals as she closed her eyes and rested again.

Harry wished his life could be so simple. Nothing to worry about except food and shelter? He still couldn't remember his snake, but he meant what he said, anyway. "I think I've misssed you, Sssals."

Her only answer was a noise of sleepy contentment.

Smiling, Harry put a hand behind his neck to steady her as he went down the stairs. She didn't seem to need it, though. Even asleep, she knew how to cling to him.

"Lead on," he said to Ron once he was back in the corridor. "Where exactly is this mirror?"

"All the way back down in Slytherin. Just down the corridor from Snape's quarters, in fact."

That figured. Snape loved having control of Harry and his things, apparently. And Harry had wanted to be adopted? He hadn't just been playing the role Dumbledore had assigned him?

Sure.

"You held a shard in your left hand and pushed it against the mirror here," said Ron, moving Harry's hand into position as he spoke. "Then you held your wand out and said 'Show me who Ron
"You understand Parseltongue now?" asked Harry, his nervousness coming out as teasing. What if Sirius didn't come? What if Harry couldn't make this work?

"Well, you told me that's what you were going to say. You explained the whole process, hoping it would help for me to know what was going on, since I was going to be involved. So . . . you told me to stand in front of the mirror, just there, and think as hard as I could of Percy, but--" Ron gulped a little. "Nothing happened. I mean, the shard was supposed to dissolve into the surface of the mirror, but it didn't. So then you said maybe the person who wanted to talk with the dead had to do the incantation. So you gave me the shard and had me say exactly what you usually do: 'Show me what you will.' But that didn't work either. Of course not. I couldn't say it in Parseltongue."

"I'm sorry it didn't work."

Ron shrugged, but the movement looked pained rather than casual. He lifted his face, which had a brave expression pasted on. "Not your fault, mate."

Harry took a deep breath and nodded, though something was nigglng at the edge of his consciousness, making him suspect that Percy's death had been his fault. In some way, at least.

But he couldn't possibly think about that now. He needed to find out if he could talk to Sirius. Everything else could wait.

One more deep breath, and then another. Even then, Harry didn't feel ready. But he wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing. So he pressed the shard of broken mirror against the silver surface of the Mirror of All Souls, and shook his sleeve until he could see Sals, wrapped around his left wrist. Then, wand in his other hand, there was nothing to do but say the words Ron had indicated.

Harry did his best to make it a spell as he spoke, really trying, for the first time he could remember, to incant in Parseltongue. The other times he'd tried it didn't count. He hadn't wanted it to work.

Now, he did.

_Come on, come on_, he thought desperately, calling to mind images of Sirius. That hug outside the Shrieking Shack. Sirius in the fireplace, Sirius in the cave. Christmas at Grimmauld Place, Sirius talking with him and telling him that there was good and bad in everyone. The Ministry, Sirius coming to help him, to defend him . . . the Veil.

"Harry," said Ron in a shaky voice. "You'd better let go of the shard, eh?"

It was only then that Harry felt pain coursing through his palm and noticed the thin line of red dripping down the surface of the mirror. He'd cut his hand open.

And Sirius hadn't come.

Harry sat down on the stone floor, cradling his hand in his lap, and tried not to cry.

Ron gently took his wrist and turned his palm face up as Sals slithered out of the way. "It's not deep," he said in a bracing voice as he angled his wand against the injury and murmured a spell.

"Doesn't matter," said Harry dully.

Ron was silent for a moment. "I know it hurts," he said finally.
"Not so much, really--"

"Not your hand. I know, Harry. I know how bad it hurts to come down here thinking you'll get to talk to someone, and then you . . . then you don't."

"Oh." Yeah, Ron would know all about it. Harry had done that to him, and the fact that he couldn't remember doing it didn't excuse him. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought you down here," said Ron. "I got your hopes up for nothing."

"It's not like I didn't do the same to you."

"It's not your fault that the mirror only works for you."

"And now it doesn't even do that," said Harry morosely.

"Oh, you'll get your Parseltongue magic back." Ron looked up from the healed cut and smiled. "You just need to practice."

"Actually, I think I need to remember."

"That'd probably help. Do you want me to tell you some stories about last year? Things that might, I don't know, jolt you into a memory of your own?"

"Yeah," said Harry, grimacing. Part of him really didn't want to remember being adopted by Snape or being brothers with Malfoy. But another part of him really wanted to get the Mirror of All Souls working, and if the price of that was getting his memories back . . . "Yeah, you should do that. Tell me everything. I mean, spare no detail."

"All right. Um, well, let's see. It all started when you got a letter from your family in Surrey--"

Harry held up his hand. "Let's start with that tomorrow. Right now, I just want to sleep and sleep."

"I think you have cause," said Ron gently. "Let's get you back to Gryffindor. You should probably think about sleeping through classes tomorrow, after what you've been through in the last three days."

Harry almost bristled. He wasn't weak . . . but then it came to him that skiving off classes tomorrow would mean missing Ethics. That sounded perfect. He didn't care that Snape had been so unSnapelike earlier in the evening. Other things meant a lot more, like the fact that Snape had taken the Marauder's Map away. And Harry's invisibility cloak, too!

How dare he!

Maybe he should go to Ethics after all, and give the man an earful that would make today's Potion lesson look like a pleasant exchange!

What good would that do, though? If Harry knew anything, it was that Snape wouldn't give Harry's things back just because Harry threw a fit. If Harry wanted them, he was going to have to find a better way than that.

Huh . . . if he could get his Parseltongue magic back then he could probably break through any wards Snape had set around the private areas in his quarters.

Not that Harry needed another reason to want it back. Sirius was reason enough.
Harry got to his feet, staggering a little until his exhaustion rolled back enough to let him find his balance. At least now he had a plan. Get Ron and Hermione to tell him everything, *everything*, about last year. No matter how distasteful the revelations. Work on remembering the things they explained. Get these "dark powers" back so that he could command the mirror and call Sirius. Retrieve his property from where Snape had it locked up.

Oh, and one more thing.

Skive off Ethics for the rest of the year.

It was just a pity that he couldn't get out of Potions as well.

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:
Chapter Twenty: "Three Nos and a Yes"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Three Noes and a Yes

Chapter Notes

I'd like to offer a final thanks to Diana, who helped me years ago when Year was removed from ffnet and who returned after I'd posted Summer to ask if I needed any assistance. She's been betaing ever since but recently told me that she won't be able to in the future. So here's to you, Diana -- thank you for all you've done for this series.

---

I received a lot of encouragement and pointers on Chapter 20 from these wonderful ladies: Kim, clauclauclaudia, Keira, and Susanna. Good thinking, good wording, good suggestions, and above all, people to bounce ideas off of so that I continue to be fascinated by the story and motivated to keep on writing.

"Coming down for breakfast, mate?" asked Dean, shaking Harry by one shoulder.

"Tired," mumbled Harry, rolling over and burrowing deeper into his blankets.

"You're already running a little late --"

"Let him have a lie-in," said Ron from a little bit further away. "Harry's had a rough couple of days, and if he wants to skive off classes, we ought to just let him."

Harry pulled the blankets up over his head, but pulled them back down again when he heard the sound of his bed curtains being closed. He didn't really want to skive off classes, but getting up wasn't appealing either. He wasn't hungry, what did he have to look forward to? Another class with Malfoy? Oh . . . but this was Tuesday morning, wasn't it? If Harry remembered his timetable correctly, he had Magical Creatures with Ron. Malfoy wouldn't be in that class now that it was optional, would he? Harry could pretend to be in Gryffindor alone, taking classes with the Gryffindors like he was supposed to.

That was a welcome prospect . . . but in the end, it wasn't enough to cut through the utter exhaustion weighing down Harry's limbs.

He closed his eyes again and hoped he'd dream about Sirius.

"I know you're awake," said Ron's voice as the bed curtains were pulled to the side again, letting in a wide shaft of daylight.

"How could you know that?" asked Harry, moving to sit up. "I wasn't making any noise!"
"If you didn't sleep through the day when you were recovering from hundreds of needle jabs, then-..." Ron suddenly cleared his throat. "Er... it's not like you. That's what I meant."

Harry swung his legs over the edge of the bed and eyed his friend curiously. Something in Ron's tone was off, but only during that last little bit. "Needle jabs?"

"Uh..." Ron flushed, swallowed hard, and looked down at his feet. "I can't tell you. Sorry."

"You can't tell me?"

Ron mumbled something inaudible as he shook his head.

"But yesterday you said you'd tell me everything," said Harry slowly. "You promised."

Ron looked up at that. "I didn't promise."

He sounded miserable, but Harry didn't particularly care. "You as good as!"

"I meant to tell you all about last year, but now... now I can't." Ron bit his lip as he sat down next to Harry. "It's just... don't be angry, Harry, but this morning there was a meeting, and... and..."

"And what?"

"Well... your father was there, and he explained a couple of things about your treatment, and... and..."

Harry didn't need to hear the rest. What Snape had said to Malfoy in front of him was enough to fill in the blanks. "And he said not to tell me anything about last year!"

"It might keep you from getting your memory back, he said, so yeah." That time, Ron sounded defensive.

"I think I know better than Snape what I need!"

"He's actually a really good father, Harry."

"What would you know about it?" snapped Harry.

"Well, I was there the time when--" Ron sighed. "I suppose I can't tell you about that, either. Snape's instructions were really specific."

"I can't fucking believe this! You're going to do whatever stupid thing Snape says?"

"If you end up with amnesia for the rest of your life because I didn't follow your dad's advice--"

"Like he's some kind of genius when it comes to me! What am I, one of his potions?"

Ron sighed. "Of course not. But he told us what your therapist had to say on the matter, and I have to think that she knows what she's talking about, Harry."

"Oh, he told you what my therapist had to say," said Harry, his voice a shade away from a snarl. "That's just brilliant! What happened to patient-therapist confidentiality, I'd like to know! What happened to not telling the whole damned world all my private business? At a meeting I'm not even invited to!"

"He didn't tell the whole world," said Ron quickly. "Just the teaching staff and the Gryffindor
prefects."

There went Harry's next idea, which had been to ask Hermione to fill him in on last year. Frustration made him clench his fists. "I'd like to know what I'm supposed to do the next time Voldemort comes after me if nobody will even teach me the sixth-year material I can't remember!" He suddenly put together the things he'd heard and came out with a wild guess. "Was Voldemort the one who jabbed me all over with needles?"

"He ordered it done, but it was--" Ron scowled. "That's not very nice, Harry."

"Not nice is refusing to tell me things I need to know!"

"I want you to be able to remember," said Ron stubbornly.

"I'm not going to remember anything as long as people make sure my mind's nothing but one large blank," retorted Harry, just as stubbornly. "If you tell me some details about what I missed, I'm sure my memory will start filling in the rest of the gaps."

"That's not what your therapist thinks--"

"To hell what my therapist thinks! Does she know anything about magic?"

"What does your memory loss have to do with magic? You were hit in the head by a Bludger!"

"I meant," said Harry, sneering, "that she can't possibly understand what I'm up against when it comes to Voldemort. I'm supposed to just go on my merry way and ignore the fact that I'm missing all the sixth-year material? Maybe I can defeat him with a cheering charm!"

Ron shook his head. "We're allowed to re-teach you last year's spells, Harry. We just can't mention anything more personal than that." His voice grew a little hopeful. "But maybe the spells will remind you of things?" Harry sighed, his anger draining away until he felt more exhausted than when he'd first woken up that morning. "Come on, Ron. Be a friend."

"I am being one. Just like I am when I tell you that you ought to give Snape and Draco a chance--"

"What if Snape's so intent on this don't-tell-Potter business because there's something he doesn't want me to remember?" asked Harry, new suspicions blooming in his mind. "Doesn't that makes perfect sense? He's a Slytherin, after all--"

"Harry . . ." Ron breathed in and out a couple of times before he went on. "So are you."

"I am not! I told the hat 'no,' and I meant it!"

"And you ought to know by now that Snape doesn't think of you as 'Potter' any longer--"

"I thought you weren't supposed to tell me things," sniped Harry, his anger trying to resurface. Exhaustion quickly wiped it out again.

"We're allowed to tell you what's true now. Just not how things got that way."

"Get out," said Harry wearily as he lay back down and curled onto his side. "Just . . . get out."

"Don't you want lunch?"

"Don't you get it? I want Sirius," said Harry, burrowing down into his blankets. "And I want to sleep."
Ron stood there for a moment, but then he pulled the bed curtains closed and quietly left the dormitory.

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Despite what he'd said, Harry did want lunch. A few minutes after Ron had left, hunger drove him out of bed. He didn't feel like going to the Great Hall, though. No matter where he sat, Ron and Hermione would move next to him, and then they'd refuse to answer his questions.

Damn it, he shouldn't have waited two days to start asking those questions. He should have done it right away, before Snape and this Marsha woman had got it fixed in their heads that telling him about the past would be a bad thing.

Of course, he hadn't wanted to hear about the past until now. The amnesia had actually suited him pretty well.

Now that it was standing between him and talking to Sirius, though . . . not so much.

"You'll tell me thingsss, won't you, Sssals?" asked Harry as he walked down to the kitchens. "About the last cold-times and warm-times?"

Sals flicked out her tongue, tasting Harry's neck as she answered that she would.

Harry quickly found out that talking to snakes had limitations. Sals hadn't been with him all the time; she'd spent a lot of the past year hiding from the "big feathered beast" or curled up in her safe, warm box. Sometimes she'd been with Harry as he walked the halls or went to class, but unless Harry had been talking to her in Parseltongue, she'd mostly paid attention to watching out for feathered beasts or scanning the castle's nooks and crannies for "small furry snacks."

There was a meadow Sals really liked, it turned out. It was near some sort of small house, but she didn't like how she got there. She didn't know how to explain about that, though. And Harry had once done a fire-spell that had frightened her, but she knew that hadn't been his intention. Harry wasn't like his nest-mate, she said. He had pointed his branch at her on purpose, over and over, and said words that made her lose herself, but not like the time she'd eaten the furry snack that had made her look at herself and see nothing . . .

And on and on. Sometimes she said something that gave Harry a vague sense of some incident or other, but mostly he just ended up bemused.

There was no doubt about who she meant when she referred to Harry's "nest mate," however. Sals knew his name when prompted.

Draco. Who had apparently cursed Harry's pet, over and over!

Well, Harry would have a thing or two to say to him the next time he ran into the pointy git!

By then they were at the entrance to the kitchens. Harry lifted Sals up to the pear and told her how
to tickle it.

"Harry Potter, sir!"

Harry grinned. He'd come down to the kitchens for food, but the minute he saw Dobby, a brilliant idea seemed to burst through his mind.

"Dobby," said Harry warmly. "How have you been?"

"Oh, very fine, very fine indeed, Mr Harry Potter, sir! So nice of Harry Potter to ask after Dobby!"

Dobby was bouncing on his heels, his ears standing straight up with excitement, but then, that was how he usually acted around Harry. Sometimes Harry had found those traits annoying, but now he was glad of them. Ron wasn't being much of a friend just now, but Harry knew that he could count on Dobby to help him out.

Harry plopped himself down on a wooden chair and set Sals on the table so she could explore. He wondered how to put the question to Dobby. Did the elves even know that Harry had lost his memory? If they didn't, then Harry's questions were going to sound odd . . .

"What would Mr Harry Potter like for luncheon?" Dobby beamed. "Whatever suits?"

Harry shivered. That phrase reminded him of last night's dinner in Snape's quarters. "No. Er . . . maybe a fry-up? I missed breakfast."

Dobby nodded in a frantic sort of way and began snapping his fingers. Dishes full of steaming food popped into existence on the table, so quickly that Harry scooped Sals up before one could land on her. She lapped at Harry's hand in thanks and then slithered down his fingers so she could wind her way around the plates and sniff their contents.

"Thanks," said Harry as he loaded his plate with eggs and bacon. "So, I don't know if anybody's mentioned this, but I took a hit from a Bludger last Saturday, and ever since, I've been having some trouble remembering things."

"Oh, yes," said Dobby gravely. "Professor Snape explained this morning."

Harry hadn't eaten a single bite yet, but those five words killed his appetite. He almost swore, but tried to brazen it out instead. "Right. Well, I was hoping that you could tell me a bit about what went on last year. I know you might not have been in the thick of everything, so maybe you won't know the answers to all my questions, but--"

The elf began wringing his hands together. "Dobby is forbidden to speak!"

Shite.

"But you're a free elf," said Harry in the most reasonable tone he could manage. It was difficult, when what he wanted to do was pound the table in frustration. "You can do as you like. And I know you'd like to help me, Dobby. You've always wanted to help me."

Dobby stretched his eyes open until they were like huge orbs. "Dobby must not, Harry Potter. Not this time. Professor Snape was most insistent! And Dobby knows that Professor Snape has Harry Potter's well-being first and foremost in mind!"

Sure he did. What Snape had, Harry thought, was motives of his own. Slytherin motives. There was something he didn't want Harry to remember!
"But Dobby--"

"Dobby must not speak."

Harry swallowed. "You can write, can't you?"

Dobby gave him a look full of rebuke and sorrow all at once. Harry felt instantly ashamed, even before the elf exclaimed, "Dobby will iron his ears for disappointing Harry Potter, but he must not speak--"

"Don't iron your ears. Don't hurt yourself at all, all right?" added Harry. "It's just . . . Dobby, I really want to remember, and I think I won't unless I get some help. That's all."

An eager nod. "Dobby will summon Professor Snape at once--"

"No!" Harry cleared his throat. "Not that kind of help. Well . . . good seeing you. Thanks anyway, Dobby."

"Harry Potter does not want his fry-up?"

"Not so much now. But thanks." Harry looked around for Sals and blanched a little. While he'd argued with Dobby, she'd slithered atop the oval dish of fried eggs and had devoured most of the ones Harry hadn't served himself. The sight of a snake curled up in a platter of food was off-putting, to say the least.

Just as well he'd already lost his appetite.

As for Sals, Harry figured that she must be hungry. "Can my snake stay here and eat her fill?"

Dobby nodded and laced his bony fingers together as he solemnly promised, "Dobby will make sure that the kitchen cats stay away from Harry Potter's familiar."

Harry smiled his thanks and bent down to talk to Sals. "Can you find your way back home?"

When Sals lifted her head, she had egg white plastered to her snout. "Up-home or down-home?"

Harry supposed that she must mean Gryffindor or Slytherin. Well, he'd seen for himself that he had things in Slytherin, and even before that he'd known that his friends weren't lying to him. The idea that he'd been rooming with Draco Malfoy still made him feel sick, though. "Up-home," he said in a firm voice, though of course he had no idea if a hiss could sound firm at all.

Sals might have nodded, or she might just have been intent on devouring more egg.

Harry gave her a little pat before he said good-bye to Dobby and headed off to his Transfiguration lesson.
"Harry," said Hermione as she slid over to make room for him. "Your father was looking for you at lunch. I think he's concerned that you didn't show up for your morning lessons."

Harry scowled. "Stop calling him that. And what's it to him if I bunk off a class now and again?"

"Well, the last time you did that, he--" Hermione abruptly clamped her lips together.

"You, too." Harry had to sigh. "This is really annoying. Snape even told Dobby to keep me in the dark! I bet he'd have told my snake the same thing if he could speak to her!"

"I'm sure it must seem very unfair, but the human mind is complex and we certainly wouldn't want to do anything that might damage your chance at a full recovery--"

"Shut it," said Harry crossly. "It's one thing if you won't answer my questions about last year. It's another for you to witter on like you're some kind of expert on amnesia. I don't want to hear it."

"I think he didn't get enough sleep," said Ron in a low voice from the other side of Hermione.

"Yeah, and why was that?" asked Harry pointedly.

Hermione blinked. "Was Ron snoring? Sometimes at the Burrow I can hear him even through two closed doors--"

"I don't snore," objected Ron at once.

Harry and Hermione exchanged a glance that had Harry almost smiling despite his foul mood.

McGonagall started the lesson then, but she'd only got two minutes into it when the classroom door opened to reveal Malfoy, who looked like he'd been running.

"Mr Snape," said the teacher in a voice laced with frost. "Please arrive on time in future. Five points from Slytherin."

Malfoy's glance swept the classroom and landed on Harry almost at once. "Yes, Professor. I apologize, though it was unavoidable. However, I need to leave again for a few moments, if I may--"

"You most certainly may not."

Malfoy opened his mouth to reply, but must have thought better of it. Instead, he quickly walked to the front of the classroom and spoke a few quiet words, his swishing wand ensuring that the conversation would remain private. When he was finished, McGonagall looked resigned. She nodded for him to go as he'd asked.

"I wonder what that was all about," said Ron in an undertone as McGonagall turned to flick some directions up onto the board.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Not to Harry, it wasn't. But then Hermione went on.

"Draco was helping Professor Snape to look for Harry, but the professor sent him to class when lunch was over. When Draco saw Harry, he wanted to go tell their father that--"

"He's not my father!"
"That is not an appropriate classroom tone, Mr Potter," said McGonagall crisply. "One point from Gryffindor."

Harry almost snorted, wondering what the counters were going to do when they tried to divide the point between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

McGonagall gave him a long, disappointed glance before she went back to teaching her lesson.

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Malfoy was back in less than five minutes. He sat down at a table with Daphne Greengrass and tried to catch Harry's eye more than once, but Harry ignored him. He didn't want to spend two seconds talking to Draco Malfoy, and even if he did, he wouldn't do it here. He needed to pay attention in class, and not just because he'd missed a year of lessons. Transfiguration was difficult for him, that was all.

He couldn't help but notice that it didn't look difficult for Malfoy. Only Hermione completed the assignment before him. She actually clapped with delight when she placed her miniature water wheel into the river flowing across McGonagall's desk and saw it begin to rotate.

Harry did snort then. "Hermione," he said when she carried her dripping project back to their table, "These are simple machines, emphasis on simple."

"I think a water wheel qualifies as a compound machine, actually--"

"My point was that you've spent time around advanced technology. How can you get so excited about a water wheel?"

She smiled. "Because I just created one with magic."

Ron looked like he was considering snapping his wand, which so far had proven uncooperative about transfiguring a scrap of parchment into any sort of "machine" at all. "But this is Muggle stuff," he grumbled. "Why should we spend time in magic lessons making things that have nothing to do with the wizarding world?"

"Now, Ron," said Malfoy, who was passing by their table on his way back from having his assignment evaluated at McGonagall's river, "you know as well as I do that it's part of the new tolerance curriculum here at Hogwarts. All the teachers are supposed to throw some non-magical elements into their lessons, to remind us that the wizarding world is not the only world that exists."

Harry could imagine Malfoy saying all that. The trouble was, he was supposed to say it in a sneering, sarcastic tone that conveyed his disdain for the idea of tolerance. Instead, his tone was neutral . . . or even a little warm.

Like he was remembering someone he was fond of.

Harry gritted his teeth. He wasn't willing to go there. Malfoy couldn't have changed. Not that
much. He had to be putting on an act. In fact, the proof of it was there in his wording. *Non-magical*

. . . "Most of us just say 'Muggle,' you know," he said, giving his voice all the sneering tone that should have been in Malfoy's.

"That word's offensive in certain quarters."

That was taking the act too far. Harry wasn't going to stand for it. "Offensive! You're the boy who went around calling Hermione a Mudblood all the time! And me Scarhead! And Ron a weasel! And--"

"Harry!" exclaimed Hermione.

"What? It's true!"

McGonagall glanced up from the front table, where she was examining a set of pulleys that Zabini had transfigured. They looked tangled together to Harry, but he was more concerned about the way the professor was pursing her lips at his outburst. Harry gave her a slight nod to show that he'd understood, and turned back to Hermione.

"Oh, Harry," she was saying, shaking her head. "Can't you see that things are different now?"

"They aren't different for me." Harry spoke in a level tone as he turned to glare at Malfoy, who didn't take the hint to leave.

"Severus was looking for you," he said. "He understood that you might need extra rest after that attack, but when you didn't show up for breakfast or lunch he thought you might be having a bad reaction to the potions he gave you yesterday. Are you all right?"

None of your business, Harry wanted to say. With Hermione looking at him so pleadingly, though? "Yeah."

"You weren't in your dormitory--"

"I went to the kitchens for lunch." Which Snape could have found out using the map, come to think of it. Harry wondered why the Potions Master hadn't thought of that.

"Why?"

By that point Harry didn't care any longer about Hermione's pleading glance. "None of your business, and if you don't mind, Mal--" Harry started over. "If you don't mind, *Draco*, we're not all finished with the lesson. I'd actually like to master this, so could you let me get on with it?"

Malfoy nodded. "I'll see you in Ethics."

Like hell you will, thought Harry as the other boy walked away.

---
It wasn't until Transfiguration was nearly over that Hermione went back to something Harry had mentioned at the start of class.

"Please tell me you haven't been grilling your snake about your missing year."

"What if I have? Are you and Ron and Snape going to make her disappear?"

Hermione shook her head, more in disapproval than in answer. "Professor Snape can't explain to her why it's important that she let you remember on your own, Harry. It's up to you to be responsible and control your questions around her."

"And what if I won't remember on my own? Ever think of that?"

"You need to give it some time."

"I have--"

"Harry," she said sternly, "it hasn't even been a week. You need to relax and let your mind recover at its own pace."

"What did I tell you about wittering on?"

"Just don't ask Sals to tell you things. Please, Harry."

Harry's nostrils flared. "Too late, but the joke's on me. She's not that useful, as it turns out. I can't follow half of what she says and I get the feeling she wasn't around all the time, anyway. She wanders the castle looking for mice. And even when she was around, all she knows for sure is what I told her in Parseltongue. Now, if she understood English, I'd be in business."

Hermione looked relieved, which irritated Harry. A real friend would commiserate with him.

"I told you all that so you wouldn't get any bright ideas about snake-napping her," he added in a nasty tone. "Or worse. For all I know, Snape would turn her into potions ingredients if he thought she could tell me whatever it is that he's hiding."

Ron set his lopsided water wheel down on their table. "He's not hiding anything, Harry."

"Sure he is. That's why he's latched onto this insane plan to keep things from me. Snape's got some kind of secret, and the last thing he wants is for me to remember it."

"He does want you to remember," exclaimed Hermione. "That's the whole point! I know it may seem counter-intuitive to withhold information so that you'll end up with more in the long run, but I told you, the mind is complicated, and--"

"Leave it," advised Ron. "Snape didn't tell us to argue with Harry, Hermione. We don't have to convince him that the plan's a good one. We just have to follow it."

"Because Snape said so," spat Harry.

"Because your father said so, yes," said Ron fiercely, but in a low voice. "Your father who loves you, which I know you can't remember, but I really think you ought to trust your friends who tell you that it's so."

It hit Harry with a dull sort of thud that Ron was right -- Snape did love him, as bizarre as that seemed. It had to be true, though. Nothing else could explain his behaviour yesterday, when he'd taken care of Harry like a son even though Harry had just been massively rude to him. The Snape
Harry knew would have been scathing in return, would have thrown out insults designed to slice Harry to shreds. References to James Potter, most likely.

Instead he'd assigned a detention . . . but not the usual kind at all.

Harry wondered what would have happened in that detention if he hadn't collapsed during class. He had a sneaking suspicion that Snape would have used the time just for talking, all the same. Had he assigned a detention so he'd have an opportunity to try to get through to Harry?

Probably. He did think of himself as Harry's father.

But there were still things that didn't add up. Harry knew there was something Snape didn't want him to remember. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he knew it for certain all the same.

And there was the fact that Snape had spent his time as Harry's father taking away all of Harry's most important things, and making him live in Slytherin half the time, and making him attend lessons with the Slytherins whenever possible.

So it didn't sound like he'd been a very good father, did it? He didn't even understand that Harry was a Gryffindor!

"Say something, Harry," said Ron. "I hate it when you won't talk to me."

Harry blinked. "Sorry. Lost in my thoughts, that's all. Er . . . it's hard to explain. It's like I'm holding a sheet of parchment but I can see that it has about six different sides."

"You're confused, of course," said Hermione as she swept books and quills into her bag. "Ron's right, though. Snape does love you."

The idea still made him feel sick inside, like his intestines were twisting themselves into knots. "He does, yeah," said Harry thickly. "I . . . I wish he wouldn't, though. It's not right."

They'd reached the door of the classroom by then, and who should be standing outside it, waiting for them, but Draco Malfoy. Or Draco Snape, Harry supposed, the knots in his stomach pulling themselves even tighter. God had no mercy, did he? The horrible Slytherin prat really was his brother the way Snape was his father.

But nothing much had changed from earlier that day. Those things were real, but they still weren't real to Harry. They'd never be real to Harry.

He didn't want them to be.

"We'd better hurry or we'll be late to Ethics," said Malfoy.

Harry wanted to tear his hair out. He couldn't bear to spend an hour in Snape's company right now. He'd end up yelling at him again, just to get the reaction he wanted, except he'd never get that, not really, because Harry probably couldn't make Snape go back to hating him. Not if the man really loved him as a son.

And there wasn't much "if" left to wonder about when it came to that.

"I'm not going to Ethics," he said.

To Harry's surprise, Malfoy didn't argue with that, but merely said, "I'll walk you to Gryffindor."

"You'll go to Ethics and tell Snape that I've had it with last year's ridiculous rule about me never
being alone in the corridors. I'm not putting up with it any longer, and he can't make me. So what if he's got a paper saying he's my father? I'm still seventeen and a legal adult responsible for himself."

"You can't stop me from walking with you to Gryffindor, Harry," said Malfoy dryly. "However, after the big lecture this morning was over, he mentioned to the three of us that there was no more need for you to be accompanied everywhere."

Harry rounded on Ron. "You said it was just the teachers and the Gryffindor prefects at that meeting!"

"Well, and Draco. He is your brother--"

"I'm surprised that Snape is willing to give up that much control over me!"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "When it's doing nothing but fostering resentment and it's truly not useful any longer?"

"Fine, then I'm going off alone and the three of you can listen to Snape teach you what little he may know about ethics."

"I'll tell Dad that you've gone to have a rest?"

_Dad_. Those knots inside Harry pulled tighter still, until he thought the tension might tear him in two. It was real, this pain. It was physical, and it made Harry more blunt that he'd have been otherwise. He didn't want to break apart in front of Malfoy, but he couldn't stop the words from spilling out. "Tell him I can't be in the same room with him without screaming, and that didn't work out so well yesterday. Or lie and say I'm tired. I don't care."

"But Harry--"

Hermione and Ron together again.

"I can't do this," said Harry, almost gasping as he turned on a heel and ran.

It sounded like Ron and Hermione made a move to follow him and Malfoy stopped them, but Harry couldn't be sure. In any case, it didn't take long before he was too tired to run further. He leaned against a wall and slid down it, collapsing to the stone floor, clenching his fists for a few moments until it came to him that nobody was coming after him.

Not even Snape, sweeping down the corridor like an avenging angel dressed all in black, determined to find out why Harry had attended Transfiguration but not Ethics.

But he couldn't do that, could he? He had students to take care of.

_If you needed him, he'd leave his class to help you_, a little voice whispered in Harry's head.

Probably true, but for some strange reason, that made Harry feel worse instead of better. He didn't want Snape for a father. He'd rather have no father at all.

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To Harry's surprise, Snape didn't come to Gryffindor Tower that evening. He didn't even try to talk to Harry during dinner, though his dark eyes frequently rested on Harry.

Well, the man wasn't stupid; Malfoy was right about that. Snape had just that morning got all of Harry's friends to side with him instead of Harry; he'd know that Harry wouldn't want to be around him after that.

As if he didn't have enough other reasons.

Hagrid did come over, his burly form knocking a pitcher of pumpkin juice over when he rounded the far edge of the Gryffindor table. "Harry. Missed ya in class this mornin',"

Harry smiled up at him. "Sorry. I was feeling under the weather."

"Head still botherin' ya?"

"Not much. But I had a hard day yesterday."

Hagrid slowly nodded. "Yer father mentioned. This morning."

If Harry had entertained any idea of asking Hagrid about last year, it went out the window when he heard that. Hagrid was a teacher; he'd been at the meeting too. And of course he'd trust Snape to know best. More than he'd trust Harry, anyway.

What he needed was somebody who would trust Harry more. Or at least somebody with a reason to do as Harry asked.

"Yeh take care of yerself, Harry," said Hagrid, patting Harry's shoulder with one of his skillet-sized hands. "I'll see you at the next lesson, eh?"

"Yeah, of course." As Hagrid walked off, Harry began glancing around the Great Hall, looking for someone who could be persuaded to talk to him about his missing year. Luna, maybe? She probably wouldn't care what Snape wanted, if she even knew about it. Luna did whatever struck her as best, no matter how strange or wrong it looked to other people . . .

On the other hand, how much would Luna even know about Harry's life in the last year? She wasn't in Harry's year, or Gryffindor. And besides, he thought she might have a touch of the "Sals" problem, too. Luna said a lot of things that didn't make sense to Harry.

Like . . . wasn't there once something very odd . . . something about a cucumber . . .

Harry suddenly blushed. *Oh, God.* One image immediately came to mind, and it wasn't exactly a cucumber. Not the kind that grew in a garden, anyway. Why would he think of that in connection with Luna? They hadn't been dating or something, had they? Wouldn't someone have mentioned a thing like that?

Well, now he definitely couldn't ask Luna anything. He'd get tongue-tied in an instant. He just knew it.

So then, who else? Lavender? She'd certainly been willing to tell him things earlier. She wasn't like Luna, though. Lavender would colour things to suit herself. She was a bit nasty that way. Harry had no doubt that Lavender would say anything to get her way, and since her way lately looked a bit like she was angling for Harry to ask her to the Yule Ball . . . no. Definitely not.
What he needed was somebody he could trust and someone willing to talk to him. Not to mention somebody who might know useful things.

Things that could help him remember everything, so he could cast in Parseltongue again and make that mirror let Sirius through.

He kept looking around, his mind whirling as he considered the possibilities, and then it came to him. Of course.

Harry stood up and walked around the end of the table and up the other side until he reached Ginny. He waited until she broke off her conversation and glanced up at him. "Would you like to take a walk with me?"

"Sure."

He'd have liked to walk down to the lake so they could have some privacy, but it was too cold for that, so they headed toward the Astronomy Tower, chatting about nothing in particular until they were almost there.

"You don't need to ask me to walk with you if you want to take a stroll, you know," said Ginny as they began to climb a long, winding staircase. "Hermione told me that Snape's not going to insist on that any longer."

Harry couldn't have asked for a better opening. "You were one of the people he trusted to stay by my side?"

"Yes, because I--" Ginny suddenly stopped and whirled around, hands on hips as she glared down at him from two steps ahead. "No, Harry."

"No, you weren't?"

"No, I'm not going to go against what your father thinks is best when it comes to your memory loss. Is that why you asked me on a walk? So you could pump me for information?"

"Well, I also thought a walk would be nice--"

Ginny crossed her arms in front of her chest. "And there I thought you might be getting your courage up to ask me to the Yule Ball!"

Harry climbed two more steps to put them on a level. "What is it with girls and the Yule Ball? It's not even December yet!"

"Harry Potter, you are the most--" Ginny's nostrils flared. "Never mind. Just take it as read that I don't appreciate this one bit. How dare you assume that you can flirt your way to what you want!"

"I didn't flirt with you! I just asked you to go on a walk!"

"That's the same as-- oh, never mind," she said again, this time a good deal more crossly. "You're hopeless."

"Look, I'm sorry you misunderstood," said Harry desperately. "I just want to remember. Is that so terrible?"

"And you thought that I'd be a soft touch! Do you know me at all, Harry?"

"I don't know, do I? I'm missing a whole year! Were we dating or something, Ginny? Is that why
You thought an invitation for a walk was something else?"

"No, Harry."

"No, we weren't dating?"

"No, I am not going to answer your questions. If you're any sort of friend at all, you'll stop asking me things."

Harry leaned on the wall, wrapping his cloak more tightly about him. "You lot are the ones refusing to act like friends. I don't know what could have convinced you that Snape is such great shakes as a father, and I suppose I'm not asking, either, but . . . damn it. Nobody seems to understand that this isn't exactly fun for me. All I hear is 'Harry, you should be nicer to Malfoy,' and 'Harry, give Snape a chance.' Doesn't it occur to anyone that that's not the sort of help I need?"

Ginny laid a hand on his arm and squeezed. "It must be terrible to feel like a stranger in your own life. I can't imagine, Harry, or put myself in your shoes. We're here for you. Really, we are. But . . . we can remember the past year, and we don't like seeing you throw away the good things that happened. We love you too much to say nothing as we watch you do that."


"He doesn't like to be called 'Malfoy' any longer."

"Yeah, I know." Harry cleared his throat. "I really didn't think you'd jump to conclusions about the Yule Ball, Ginny. Er . . . I suppose you want to go with me, then?"

Ginny sighed. "If you want to go with me, then you'll ask me again. Properly. It's not very flattering to be invited because you think you have to, Harry. Or because you feel guilty about trying to use me."

"I wasn't--" Harry's denial crumpled under her steady gaze. "Well, maybe I was. A little. I didn't mean anything bad. I just thought you were the one person who would talk to me."

"I know, but it's not nice to pick me for that just because I fancy you."

Harry bit his lip and nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you, but don't do it again."

"I won't," said Harry, shamefaced. What had he been thinking? Of course he wouldn't do it again. He wasn't the world's biggest heel. And anyway, what would be the point? Ginny was determined to tell him "no," just like everybody else in his life.

Shite, shite, shite.
Harry sat back in his chair and rubbed the side of his head. "I guess some things never change."

Ron grinned down at his chess pieces, which were shaking hands with each other. The ones that weren't applauding themselves, that was. "Well, you know what they say. Practice makes perfect. If you only play chess a few times a year you aren't going to improve much."

Harry's own pieces were slowly trudging back to the wooden case next to the board. To think they'd leapt out of it so eagerly not fifteen minutes earlier. "I don't suppose you'd tell me anything about our chess matches last year?" Even to his own ears, the question sounded desperate and feeble.

"No I wouldn't, but if you cosy up to Ginny like that again, I'll be happy to punch your nose in," said Ron cheerfully, yet with a hint of true threat in the words.

"I don't need you to handle Harry for me," said Ginny from where she was reading a Quidditch magazine five feet away.

"As long as you'll punch his nose in--"

"If he tries you use me like that again," said Ginny in a sickly-sweet voice, "I'll hex him in his jewelbox."

Harry flushed, but knew he probably deserved it. Well, not that. Nobody deserved to be hexed there. But he did deserve her contempt. Needing to think about something else, he started putting his chess pieces away. That didn't last long. The second piece he touched bit him sharply and began railing about the indignity of being handled by the very boy who had caused their army such an ignominious defeat.

Harry yanked his hand to his mouth and sucked on the little stab wounds the pawn had inflicted. Well, at least he'd got the distraction he'd wanted.

"They're getting too cheeky," murmured Ron, waving his wand in an arc over the entire set before pointing it directly at the pawn in question. "You there. No more of that."

The pawn raised its hands in supplication. "Can I change colours, oh great wizard general, sir? Please?"

"Traitor! Traitor!" yelled several of the other black pieces. A knight shoved the offending pawn face first onto the chess board and began pounding him on the back with the flat of his sword. "Cur! Scoundrel! Knavel!"

Ron sighed and cast a spell to waft them all back into the box. They struggled mightily, but the magic was stronger than their will. Harry could still hear faint shouting when the wooden box was shut.

Ron sighed again. "Sometimes I think that Muggle chess is the way to go."

A knock sounded on the common room door. A moment later, Malfoy entered. Harry glared at Dean, who had let him in.

Dean just shrugged.

"Draco," said Lavender in a voice that could be mistaken for a coo. She rose from her chair, stroking her robes in a way that looked obscene to Harry, even though she was buttoned up to the chin. It only got worse as she sidled up to Draco, her hips swinging outrageously. God, had she
looked like *that* when she'd been coming on to Harry? It hadn't seemed so at the time, but then, at the time Harry had been a little distracted by the fact that all the girls seemed to have *matured* so much during his missing year.

"Good evening," said Malfoy very formally, addressing the remark to the room at large rather than Lavender in particular.

Not that she cared. She sashayed her way over to him in record time and batted her eyes. It was pretty pathetic, the way she was being so obvious. It made her look common, in Harry's opinion. And it was a sure bet that Draco Malfoy would never, ever find himself attracted to anybody common.

"Aren't you looking fine this evening," Lavender said in the same cooing voice once she was alongside Malfoy. "Mmm."

Malfoy gave her the kind of look he probably gave rotting meat, but the words that followed were polite enough. "Excuse me, please. I've come here to talk to my brother."

Was Lavender dense enough to ignore a clear hint like that one?

Yes, she was.

"You're so talented at magic," she simpered. "I'm having some trouble this year and I wondered if you could spare a little time to tutor me--"

She'd reached out to rest a hand on his forearm, but Malfoy smoothly turned his body so that she missed him. "You'd do better to be less transparent," he said, shaking his head. "And I don't mean that you'd do better with me. You have no chance at all with me, so I'd advise you to forget about it. But in case you actually do need some help in your lessons, I recommend you ask Hermione. She's at least as talented in magic as I am. Not to mention, she's in your own House."

Lavender pouted like she'd been told she couldn't have a sweet, the gleam in her eyes clearly saying that she wasn't through with Malfoy yet.

Harry revised his opinion from "common" to "vulgar." Just the other night she'd been happy to bad-mouth Draco. Well, when she thought it might get her somewhere with Harry. And now she was throwing herself at him!

As if to underline that last thought, Lavender gave Malfoy a sly smile as she went up the stairs to the girls' rooms, her hips swinging all the way.

Harry almost rolled his eyes, but decided that he didn't want to agree with Malfoy about anything. "Was there something you wanted?" he asked coolly, leaning back in his chair and looking at Malfoy through hooded eyes.

Malfoy evidently didn't appreciate the attitude. "Unlike you, when I visit my brother's common room I actually want to speak with him."

"About?"

"You don't want me to say in front of everyone," said Malfoy. "Trust me on that."

What could Harry do but laugh? "But I don't trust you at all, *Draco.*"

Malfoy looked like he'd expected the rebuff but not the name, which gave him a weird mixed
expression. "You really want me to tell the whole common room about Severus' plans for you? He wasn't happy when you missed Ethics."

"And you're his little messenger boy, are you?"

"No, I'm your brother and I came here to help you, though Merlin knows you make it difficult!"

Harry almost sat back further in his chair. He wouldn't mind exasperating Malfoy even further. On the other hand, he did want to know what "Severus" had planned and he doubted Malfoy would say anything in front of the other Gryffindors. If Harry pushed him too far, he might leave. Which left . . .

Harry stood up and made a sarcastic gesture encompassing the entire common room. "Upstairs to my dormitory or out into the cold, drafty corridor?"

"Let's take a walk."

Harry took that to mean that Malfoy suspected there were listening spells all around. Which only went to prove that such things must exist in Slytherin. It explained some of their habitual paranoia, at any rate.

Had he grown just as paranoid after living there for . . . damn it. He didn't even know how long that had been going on. Probably from the first day he'd been allowed back into classes.

Snape had probably insisted, the way he'd insisted that Harry had to be a Slytherin prefect whether he liked it or not.

Malfoy didn't say anything at all while they were in the hallways, which suited Harry. They didn't have much to talk about. He was a little surprised when their destination turned out to be the Room of Requirement. Malfoy paced in front of it, his brow furrowed in concentration, then pushed open the door to reveal a small room containing two comfortable chairs facing one another, a little table set with a full tea service, and a fireplace burning merrily away. There was nothing else unless one counted things like rugs and tapestries.

"What did you tell it you wanted?" asked Harry as he went in and helped himself to a chair.

Malfoy answered only after he'd shut the door. "A private place in which to talk."

"Goodness, it must be very secret, whatever it is that you have to tell me."

"Oh, believe me, it is," said Malfoy, ignoring the mockery in Harry's voice. "Severus would . . . well, not kill me. But he'd want to."

"But everybody will know the punishment eventually."

"Punishment?" Malfoy sounded baffled. He dropped into a chair and gestured toward the tea.

Harry ignored that. "Snape's punishment for missing Ethics? Which you came to warn me about? Except you didn't, obviously. That was a lie."

"Of course it was a lie. I was hardly going to tell your friends the real purpose of my visit." Malfoy leaned forward. "Though I think, on balance, I'd prefer that you asked me."

"Asked you what?"

The other boy sighed. "What do you think, Harry? What you've been asking people all day long. 
What you asked your snake. I heard Hermione berating you for that as Transfiguration ended."

Oh. Oh.

Harry peered at Malfoy suspiciously, wondering what was really going on. If anything was certain, it was that you couldn't trust a Slytherin. "Why would you offer that?"

"Because I happen to believe that Severus and your therapist are wrong," said Draco calmly. "I think that hearing things will help you remember. And Harry? I miss my brother. I want very much for you to remember."

Harry was hardly mollified. "There's more to it. There has to be more to it."

Malfoy shrugged. "Of course. I need help in Muggle Studies. You promised to help me, in fact. As long as you keep your promise, I'll tell you anything you want to know about last year."

"You've got some scheme in mind," accused Harry. "Some way you can use this against me."

"Right, the I-can't-trust-you scenario," drawled Malfoy. "Let me explain something, Harry. I can't trust you. At least, not the 'you' sitting in this room. You aren't yourself; you hate my guts. These things are very clear to me. I can't see any risk to you in this 'scheme,' as you put it. But there's a great deal of risk to me. Any time you like, you could go to Severus and tell him that I've disobeyed his edict to let you remember on your own."

"And you're willing just to take that risk?" asked Harry in disbelief.

"Yes, because this will help you remember. The Harry who's my brother will return. I can trust him."

"Well, I can't trust you," said Harry hotly.

"Weren't you listening? There's no risk on your side!"

"Oh, there's every risk." Harry smiled. "You think I wouldn't see it? You think I'm going to sit here and believe anything you say about last year? I'm not that gullible."

"Then here's another thing you can tell Severus if you ever decide you'd like to see me boiled alive." Malfoy reached into a cloak pocket and drew out a small bottle labelled Veritaserum. "I nicked this from him, even though the last time I had to take some it made me sick to my stomach. But that was Ministry-made. Severus produces a finer brew, as I know from first hand experience. So what do you say?"

He passed the vial of potion to Harry, who rolled it back and forth in his palm. "How do I know this isn't water?"

Malfoy sighed. "Test it on yourself when you're alone. Three drops on your tongue, and then try your best to say a lie out loud. Just make sure you won't be around anyone who could take advantage. Oh, and tell your housemates that I lied about wanting to warn you about Severus' plans, since he doesn't have any."

"He's just going to let me skive off class?"

"This time. He's telling himself that you've been ill recently and need your rest. Personally, I think he simply doesn't want another confrontation with you. Keep skipping his class and you'll get one, though."
"So what am I supposed to tell Ron and Hermione you wanted, then? I can hardly let them know that you're going against Snape's orders!"

Malfoy waved a hand. "Oh, just say that I lied to get you alone because I'm desperate for time with my brother. They'll believe that. It has the advantage of being unfortunately true."

"Trust a Slytherin to lie with the truth."

That made Malfoy laugh. "Oh, but you always insisted that I was a terrible liar, Harry. It wasn't until I learned to Occlude that I could manage it well."

"I'll believe that when I hear it under Veritaserum."

"Of course."

Harry's turn to sigh, then. "So I suppose we'll need to set up times to meet."

"Not difficult. Our free periods coincide and when you say you've decided to study with me, Hermione will be delighted. Ron will be jealous but handle it fairly well, I think. But you must be careful with the things I tell you. Your friends will have to believe that you're remembering on your own. If word gets back to Severus . . . well, let's just say that he'll find a way to keep us from 'studying' together."

"Except that you really do want to study." Harry's brow furrowed. "Muggle Studies? That's not like you."

"That alone should tell you that Hermione is right when she says that things have changed."

"But when did you start taking that? Last year?"

Malfoy shoved his hands into his pockets, his face taking on rigid lines. "This year. I'm in love with a non-magical girl, Harry. I know you don't believe me, but . . . well, it doesn't matter if you believe me. It's true either way."

"But Hermione said that she broke up with you."

Malfoy scowled. "It's your fault that Hermione even knows about that. I didn't want anyone to know. But thank you for the reminder. Now I'm sure to have pleasant dreams."

Harry flushed. He hadn't intended to be cruel. Of course, he wasn't sure about the Malfoy-loves-a-Muggle story to begin with. Though if Malfoy didn't like the word 'Muggle' because she hadn't . . . maybe it was true. "No, I meant, why didn't you drop Muggle Studies when she . . . er, when she dropped you?"

"I thought that with my history, a N.E.W.T. in it would help my prospects of becoming an Auror."

"There's more."

Malfoy shoved his hands even more deeply into his pockets. "You don't know when to stop. But thanks to Marsha, who is my therapist as well, in case you didn't know, I can tell you the rest. I didn't understand it myself, at first. I haven't dropped Muggle Studies because I haven't accepted that I've truly lost her. Satisfied?"

"Sorry."

"She's the most beautiful thing I've ever, ever seen," said Malfoy, a wistful look in his eyes. "And
she sings like an angel. A simile I actually understand now. Strange idea, angels. Did you grow up believing in them?"

"Not really." Harry thought back. "They seemed like magic, I guess. I didn't believe in that either. Well . . . I suppose we'll do this, then. But I am going to check the Veritaserum first."

"No, first you're going to ask me."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"It's ridiculous to throw me one chip of a wand? All I want is the feeling that my own brother is willing to come to me when he needs help."

Harry didn't like hearing it put that way, but he also didn't like the feeling that Malfoy would happily argue the point all night. "Fine," he snapped. "Will you tell me about last year, Malfoy?"

"Draco."

What a complete prat. "Will you tell me about last year, Draco?"

A wide smile lit up Malfoy's face. "Yes," he said. "I will."

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------
Severus Snape is not my father.

Draco Malfoy is not my brother.

And I am not a Slytherin.

Harry blew on the scrap of parchment until the ink dried, and then quickly folded it and slipped it into a pocket of the warmest cloak hanging in his wardrobe. Then he hesitated. Huh . . . he couldn't remember wearing that particular cloak before. He couldn't even remember buying it, which brought a horrible thought to mind. Had Snape bought it for him?

The idea niggled at the edge of his consciousness, making him feel more uneasy the longer he stared.

Well, at least the cloak didn't have a school crest on it. Harry was getting a little tired of removing those dual crests that Snape had evidently thought such a good idea. How on earth had the man got Harry to replace the Gryffindor crests on all his clothes? Threats, probably. What sort, though? Absolutely no Quidditch until you do as I say, Potter . . .

No, Snape would have come up with something much worse than that, Harry decided. Besides, how much Quidditch had Harry been playing last year? Based on everything he'd heard, it couldn't have been much. Well, Harry would know soon enough. Malfoy would tell him.

But first, Harry was going to make sure that the vial he'd been given really did contain Veritaserum. He'd rather have done this experiment during lunch, when it would be easier to arrange some privacy, but his free period today was before then and Harry was determined not to waste so much as a single day. He had to be ready to meet with Malfoy.

Since Harry couldn't risk running into anybody while he was under the influence of Veritaserum, he left the dorm early, his Firebolt tucked under an arm. As soon as he slipped out of the castle, he mounted it, intending to soar high over the lake before he found a secluded spot somewhere in the meadows beyond. That plan was scuppered when he realised that some part of him could almost remember his Quidditch accident. The moment he pushed off from the ground, his teeth started chattering, and not from the bitter November cold.

His arms started feeling shaky, and a wobbly, disjointed feeling seemed to settle into the bones of his skull. He wasn't dizzy, exactly. It was more as though he knew he might get dizzy at any moment.

Harry ground his teeth together and leaned forward to pick up a little speed. He wasn't going to let a little stage fright or whatever this was keep him from flying. He'd taken bad falls before. Granted, he'd never taken a Bludger square to the head before, but there weren't any Bludgers about at the
moment. Besides, it was ridiculous to let that Bludger hit bother him. He couldn't even remember it!

For all that, though, Harry knew better than to act like a complete idiot. Soaring high over the lake today was out. He'd stay low to the ground, not because he was afraid of falling but because he was afraid of getting afraid.

Soon enough, he'd landed at his destination and aimed a drying charm at a patch of damp grass. Then he plonked himself down and fished out the parchment he'd prepared, along with the vial of potion—or possibly water—that Malfoy had given him.

Three flavourless drops on his tongue. Harry let them dissolve, and then swallowed down the spit that had collected for good measure. He felt . . . huh. Not too different, really, but it did seem like an unnatural calm had fallen over him. He wasn't even upset when he picked up the parchment, along with its reminders of what a mess his life had become.

Now, all he had to do was open his mouth and read the script he'd written. If he could read it all out loud without a problem, then he'd know, wouldn't he? He'd know that whatever anybody else said, whatever he'd said last year, he hadn't meant it where it really counted.

Harry opened his mouth and started to read his script.

"Severus Snape is -- my father. Draco Malfoy is not my brother. And I am -- a Slytherin."

Something twisted deep inside him when he heard what he'd said. Severus Snape is my father?

Harry started shaking his head. That didn't mean anything. It couldn't. Or . . . or what it meant was that Snape was legally his father. But Harry had already known that much. And the part about being in Slytherin was true, too, in the literal sense of the word. But if the potion was relying on the literal, then why had he been able to say that Malfoy was not, in fact, his brother?

Harry groaned when the answer struck him. Draco wasn't properly called 'Draco Malfoy' any longer, was he? What he should have tried to say was . . .

"Draco Snape is -- my brother." As with the other sentences, his Veritaserum-laced tongue skipped the word it was unable to say.

Harry sighed. Yes, the Slytherin was his brother, since they'd both been adopted by the same man. It didn't mean anything. It certainly didn't change anything.

Well, he had his answer to one thing at least. The Veritaserum was real. Now all Harry had to do was wait until he was sure that the potion's effects had worn off. He pulled his spell lexicon from another pocket of his cloak and started studying it, though since he hadn't wanted to bring Sals out into the cold, he didn't have a snake to get his Parseltongue started. No matter. For now, Harry could just read his personalised incantations and think about how they related to the standard Latin ones.

At the end of every page, he glanced up, took a breath, and tried to say something blatantly untrue.

Six pages later, he managed.

"The Dursleys were the most kind-hearted relatives a boy could ever want," came tripping off his tongue. Startled, Harry tried something else. "And Dudley could pass for a male model. And . . . And I grew up in Essex and went to school with Henry the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh . . ."
All right, that should be enough.

Harry mounted his broom again and flew toward the castle, going a little higher this time, but not by much. He still had that vague wobbly feeling that he could end up paralysed with terror if he wasn't careful.

When Harry saw Snape standing on the steps leading to the main entrance of the castle, he almost flew straight past him. He didn't want to be anywhere near the man; that was exactly why he'd skipped Ethics the day before.

On the other hand, he didn't want to be completely childish. Avoiding class with Snape was different. Harry didn't want to study ethics, and certainly not with a man who couldn't possibly know much about the topic.

Besides, Harry had just as much right as Snape to use the front steps of the castle!

"Sir," he said as he landed, careful to keep his voice completely neutral.

Snape peered at him rather closely. "Are you all right?"

Harry bristled. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Still that same intense look, Snape's eyes so dark and gleaming that Harry had to look away. "It hasn't been your practice to fly in the early morning."

"No offence, but what is and isn't my practice is up to me now, not you," snapped Harry. "You've got nothing to say about it any longer."

"I do happen to be a teacher at this school. That certainly gives me the authority to--"

That brought a lot of ugly memories to mind, along with a renewed sense of outrage that Snape, of all people, had been selected to teach ethics. "And you don't mind misusing your authority, do you? What's it going to be, another detention I don't deserve?"

"I would say," answered Snape in a mild voice, "that you did deserve the last detention I assigned you."

"I did," admitted Harry as he climbed a couple of steps so that he could look down on Snape instead of the reverse. "Why do you think I skipped your class yesterday? I didn't want to act that way again."

"Harry . . . I would rather have you come to class and yell at me than avoid me entirely."

Harry snorted. "Of course you would. More detention, which these days you're using as an excuse to get me to come to a 'home' I don't remember and don't want." A sudden suspicion bloomed in his mind. "And why are you out here, anyway? Just taking an early morning walk for your health?"
"I was concerned about you."

Harry's voice grew vicious. "But how did you know to be concerned? How did you know I was out here? You saw that I wasn't in the castle, didn't you? I want my dad's map back!"

To Harry's utter shock, Snape gave a brief nod. "Of course. I'll fetch it at . . . ah, no. On reflection, I think that's not a good idea."

Harry glared, though he had a feeling that he didn't do it very well. "Why not?"

"I have my reasons."

"I bet you do. You always did hate my dad!"

"Not always," corrected Snape quietly. "I don't hate him now."

"Then give me his map!"

"Harry . . . no. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid I can't explain."

"Just like you won't let my friends explain anything! You even got to Dobby!"

Snape visibly swallowed. "I know that isn't to your liking, but it is the best course to follow."

"I'm surprised you don't blame Dr Goode for the map thing, too!"

"Perhaps we can compromise," said Snape, looking like he was struggling to regain his composure. "The map is out of the question, for reasons I can't discuss. But I've noticed that you've taken the mirror Sirius Black gave you. Please keep it in its box when you aren't looking at it, Harry. There are wards in that box that help keep the magic in the mirror stable."

"The mirror's broken, and its magic with it," retorted Harry. "And what sort of compromise is that? I already have the mirror. What you ought to do is offer me my dad's invisibility cloak back. You obviously took that away as well."

Snape looked torn, but he gave a sharp nod. "Stay behind when Potions class ends this evening. I'll have it for you."

"Thank you," said Harry, but not graciously. Snape should never have taken his dad's cloak away in the first place, and he ought to give it and the map back . . . but Harry would take what he could get, and keep thinking about how to make Snape give back the rest of his things. There had to be a way.

In the meantime, he didn't want to talk to the man. "I should head to breakfast."

"They won't be serving for twenty minutes. Why don't we take a walk around the grounds?"

"Why don't you take a hint?" asked Harry. Anger he couldn't explain began surging through him. All he knew was that he'd reached some sort of limit, and if he didn't get away, he'd end up screaming. As it was, he had to speak through clenched teeth. "I don't want to spend time with you. Potions class is more than enough. Good-bye, Professor."
He stomped up to Gryffindor Tower without once looking back.

Defence and Charms went well enough, maybe because Malfoy left him alone during them. Harry watched Morrighan's demonstration of ways to undo anti-*Expelliarmus* wards and then practised with Ron and Hermione, two of them duelling while the third reported on strengths and weaknesses observed.

"That's a good system," said Harry after a while. "Makes up for the way things happen too fast to notice, sometimes." When he glanced around the room, he saw that most of the students were practising in groups of three instead of pairs. "Was that Morrighan's idea?"

Ron shook his head. "Draco's. He started using it in the D.A. and it worked so well that it sort of spilled over into class. But Morrighan doesn't object, so . . . what?"

Harry's fists clenched at the reminder that Malfoy was heading the D.A., these days. "Did I really appoint that Slytherin prat to lead Dumbledore's Army?"

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance, one Harry was coming to recognize.

He sighed. "You can't tell me. Why could you tell me the rest?"

"Well, your father said that we could explain things about your classes, and D.A. meetings fit that category--"

"And we can tell you about general events in the Wizarding World, like the fact that Bulgaria hit the bottom of the Quidditch rankings last May," added Ron.

"But we're not supposed to tell you anything personal. Anything about you." finished Hermione.

"So Malfoy being in charge of the D.A. is my fault, just like he claimed?"

Ron and Hermione just looked at him.

"Well, that's answer enough," said Harry, scowling. He was tempted to use the Veritaserum Malfoy had given him. They'd talk plenty after three drops in their pumpkin juice! Would they forgive him afterwards, though? Harry didn't really want to think about what he'd do if they wouldn't.

"If we can tell him about general events," said Ron suddenly, "doesn't that mean we could tell Harry anything that made the papers?"

Hermione's voice went stern. "Not if it's something personal."

"Oh, great," said Harry sarcastically. "I made the papers. What joy. I could even read them for information if reporters didn't spend so much time wrapping the truth inside a huge pack of lies."
Or, Harry thought, he could read them for information and question Malfoy about the "facts" in the articles.

Flitwick gave Harry a list of charms that covered all of sixth year and the first three months of seventh year. Harry gaped when he felt the weight of the parchments in his hand. "I remember five years of class with you, sir. N.E.W.T. lessons must be a lot more intensive than I thought--"

The Charms professor beamed. "Oh yes, Mr Potter. They are. But I should mention that you're also holding copies of all your essays from sixth-year onward. I thought they might help to bring the coursework back to you."

Just what Harry needed: the opportunity to re-read essays which had probably bore him to tears when he was writing them. "You keep copies of all our essays?"

"Oh, yes." Now the professor's grin looked a little predatory. "Anti-cheating spells and true-authorship charms only go so far, after all. When it comes to working with teenaged wizards, one can't take too many precautions."

Harry was suddenly glad that he'd never given in to the temptation to ask an older student for the previous year's essays. Though he wouldn't have thought to do that in Charms, in any case. As far as he could remember, it was one of his easier subjects.

Transfiguration and Potions were the classes he found the most challenging. Well, he found Transfiguration challenging. Potions was just plain impossible for him.

"Master the charms you've forgotten as soon as you can," instructed Flitwick. "But for now you should join your classmates in practising the Muggle-tongue charm I introduced at the onset of class."

The Muggle-tongue charm was Flitwick's contribution to the new tolerance curriculum at Hogwarts, it turned out. More than merely teaching it, he'd invented it. It didn't exactly make a wizard speak like a Muggle, but it did strip wizarding references out of one's speech. The results could be a bit hilarious at times.

Harry worked with Padma, who wasted no time in finding out that "Yule Ball" came out as "Christmas Ball," when she was under the influence of the spell. Harry thought that was strange since Muggles did know the word Yule and used it in phrases like "Yule log." He wanted to explore that aspect of the charm a little more, but Padma was a lot more interested in talking about the ball.

No, he didn't know what he was going to wear, Harry told her impatiently. And he didn't want to be on the decorating committee with her and he didn't know if he thought that red and green was too predictable. And no, he hadn't asked anybody yet. Well, he'd sort of asked Ginny, but she'd turned him down flat. He didn't think he needed to explain all that to Padma, though.
"You do look simply smashing without your glasses," Padma said with a bright smile. "I'm sure that any girl you ask will fall over herself trying to say yes."

Harry hadn't liked it when people fell over themselves in his presence on account of his scar or his name. He didn't like the idea that they might do it because of how he looked, either. He was still himself, after all. Glasses or not, he was just Harry.

Malfoy fell into step beside him as Harry was leaving the class. "We're still set, aren't we?"

Harry gave a curt nod and didn't look at him.

"Did you already test the--"

Another curt nod. But Malfoy didn't get the hint.

"Daphne was a bit cheesed off that Padma got to you first when the Professor let you join the practical session--"

"What do you think of the Muggle-tongue charm?" interrupted Harry. He wasn't going to talk about girls with Draco Malfoy, of all people!

The diversion worked better than Harry could have predicted. "I don't like the name," said Malfoy sharply. He glanced left and right and left again. Harry didn't understand what he was doing until he spoke again. "But I suppose it would have come in handy over the summer."

Oh, so he'd been making sure they were alone. Only, he hadn't thought of everything, had he, thought Harry smugly. He wasn't sure why outsmarting Malfoy meant so much to him, but it definitely did. "Portraits."

"Good point." Malfoy said nothing more until they were safely in the Room of Requirement and the door was well-warded. Then he sat down in the same chair he'd used before and crossed his legs at the ankle. "We spent most of the summer at Severus' cottage in Devon."

Harry got his wand out and checked Malfoy's wards. They seemed sound enough. "What does the summer in Devon have to do with the Muggle-tongue charm?"

"Oh, well we were out and about quite a bit. You had swimming lessons in Exeter and we went shopping there a fair few times." Malfoy shrugged. "With this charm I wouldn't have mentioned twelve different kinds of milk when we were shopping in Tesco."

To hear Malfoy mention Tesco was beyond surreal. "What, like skim, semi-skim, whole?"

"More like whale, elk, and Canadian caribou."

"You didn't."

"An old lady glared at me like I'd spent the whole morning guzzling Dad's Galliano." Malfoy waved his wand at the hearth and made the fire flare a little higher. "Sit down, Harry. I'm hardly likely to bite you."

Harry perched on the edge of his chair, questions spinning through his mind. "I'm just not used to you being so . . . so . . ."

"Affable? Good-natured? Brotherly?"

Harry lifted his chin a notch. "Normal."
"Ah." Malfoy tucked his wand away as he spoke. "If you're trying to offend, you'll have to do better. I've come to accept that I didn't have what you could rightly call a normal upbringing. The longer I live with Severus, the more I can see just how twisted it was."

"Are you saying you were wrong to throw your money and your pure blood in everyone's face your whole life?" Harry narrowed his eyes. "And what about your money, then? I thought you were disinherited and disowned and all that. You're dressed pretty well for somebody who's supposed to be poor now."

When Malfoy looked away like he was considering how to respond, Harry knew what he had to do. What he should have done the moment they were alone, in fact. "Time for your potion, I think."

"I'll tell you the truth without it," said Malfoy quickly. "I'm not poor, though Lucius certainly did his best to take away everything I had. You gave me back more than I'd lost, though. You said that I was a Black and that Sirius would be proud of me, following in his tradition of rejecting his family's dark history. So . . . you passed his bequest to you along to me."

"Oh, God." Harry's tongue felt huge in his mouth. "I gave you Sirius' money?"

"Don't look like that."

Harry didn't care how he looked. "But that's . . . yeah, so you're a Black in a way, but . . . how the hell could I have given you whatever Sirius left me!"

"Don't forget, my mum always was his favourite cousin."

The fact that Malfoy could only have heard that from Harry was just as sickening as the money thing. To think that he'd shared Sirius' private confidences with *Draco Malfoy* of all people . . . "What's that got to do with anything?" erupted Harry.

"Just this," said Malfoy calmly. "You think of me right now as Lucius Malfoy's son, I'm certain. But Harry, if you must focus so much on bloodlines . . . I am just as much Narcissa Black's son."

"Oh, that's rich. You, complaining that people focus too much on bloodlines!"

"I'm learning to think beyond them. Think about who I am now, Harry. A member of the Order, just as you are. Determined to become an Auror so that I can watch your back so that you can end that monster once and for all."

Monster? Right. "Potion," Harry said again. "Don't try to talk me out of it again."

"I wouldn't dream of it. But you should know that it makes me ramble a bit. Truthfully, of course."

"Give me your wand and stick out your tongue."

"My wand?"

"So you can't try any funny business, transfiguring it before it gets to you."

Malfoy grimaced, but did as Harry had requested.

Harry knew, of course, that Malfoy might have transfigured the potion on the walk over, but it wasn't too likely. Harry had thought of that in advance and had kept the vial tucked inside his left trainer. Not too comfortable, but it had done the trick.

"Now close your eyes," demanded Harry.
"Close my eyes!"

"Do it."

Only when Malfoy complied did Harry feel all right digging the vial of potion out of his shoe. Not that it did him much good.

"You know," said Malfoy in a conversational tone, "a lot of students consider their school bags a more convenient place to tote their odds and ends. You might think of trying it."

"I told you to close your eyes!"

"I can see through closed eyes."

Harry sighed. "Just shut up and stick out your tongue again."

Three drops . . . Harry knew the instant they began to take effect. Malfoy's eyes glazed over, his mouth hanging slightly more slack than before.

"Now," said Harry, leaning forward over his folded hands so he could watch Malfoy closely, "tell me why you thought it was all right to hex my pet snake over and over."

"Because I was terrified of snakes," said Malfoy in a perfectly level tone. If he was trying to fight the Veritaserum, it didn't show. "And because I thought she'd crawl all over me when I was asleep and you weren't in the living room to stop it. And because you used to flaunt Sals in front of me to rub it in that I didn't have a familiar, like the way you rubbed your friends in my face every time they came, just to show me that I didn't have any decent ones. And I don't know that I'd classify Stupefy as a hex in any case, and I'd like to say that I stopped doing that on my own and asked you to take your sodding snake into the bedroom when you went to sleep. And--"

"That's enough," said Harry, thinking that "rambling" didn't begin to cover it. "Er . . . I thought we shared a room. Why were you sleeping in the living room?"

"Because I was generous, considerate, thoughtful, caring, selfless and understanding when your cousin Dudley came to stay with us!" declared Draco in terms of absolute certainty. Then, more grudgingly: "And also because I didn't want to sleep in the same room with a Muggle, and because if the spells I cast on my bed to strengthen it weren't enough and it collapsed under all the weight, I didn't want the crash to wake me up, and I wanted you to like me, didn't I, so I was hardly going to make you take the couch and anyway, Severus got annoyed enough when Dudley slept on it in the middle of the day and annoying Severus is never a winning strategy, and . . . I think that's all."

Most of that got lost in the astonishment Harry felt at the single revelation that mattered. Dudley had been at Hogwarts! That scene Harry had been able to visualize . . . it had been a memory.

A real memory.

And it had come to him because his mind had been prodded by the feel of Sals slithering between his fingers. Which proved that Marsha Goode was full of it. Harry needed things to cue his memory, things like this conversation. That was the only way he was going to start remembering so that he could get that mirror working and talk to Sirius.

That realisation left Harry uncomfortably aware that he was going to end up indebted to Draco Malfoy. Not a good feeling.

He cleared his throat. "Why would Dudley be at Hogwarts, though?"
"Because we needed him for the new blood wards Severus wanted to construct on his quarters. For your protection, and I'd just like to point out here that I was the one with a father who'd issued a death-warrant on me, with lovely fat bribes to sweeten the deal, and did I get any special warding? No . . . I could just wait around all day with my hand splinched off and get hexed by Aurors when the headmaster wasn't looking, and this when I'd rescued your all-important special twinned wand and brought it to the head of the Order of the Phoenix as a token of my good will, and what did that get me, I'd like to ask?"

"You're jealous of me?"

Malfoy gritted his teeth and rolled his eyes like he was praying for patience. "Yes, and if you're any sort of brother at all you'll remember that I wouldn't admit it under normal circumstances!"

A dark sort of suspicion started churning in Harry's mind. "Did you use some kind of Slytherin tactics to get me to give you Sirius' money?"

"Certainly not," said Malfoy, sniffing. "I told you 'no' the first time you tried to treat me like a charity case, and I only took the bequest in the end because you persuaded me that members of a family are allowed to both support one another and be supported, and I thought you were going to believe I didn't really consider myself your brother if I kept refusing, and also because it was rather stupid to stand on pride like that. Even I could see that. And also because Severus told me he'd made me write all those lines for a reason and he'd be disappointed if I didn't understand that I was a Slytherin after that, and what sort of Slytherin would refuse something that was so much to his advantage?"

Malfoy suddenly clapped a hand over his mouth.

"What?"

The single word was enough to force the other boy to speak, though he clearly didn't want to. Malfoy's face went pasty as his answer spilled out his lips and through his clenched fingers. "D- D-Dad said not to tell you that last bit."

"So? He said not to tell me any of this, didn't he?"

Malfoy nodded as he lowered his hand. "Yes, but that's different. He told me most specifically at the time not to repeat that to you."

Harry leaned forward in his chair, his eyes narrowed. It didn't surprise him one bit that Snape had told Malfoy to keep secrets from him. That sounded exactly like the way Slytherins would behave. "Oh yeah? What else did he say not to tell me?"

Malfoy clamped his lips shut, not that it did him much good. The words were dragged from him anyway.

"That-- that-- that sometimes he wished he could shred the Sorting Hat. That he was tired of the way you kept telling him to be more affectionate with me, and a Slytherin would understand. That-- that-- that all those years in Gryffindor had almost ruined--."

"There's nothing wrong with Gryffindor!" Harry interrupted, his voice sharp as he peered closely at Malfoy. "No answer to that, I see."

"You didn't ask me a question."

Harry wasn't going to, either. He didn't need to hear what Malfoy thought of the other houses. It
was clear in almost every word he said. "What was that bit about writing lines?"

"Severus assigned me to write ten thousand of them," said Malfoy, looking away.

Harry snorted. Snape never punished his Slytherins, so if he'd made Malfoy do something as extreme as that . . . "What did you do last year, poison somebody?"

Malfoy's mouth dropped open.

"You did?" accused Harry, vague images in his mind seeming to dance away when he reached for them. Scones, or . . . no, something more decorative--

"I most certainly did not," announced Malfoy in tone which grew more and more snooty as he kept talking, which Harry thought proved he couldn't possibly be listening to himself. "It was attempted poisoning only, since nobody ate the fairy cakes. Oh . . . and there was a spot of forgery involved since I wanted people to blame Lucius when they became ill. It wasn't a fatal poison, though believe me, when I was brewing the Venetimorica, it was extraordinarily difficult to keep to my resolve to be good--"

"Good!" shouted Harry, snatches of remembered conversations glittering through the fog in his mind. "You left poisoned fairy cakes out in your common room for anybody to gobble! What the hell are you talking about, being good?"

"I'm talking about the girl I loved getting shoved out of the Owlery!" shouted Malfoy back. "I'm talking about being framed for murder, about being hexed and potioned and kidnapped so I could be brought to the Dark Lord to be tortured for information about you! Yes, I wanted to kill the fuckers that had done all that, but I limited myself to just making them very sick, and I only did that much because I was trying to identify who they were! And because I wanted revenge, but who wouldn't, except fucking perfect Harry Potter! Though I notice that didn't stop you from killing Lucius, did it? But then, being a ridiculous Gryffindor, you had to feel guilty that you couldn't feel guilty, and . . . what was the question, again?"

Harry laughed, though nothing was funny. It was more of a release of tension than anything else. "I . . . did I hear you right? I killed your father?"

Malfoy dragged in a shuddering breath, his hands clenching on the arms of his chair. "Yes and no."

Harry took a deep breath too. It was either that or laugh again, or maybe scream, or leave the room so he could be alone. He actually didn't know how he felt. He just knew that he didn't feel good. For Lucius Malfoy to be dead and gone . . . that part was fine. But the idea that Harry had killed him?"What do you mean, yes and no?" he asked when he thought he could get the words out calmly.

Malfoy looked him straight in the eyes, his own gaze still clouded with truth serum. "Yes, you killed Lucius Malfoy. But I consider Severus my father now, and I felt the same at the time, so . . . no."

If Harry had had any doubts, that sealed them. Clearly, the adoption was very real to Malfoy. He supposed he'd known that earlier, from the way Malfoy got so angry when he thought that Harry was treating Snape badly. But that was Malfoy's problems if he couldn't handle the fact that Harry had just been pretending last year about all this adoption rubbish.

Harry had more important things to find out at the moment.
"But why did I kill him?" A question seemed to claw itself forward from the centre of his soul. Draco had mentioned revenge . . . "Was it because Lucius Malfoy was the one who stabbed me all over with needles?"

To Harry's shock, Malfoy suddenly leaned forward and grasped both his hands. He squeezed them hard, but not cruelly. "No."

Harry yanked his hands free, even though for a single second the touch had felt . . . well, not terrible. But then, he didn't think Malfoy had meant it to be terrible. "No he didn't stab me or no I didn't kill him for it?"

"No, you didn't kill him for it, though yes, he was the one who hurt you so horribly. On the Dark Lord's orders."

Harry glowered. "Is that supposed to excuse him?"

"I didn't mean that," snapped Malfoy, sitting back in his chair and glaring. "I was just trying to give you a little more context, which is what I thought you wanted from this entire conversation. I might not have bothered had I known you were going to be such a toerag about it."

"I was just asking!"

Malfoy sighed. "Don't you understand, Harry? I have to keep reminding myself that you're confused or my patience will give out entirely. But . . . questions like that don't help. Why don't you ask something that matters?"

"Fine," said Harry tightly, hating the sheer hurt he could hear in Malfoy's voice. "What made me kill Lucius Malfoy?"

Malfoy leaned forward again, but this time he didn't try to touch Harry. "It was mostly on accident, though it was just as much self-defence. He'd snatched us both and was trying to get me to torture you, but I wouldn't do it. I pretended I would, just to gain an advantage, and in the end you cast a Petrificus on him. Except, he'd startled you and you used wanded instead of wandless powers without intending to at all, I think. The spell turned him to stone, literally, and anyway, if you want to see for yourself, he's a statue now, standing out on the grounds and getting shat on by owls all the time."

It was news to Harry that "shat" was a word. The picture Malfoy's words painted, though . . . it felt right, somehow. Harry wasn't sure if that was because he found the idea satisfying, or because some part of him could tell that it was true. What a strange thing to do with his body, though. "Uh, why was it decided to keep him here?"

"So your spell can be reinforced in case it starts to fade, though I personally doubt that's going to happen. And also because as any Slytherin knows, one of the best places to hide something is in plain sight. And . . . and . . . I don't know. Sometimes I think that Dumbledore wanted him here to remind me what I almost became or to keep me aware that no Death Eater is going to stand a chance against you, but I don't need reminders to keep me on your side, Harry. I don't. I just . . . don't."

Malfoy leaned his head against the back of his chair and sighed, his hands twitching a bit on the armrests.

Well, he'd said to ask things that matter . . . "But why would you be on my side?"

"Because you're my brother," said Malfoy, his eyelids drooping, his voice coming in a slow slur by
then. "Because you're going to win and I don't fancy being on the losing side, but it's more than that. There's no point in being on the winning side if the Dark Lord wins, since all that means is the chance to be his abject slave. Because I love Rhiannon dearly and he'd kill her on sight for lacking magic, not that having it ever did his followers much good. He tortures them for sport and they kneel to him and kiss the hem of his robes . . . Because as powerful as your dark powers are, you don't truly understand evil the way I do, and having me at your side when one of those bastards comes at you might make the only difference that matters in this war, keeping you alive until you can end it once and for all. Because . . ." Draco slowly blinked, his eyes drifting closed. "Because I love you and you're right, Harry. That's all that really matters. You're right and he's wrong and by Merlin . . . I'm ashamed that I had to meet Rhiannon before I could really understand just how wrong he is."

A four-poster draped in silver and green suddenly popped into existence, the room spontaneously growing larger to accommodate it.

"I think the room is trying to tell us that you're getting tired," murmured Harry. He wanted to ask more questions, but it didn't seem right when Malfoy was worn so thin. And anyway, he'd been very cooperative about the whole thing, except for peeking when Harry was getting the potion out of his trainer.

"I can go on," said Malfoy, struggling for his usual perfect posture and failing.

"Er . . . no. I've got enough to think about, I guess. Why don't you lie down for a while? I'll . . . well, I suppose I'll come get you in time for you to have lunch, in case you fall asleep. Or are you feeling sick enough that you don't want to eat?"

"I'm not feeling sick. Just tired . . . Dad doesn't brew the swill that passes for Veritaserum at the Ministry, but even his potion can make one feel like the whole world is falling away . . ."

"Well then, I'll be sure to come get you for lunch--"

Malfoy started shaking his head. "No. Stay here with me. I want to study with you."

Harry crossed his arms. "You don't really want that."

"I can't lie," insisted Malfoy. "I do want that. Why wouldn't I? We studied together for most of sixth year. I helped you a lot then and I can do it again now that you have so much catching up to do." He yawned, his hand coming up to cover his mouth and then dropping bonelessly to his lap. "But it's . . . it's like with Sirius Black's money, Harry. It's all right for me to get help, too. And I really do need it. Hermione's been wonderful but . . . and you promised." Malfoy swallowed. "Can I have my wand back?"

Harry pulled it from his pocket and handed it over.

"Thank you." Malfoy drew in a shaky breath and reached down into his school bag to pull out a book. "If you'd be so good as to read the bits I underlined in Chapter Four, 'Contact Sports', and answer my questions . . . I suppose I can listen just as well flat on my back . . ."

He didn't walk to the bed; he staggered. And then he fell headlong into it and moaned something about hating Veritaserum.

Harry would have thought the comment part of an act, except that Malfoy's eyes were still glazed over. Whatever he said was bound to be true.

Dragging a chair closer, Harry waited until Malfoy had settled himself in. Then he glanced at the
first page of Chapter Four and raised an eyebrow at the neat question penned in the margin.

"'Why is it called rugby when it has nothing to do with rugs?'" he read out loud. "Um, I have no idea. That's like asking why a hex is called a hex."

Malfoy yawned and burrowed under a blanket, his eyes closed and his features at peace. "Mmm, but that term comes from German 'hexen' which came from 'Hexe,' an old word for witch . . ."

"Well, I'll have to get back to you on where 'rugby' comes from, then," said Harry dryly. "All right, next question . . . say, who wrote this book, anyway? I don't think that the very first page on contact sports should bring up the Hillsborough tragedy; that's bound to give any pureblood a rather warped view of Muggles--"

Malfoy had no reply. By then, he was sound asleep, rolled onto his side to face Harry, the picture of trust.

Snoring trust.

Harry sighed and glanced longingly at the door. He didn't want to stay here and watch Malfoy sleep, but he didn't feel right leaving him alone, not after he'd asked Harry to stay, and especially not after Harry was the one who had given him the potion that had made him so tired. A potion he'd taken, knowing it would make him feel this way or worse . . . but he'd taken it so Harry would believe him.

The least Harry could do after that was stay with him and make sure he made it to lunch and then Double Potions.

Potions.

Harry shuddered. A distraction was definitely in order. Summoning a quill and ink, he started writing down answers to Malfoy's questions about rugby.

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Harry waited as long as he could. "Come on," he finally said, shaking Malfoy by the shoulder.

"Mmm."

Another shake. A harder one. "If we don't leave now we'll miss lunch completely."

"Oh, all right." Malfoy slowly sat up. He ran his hands through his hair and yawned, and then took up his wand and cast a few charms on himself, straightening and freshening his clothing and making his hair fall neatly into place.

Harry wanted to be annoyed by all that, but he found himself becoming amused, instead.

Then he decided that he could be annoyed that he'd found Malfoy's wake up routine a little . . . oh, God. Endearing.
"Come on," he said again, turning his back on the other boy and heading toward the door.

He was about to open it when Malfoy's hand on it stopped him.

"Don't tell Dad," said Malfoy in an urgent undertone. "Or just tell him that we were studying together."

"I won't tell Snape," snapped Harry. "Of course I won't. I want to keep talking to you."

"Ugh, more Veritaserum."

"You did volunteer."

"Just because I . . . never mind." Malfoy yanked the door open and started walking away. Harry didn't exactly want to go with him, but arriving at the Great Hall together would help people believe the cover story that they were starting to study together, so he caught up to Malfoy and began walking at his side.

Malfoy cast him a sidelong glance, then nodded. After a moment, he began talking about last year's Transfiguration projects.

"You're getting along a little better with Draco," said Hermione warmly as Harry sat down across from her.

"Not really. We were studying together, that's all." Harry scowled as though he felt very put-upon. "He and I have the same free periods because some genius-or-other grouped me with the Slytherins for lessons." Then he let his voice become grudging. "But . . . I suppose he knows quite a lot about magic. And . . . well, he does seem to want to tutor me."

"Of course he does. What did you work on?"

"Transfiguration," said Harry quickly. "Oh, and he had some questions about the things he's learning in Muggle Studies."

Hermione nodded, but rather predictably said, "You have Double Potions after lunch. Perhaps you should have revised that, especially since you . . . you weren't yourself during the last class session."

"Potions." Harry made a face and tried to think of a way to change the subject. He turned to the side to talk to Ginny, who was two students away from him. "Ginny. Why didn't I see you in Potions? Luna was there because sixth- and seventh- years are all in the same class. I thought you were planning on taking the N.E.W.T. in Potions."

Ginny grinned. "Well, now that the Ministry has decided that an O.W.L. from Snape is the equivalent of seven years of Potions anywhere else . . ."
Something started clanging through Harry's mind, so loudly that he could hardly hear Hermione snapping, "Ginny! You promised!"

"It's in all the career circulars the Ministry publishes, and the changes made the front page of the Prophet," Ginny retorted. "That's hardly personal information."

"But for heaven's sake! You might use some judgement about what you decide to tell Harry--"

Harry heard that loud and clear. "So I can keep attending a class with Snape that I don't even need?" he snarled, so furious that for an instant he honestly thought his head might explode. "Because you know better than me, is that it? Like you knew better when you got my Firebolt taken away in case it was hexed, which it wasn't, wasn't, wasn't!"

"But you're going to be an Auror," said Hermione, leaning across the table. "Harry, I know that everything is very difficult for you right now, but you can't drop Potions, not when you could learn something in there that you'll need to know later--"

Harry spoke through gritted teeth. "Does the Auror program still require a N.E.W.T., Hermione?"

She chewed her lower lip instead of answering.

"Fine. I'll look it up in the careers circulars if you won't tell me." Harry pushed his bench back, not caring that he jostled several other students. "But you don't even have that following-directions excuse not to tell me this. Ginny's right. It's not personal, not like the other things you keep refusing to tell me. This is just pure bossiness, like when you left little knitted clothes around for unsuspecting elves to pick up! Like when you--"

"The Auror Apprentice Programme only requires an adequate O.W.L. score, not a N.E.W.T.," said Ginny quietly. "Sit down, Harry."

He did. "Well, that settles that, then. I got an Outstanding on my O.W.L. and that'll satisfy the requirement. I'm dropping Potions."

"Oh, Harry! You can't!"

"Watch me," said Harry, feeling really good about something for the first time in days. Six fewer hours a week spent with Snape sounded heavenly. "Ron's not in that class either. He has a free period then? Well, good. I want time to study with someone besides sodding Malfoy." He glanced around. "Huh. Where is Ron, anyway?"

"He grabbed a couple of sandwiches and left," said Hermione. "Listen, Harry. Potions is an important discipline and you're already behind in it because you can't remember last year's lessons. Don't make things worse by--"

"Is Ron at a team meeting?" interrupted Harry. He wasn't going to talk about his decision. It was his, full stop. Not hers, not Snape's, not anybody else's. But of course there wasn't a team meeting; when Harry looked around, he could see a couple of other Gryffindor players still eating lunch.

"Harry--"

"Well, where did Ron go?"

He'd finally diverted her; now Hermione was the one scowling. "We had a bit of a row and he stormed off. It seems he thinks I spend too much time with Draco."
Harry raised an eyebrow. "Do you spend a lot of time with him?"

"Don't be ridiculous. We're friends. We're in Arithmancy together and he's a good study partner. Besides, he needs a lot of help in Muggle Studies."

Thinking of the questions he'd just seen written in Malfoy's text book, Harry could certainly understand that.

"And he needs support right now," Hermione sailed on. "Because of . . . well, you know. And I'm really proud of him for coming to understand things properly at last; I want to do everything I can to bolster that. And him. Ron's just being . . ." She rolled her eyes. "Being Ron, I suppose. Now, about Potions--"

"I don't want to fight about it. Just go." He leaned around again and gave Ginny a grateful little wave. "Thanks for the heads-up."

Hermione gazed at him doubtfully, but finally left to go to class.

Harry thought the issue was settled until Malfoy appeared at his side. "You don't want to arrive late again."

"Not a problem." Harry took a long, slow sip of pumpkin juice. "I'm not going. Not today, not ever."

"The Auror Programme--"

"Doesn't require a N.E.W.T. any longer."

"They'll still give preference to candidates who exceed their minimum requirements." Malfoy leaned down. "I thought you didn't want to get in on your name."

What a nasty bit of manipulation. Harry wasn't about to fall for it. "I'm dropping Potions and that's final. You can let Snape know."

"You can let him know," retorted Malfoy. "When he asks me where you are I'm going to tell him that you have something to say to him."

"I've got nothing to say to him! That's the point!"

"No, the point is that you're being a spoiled little arsehole about this whole thing. So you have amnesia! Do you think my life has turned out the way I expected? Fuck, Harry! Can't you see what you're doing to yourself?"

By then, the Great Hall was nearly deserted. Harry made a show of checking his watch. "You'll be late if you don't leave now."

Malfoy shifted on his feet, opened his mouth to say something, but then did nothing but scowl. After another moment he gave up and left Harry behind.

Harry fetched a new sheet of parchment from his bag and dated it, then wrote, "To the Headmaster of Hogwarts and the Heads of Slytherin and Gryffindor Houses: This is to inform you that I have decided to drop N.E.W.T. Potions from my timetable." He signed it with a flourish, feeling almost giddy with relief. Tapping his wand to it, he used the duplicating charm Hermione had shown him to make two extra copies, then neatly folded each in half. He didn't bother with wax or an envelope; he didn't care who found out that he'd dropped Potions.
Now all he needed to do was pop up the Owlery so Hedwig could deliver the letters.

Harry headed there straight away, whistling a merry tune as he ambled along.

He was a little less delighted with himself when he remembered a couple of things halfway through his impromptu free period. First, that he'd have to see Malfoy later that day, since under Malfoy's watch, D.A. meetings were every Wednesday after dinner. The second thing was even worse, though.

Snape had said that he'd bring Harry's invisibility cloak to Potions class.

Harry didn't think he could get away with dropping by just to pick it up. That would just lead to an argument and he'd lose his temper and tell Snape to fuck off again. Not a good idea.

Fine, fine, fine. He'd just have to go to Snape's quarters to get it. He'd do that right after the D.A. meeting, and this time, he wouldn't floo in. He'd go about things properly, the way he would if he wasn't the man's son, which he wasn't, not where it counted.

He'd knock on the door properly and stand in the corridor while Snape fetched the cloak. And if Snape wanted to talk about Harry skipping Potions class, Harry would simply refuse. He had every right to stop taking a class he didn't care for, and nobody, not even his so-called father, had any power to force him back into it.

He was seventeen now, damn it. Of age. An adult.

Harry ignored the niggling little voice inside that said he hadn't been acting much like an adult recently.

Ron showed up in the tower half-way through Harry's free period, a Cleansweep in his hand. He shrugged when Harry threw him a questioning look. "Had to get my mind off some things."

Off Hermione, Harry thought he meant, but Harry wasn't going there. "I dropped Potions and I don't want an argument about it."

Ron sat down on his bed, hunched forward over his legs, and peered closely at Harry. "All right. No argument. But I think it's a mistake."

"No, it's not. I hate Potions."

"But . . . you don't. I mean, I don't think you love brewing the way your father does, but you don't really hate it any longer, not like before--"

"Isn't that personal information?" mocked Harry. "The kind you're not supposed to give me any longer?"

"Yes. And don't be an arse."
"Then don't try to shove me back into Potions. Hermione and Malfoy both already tried, and if people who actually give a rat's arse about the subject can't convince me, you aren't going to be able to."

Ron dropped the subject, much to Harry's relief. "Let's talk about the Quidditch team. You missed practice on Monday, but you were just a day out of hospital so nobody expected you, of course. But we've also got practices on Thursday and Friday. Wednesdays were cancelled due to D.A. Our next match isn't for a month, when we play Ravenclaw. So . . ."

He left the word hanging in the air.

"I'll join you for practice tomorrow," Harry said in a definite voice, even though he didn't feel definite at all, not after how he'd felt on a broom that morning. What was he going to do, though, let nerves get the better of him?

"Doesn't have to be that soon. Your father said--"

Nothing was more guaranteed to seal Harry's decision than those three words. "Tomorrow."

Ron gave a sharp nod. "If you're still tired you should start off with half-practices. It can take a while to recover from a Bludger hit--"

"I'm fine." Harry took out his old Charms essays and got to work reading them, only to scowl when he saw that his writing changed dramatically when he got to November. The wording sounded like it was his, but the written script wasn't his hand at all. In fact, it looked like the writing he'd seen earlier that day in the margins of Malfoy's textbook.

No matter what he did, it seemed like he was fated to be confronted with Malfoy, Malfoy, Malfoy.

Harry really wasn't looking forward to the D.A. meeting that night.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Twenty-Two: ". . . And Consequences"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"All right," said Malfoy at precisely seven o'clock as he stood in the Room of Requirement, which tonight was a bare stone chamber lacking any furnishings at all. "We need to talk about an unpleasant subject, but one which it would be foolish to avoid. This is a war we're preparing to fight, and the Death Eaters will not fight fair. If you're captured--and unless we're the luckiest wizards ever to walk the hall of Hogwarts, some of us will be--you need to be prepared to face torture."

"This is all bloody obvious," muttered Harry to Hermione. "I thought you said he was brilliant at this."

"Shh. I want to hear."

"Now, the Death Eaters typically restrict themselves to magical forms of torture, but I can tell you from personal experience that they're not above using Muggle means if they think those will affect you worse. Luckily, most of the Death Eaters can't do any Legilimency. If you're brought before the D-- before Voldemort, though, you can expect to have to live through your worst imaginable fears."

Like needles, thought Harry, shuddering.

"Unfortunately, I can't teach you Occlumency," added Malfoy. "Only a truly skilled Legilimens can manage that. What I can do, is teach you the same techniques that the Death Eaters use to help resist torture. The more intelligent Death Eaters, I should say. These methods originated with wizards in the Orient, and I don't want to hear any rubbish about British magic being superior somehow. It's not. Magic is magic."

Hannah raised her hand. "Resist torture? Really?"

"Help resist torture," corrected Malfoy. "You'll still suffer. Terribly, and if you're captured you'll probably be killed when they're done toying with you. But if you do survive, these techniques might mean that you survive with your sanity intact."

"Sugar-coat it for us, why don't you?" groused Michael Corner from the corner, where he was slouching with a sneer on his face.

"I won't lie to make you feel better," retorted Malfoy. "The seventh years here are in Ethics class. They've heard Professor Snape say this very thing, more than once: if you don't know what war really is, you've no business getting involved in the first place."

"But why would Death Eaters need to resist torture?" asked Parvati. "Our side doesn't abuse prisoners--"

Malfoy shoved his hands in his pockets. "It doesn't? You might want to let the Auror division
know about that, because I can assure you that the side of the Light is not as pure and blameless as some people would have you believe. Also, the more intelligent Death Eaters are prepared to be tortured by their own leader, who is not known as the personification of kindness. That's enough questions. It doesn't matter why the enemy knows this. All that matters if that if any of you are subjected to torture, I'd like you able to handle yourselves so you don't spew out every secret you might know. Everybody on the floor. Sit however you're most comfortable."

"On the floor?" Daphne Greengrass widened her eyes, clearly astonished.

"Yes. Do you think that Death Eaters provide cushions and couches for their prisoners?" snapped Draco. "This isn't a game, and if you think it is, you should go through that door right now and not come back."

"It was just a question," murmured Daphne as she sat down on the cold stones and arranged her robes in elegant swirls around her.

Malfoy ignored her and went on instructing the students, covering meditation first and then some deep breathing techniques which could help students stay as calm as possible during the unthinkable. "A common reaction to fear, stress, or extreme pain is to stop breathing, but that's a mistake. You're more likely to get hysterical if your brain isn't getting enough oxygen, and it's when you get hysterical that you might break. None of this is going to make the torture go away, but if you can keep your head you'll at least be able to take advantage of anything exploitable you notice, like a momentary distraction on the part of your captors."

Harry had to admit, that did make sense. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth as Malfoy instructed, his eyes closed, the only sound in the room by then the click of Malfoy's boots on the stone floor as he wandered amongst the students sitting on the floor. He didn't want to fantasise about torture--who would?--but the situation lent itself to such thoughts. He started to wonder what it had felt like to be stabbed all over by needles. Even the thought of that made his stomach twist, but he'd apparently survived the experience, sanity and all, so he soldiered on, determined not to shy away from thinking about it. So . . . he'd been stabbed all over, Ron had said . . . was that why he'd been blind for a while? Had Lucius Malfoy blinded him?

When Harry thought about that hard, he felt like he could almost remember it happening. A cold wind on his face, and a needle that seemed to undulate like a snake, getting closer and closer as a horrid voice taunted him . . . and trying to look past that needle to the stars overhead, but he couldn't manage. His attention was drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

And then--

The vision inside his mind abruptly cut off. No huge mystery why, though Harry grimly. He wasn't ready to remember the actual pain, which must have been unimaginable. He did have a feeling, though, that Malfoy had said something about the whole thing later. Months later, maybe. Something about the pain?

No . . . no . . . it was something more sinister . . . something about how all the healing that had gone into his eyes had been a waste, since now Lucius was going to pluck them from his head once and for all. A mocking question about whether Snape would want to display them along with his other potions ingredients . . .

Then suddenly there was a sensation of cold metal being shoved up against the bone just below his left eyeball, pressure being brought to bear . . . and someone's hand atop his skull, the grip there strangely weak for someone determined to pluck his eyeballs out--
"All right, that's enough," said Malfoy, startling Harry out of his trance. When Harry opened his eyes in reflex, he was almost surprised that he could see. He had some strange idea that he was supposed to be blind again. Had he been blinded twice during the previous school year?

Harry did his best to shake the question off and listen to Malfoy, who was teaching the whole group again.

"... Granted, they might not use it in the middle of an impromptu battle. It requires extensive preparation which gives only a small window of opportunity, so you probably won't see it in action unless the Death Eaters stage a coordinated attack in which they control the timing rather precisely. The counterspell isn't well known since the spell itself is such dark magic that few could wield it, notwithstanding the timing issues, but you should have it in your arsenal just in case. The incantation is *Retroago temporalis*. Repeat that a few times and then we'll discuss wand movement."

Harry didn't want a lecture from Hermione about listening better, so he scooted over a few feet and leaned in toward Luna. "I missed the first bit. What does this counterspell do, exactly?"

Luna turned a dreamy smile on him. "Oh, more or less the same thing as a hanzelgretten."

"Uh, it helps small children lost in the forest defeat an evil witch?"

Luna wiggled her toes as she answered. It didn't surprise Harry that they were bare, but it did surprise him that her toenails were painted blue and had images dancing on them. Huh. Tiny unicorns, only pink?

"You should read the series my father did a few years back, 'What's Fair about Fairy Tales?' It turns out that Hansel was a horrid little boy with putrid breath who was trying to curse that poor dear witch's house, and Gretel... well, let's just say that she had some interesting personal habits which don't belong in a children's story at all, which explains of course why the story leaves them out."

Harry blinked, some part of his mind chasing that rabbit down a hole. *Interesting personal habits?* He wondered what they could be. "But what does this counterspell of Malfoy's do?"

"Who?"

Unlike Zabini, she didn't sound sarcastic about it, just genuinely confused. Like there was nobody at the school named Malfoy and she couldn't imagine whom Harry could mean.

Which she probably couldn't. That was Luna.

"Draco. What does this counterspell of Draco's do?"

"It keeps your wand from succumbing to the ritual dark magic I was explaining," said Malfoy himself, crouching down at Harry's side.

Harry sucked in a breath and prepared himself to be ridiculed. It would be worth it; he wanted an answer, and Luna wasn't likely to give one he could follow. "I didn't hear the bit on ritual dark magic."

Malfoy gave him a quizzical glance, but didn't make fun. "On rare occasions the most skilled of the Death Eaters might prepare a spell in advance of battle. It requires a lot of preparation, so it's not common. But it allows them, once the battle commences, to cast *Retardo* against your wand. It slows down local time so that a wand can't react well to the wizard who wields it."
"Wouldn't it be more effective to cast *Retardo* on the wizard himself?"

"The spell can only attach to something that doesn't itself usually possess any awareness of time. The thing to keep in mind is that counterspell is very effective when cast properly. In this case properly means more than correct pronunciation and wand motion. You must finish casting Retroago temporalis before your opponent finishes his own spell invoking Retardo. We're going to practice that next." Malfoy stood up and raised his voice a little as he looked around the room, clearly addressing everyone. "Everybody on their feet. We'll work in groups of three. This time the observer's job is to listen carefully and determine who finished their incantation first. The observer will announce the results to each pair immediately and then someone else in the group will become the observer. No arguments about the observer's decision, which is final. Begin."

"Pair up with me, Harry?" asked Luna as she pushed to her feet.

Harry had planned to duel with Ron and Hermione, but he supposed he shouldn't stick to them like glue all the time. Especially not in D.A. He remembered teaching it before and making a special effort to be sure he worked with all the students who attended. He wasn't teaching now, of course, but . . . "Sure. Who else?"

Parvati tried to join them but Terry got there first. She looked a little peeved about that and this time, Harry didn't need to hear the ball mentioned to guess what was on her mind.

Malfoy circulated offering pointers on wand usage and pronunciation, reminding the students that being faster with the incantation would be useless if they cast it wrong. Harry knew he should be paying attention to his own group, but he couldn't help but watch Malfoy whenever he got the chance. It was just . . . fascinating. No other word could possibly apply. He spoke to everyone in a level tone and was more patient that Harry could believe. Even with the Muggleborns.

But that made sense, Harry supposed. Malfoy really *was* in love with a Muggle; he'd talked about that while under truth serum. And even if that hadn't come up . . . Harry was starting to think he'd have believed it anyway. Malfoy was still the same in a lot of ways, but in the more important things he seemed to have truly changed. He wasn't . . . he wasn't . . .

He wasn't like a *Malfoy* any longer. At least, not in their worst characteristics.

Something clicked inside Harry's mind. It felt like a puzzle piece being slid into place, merging with a bigger picture so that it couldn't even be removed any longer. Draco wasn't a Malfoy. Harry more than knew it. He *knew* it, because now, it was real to him. And since it was, "Malfoy" could only mean the father now, not the son.

No wonder he'd been able to say that Draco Malfoy wasn't his brother. Draco *Malfoy* truly wasn't.

Two groups over, Ernie was having some trouble getting his wand movement right. "It's because we need to cast against a real spell," he groused when Draco wandered near, "instead of all this make-believe."

"That would be better training, certainly," answered Draco. "And we'll do things that way whenever possible. But since casting *Retardo* requires some truly disgusting preparation beforehand--"

"How disgusting?" asked Zacharias Smith.

"You don't want to know," said Draco in a sharp tone. Harry could hardly fault him for that, though. What sort of question was that?
The kind Smith wanted answered. "I knew it was a mistake to let Harry put you in charge this year. I do want to know!"

"You shouldn't want details about dark sacrifices, and if you do, too bad," said Draco bluntly. "We're not here to learn to wield the dark arts but to defend against them."

"But--"

"Shut up," said three students at once, which told Harry that the argument must be a familiar one and that the club was used to taking Draco's side against Smith.

Draco's eyes glittered a little, but he didn't rub his victory in Smith's face. He just stepped closer to Ernie and showed him the wand movement once again.

"I'll see you both in the Tower later," said Harry when Draco called a halt and Ron and Hermione appeared at his side. "I've got something to do."

At least Hermione didn't say that it was nearly curfew. Harry knew that.

"What do you have to do?" asked Ron, the words a bit mangled since he was chewing something he'd fished out of a pocket.

Draco made a face at that as he walked up. "I suspect that he has to talk to Severus about dropping Potions from his timetable."

Harry glared, annoyed that Draco had guessed his destination. He'd got the rest of it wrong, though. Potions class certainly wasn't why he was going down to the dungeons. He just needed to pick up his invisibility cloak. Besides . . . "It's not your place to tell my friends that."

"Why not? It's my home too. And my Dad." He put a hand on Hermione's arm when she started to turn away. "Quidditch practice will probably run a little late tomorrow but I'll join you in the library by a quarter past. Will that be all right?"

"Bring your notes. I saw you working out an equation which looked quite useful."

Draco grinned. "As if I'd arrive to a study session without my notes."

When Ron urged Hermione away before she could reply, Draco sighed. "Do all Gryffindors suffer from insecurity complexes?"

"Stop judging by house," said Harry. "And since when do you throw around phrases like that?"

"Since I started reading books on psychology. So then . . . I'll walk you down, shall I?"

"Not that again. I can look out for myself--"
"Harry," said Draco in a quiet voice. "Do you know how to find Severus' quarters on your own? I'm thinking not."

He had a point, one which Harry should have thought of on his own. "Er . . . crap. Well, if you'll just tell me what the portrait on his door looks like--"

"He prefers his private domain to be much less easily located. There's an illusion of an empty stone wall covering his door, and it's not the kind of spell that students can detect or make vanish."

That sounded like Snape, all right.

As the last few girls to leave called out good-byes to both of them, it seemed to Harry that there was something in their voices that sounded . . . well, he wasn't sure, but it struck him as a little flirty to him. And they'd specifically included Draco . . .

He waited until the room was completely empty. "Let me guess. The girls keep mentioning the Yule Ball to you as well."

Draco gave a curt nod. "And they don't take a hint. But at least you can have your pick, Harry. I can't."

"Of course you can--"

"No." The other boy turned his face away. His profile looked carved in stone. "I can't."

Harry swallowed. He didn't usually have a problem admitting that he was wrong. At least he thought he didn't. But this was different. There were years of history between them, and then another year when everything had changed, but that was like a bank of fog to Harry, for all it seemed almost real to him now. "I . . . I'm sorry."

"For?"

"That she hurt you, I meant. Do I . . . do I have something to be sorry for when it comes to her?"

Oh, God. Had Harry dated her first? Tried to steal her away? Told her terrible things about Draco?

"You were a bit of an arse about the whole thing." Draco waved his wand, casting a thick privacy ward, even though the Room of Requirement had probably already taken care of that for him. "But then . . . so was I, I suppose. I couldn't believe that Rhiannon could really be a Muggle. She was too perfect. My limited world view couldn't reconcile those two things." Draco shook his head.

"You thought I'd lash out at her when I finally did realize the truth. And then you misjudged me again, and assumed that I would do something terrible to her when she threw me over."

"But you didn't," said Harry quietly. "Of course you didn't."

Draco swiveled his head to face Harry, one pale eyebrow arching upward. "You don't need me to repeat it under Veritaserum?"

"Not that bit."

"That's something, I suppose."

Harry tugged at his collar, feeling distinctly uncomfortable beneath the other boy's steady grey gaze. "Uh . . . but, uh . . . I mean, you can't have liked it much, getting a letter like that, so--"

Draco's eyes narrowed. "Who said anything about a letter?"
Harry thought back and wasn't sure if a letter had been mentioned or not. "Well, you did say she threw you over. I don't imagine she rang you."

"So that was pure deduction? Not a memory glimmering through?"

Harry shrugged. He had no idea. "Anyway, when you got her letter, didn't you... I mean, you were obviously very upset. Who wouldn't be? But I'm a little surprised it didn't make you change your mind again. About Muggles."

"I know you're surprised," answered Draco calmly, though his eyes glinted. "You've said so before."

Oh. That was interesting to hear. It made Harry feel a little bit less a stranger in his own life. "But you haven't changed your mind?"

"Now you're just being tedious. Do I speak as though I have?"

Of course he didn't. Harry didn't even know why he'd asked such an idiotic question, unless it was because that this was just so bloody strange. All of it. A Malfoy in love with a Muggle?

But that wasn't it at all, was it? Harry had figured that out already. It was Draco in love with a Muggle, and Draco was... well, he was a person Harry thought he didn't know very well any longer. Talking to him was like feeling his way forward in the dark.

"If you don't hate Muggles again, is that just because of what you told me last night? You aren't ready to accept that you've lost her?"

Draco scowled. "I haven't lost her. I can't have. She attends a university in London, and if it weren't for the war I could go to her and make things right. As it is, that'll have to wait. I can't tell you how many times I've thought of slipping away to see her, Harry. I bet I could do it and nobody, not even Severus, would ever be the wiser. Especially not now that he's so distracted with you."

A shudder coursed through Harry, settling somewhere near his gut. "I don't want Snape distracted with me--"

"You don't get a choice about that." Draco sighed. "Just as I don't get a choice about Rhiannon."

The ache in his voice seemed to reach down inside Harry and tug on something. All he knew was that he wanted to make Draco feel better, strange as the whole idea was. "Er... well, you could sneak off like you said, and--"

"No," said Draco sharply. "The-- Voldemort wants to get his hands on me, so if I leave the protection of the castle, it's entirely possible I could be tracked or followed. Rhiannon's defenceless, and she could be attacked as a way to get to me. I can't risk it. I can't risk her."

Draco, thinking of someone besides himself... Harry shook his head, deciding that he'd have to get used to it. "She... she really changed you," he murmured.

"Yes, but..."

"Hmm?"

The other boy slanted him a glance. "She wasn't the one who started me changing, Harry. You did that. You stood up to the Dark Lord while the purebloods at that meeting cowered at his feet. That was when I first knew that blood status couldn't possibly mean all the things I'd been taught."
Harry blinked. "You were there? The night I was tortured with needles, you were there?"

"Another deduction? I don't think I ever said that it was at night, but it was."

Harry waved that issue off. "Are you telling me that you've been marked?"

He wished his voice hadn't held such a shrill tone.

Draco shrugged off his robe and rolled up his left sleeve, and when Harry just stared, he rolled up his right sleeve as well. "Satisfied?" he asked, the single word clipped.

"Uh--" Harry swallowed. "I don't know. Did you make a habit of attending Voldemort's gatherings?"

"I made a habit of obeying my father, right up until I figured out that he had his head stuck up his pureblooded arse," said Draco as with one abrupt motion, he shoved both his hands deep into his trouser pockets. "We've had this conversation before, and you forgave me that time, but I suppose that's out of the question now, seeing as you hate my guts again--"

"I don't," said Harry, reaching out a hand, but dropping it just as quickly. "It's just-- it's a shock, Draco. I mean, I thought you were ugly and vicious when you were having such fun running around on Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad, but even then I'm not sure I really believed you'd ever actually join the Death Eaters. And now to hear that you--"

"I didn't join them! I just attended one meeting! And believe me, it wasn't my idea to go--"

"Maybe not, but did you laugh when I was being stuck with needles?"

"No," said Draco in a low voice. "Not once, I swear. I couldn't enjoy that. I was terrified, Harry. And grateful for the mask. I held my breath because that was horrible to watch. Even not liking you at all, which I didn't then, it was horrible. And I knew I could be next if I made the slightest noise of distress. And that fucking snake kept crawling across my boots."

"Nagini?"

"I don't know. Does the Dark Lord have more than one?"

"I liked it better when you were calling him Voldemort."

"Your influence." Draco stared morosely into the distance. "As soon as you blasted them with your dark powers, I made a move to get your wand back for you. Strange how that never seems to count for anything. Never mind that Lucius had it, which means I had to defy my father and turn my back on my entire heritage."

"You said yourself that you did that for advantage. As a sign of your good will."

Draco's nostrils flared. "I certainly wasn't brainless enough to run to Dumbledore without one. Even with it, he didn't believe me until he'd Legilimised me half to death and poured Veritaserum down my throat. I understood that, of course. It could have all been part of some elaborate scheme. You kept thinking that it was. For months. And now we're right back where we started."

"Not quite where we started," said Harry seriously. "This . . . well, this isn't what I expected when they said you were my brother. Not that I think you're my brother, but . . ." He gave the other boy a small smile. "It does seem like we get on, Draco. Maybe because I can see now that you really aren't a Malfoy any longer."
He'd expected a smile in return, or at least a pleased expression. Instead, Draco pulled in a breath like he was steeling himself. "But I am. That's still a part of my name. A minor part now, but . . ."

"You didn't want to ditch it completely?"

"I did. But names can be a little like incantations, Harry. They hold power, and I didn't want to give up what little influence I might still wield over things like wards or family artefacts. A good thing, too. It helped us that time in France."

Harry tilted his head to one side. "Why tell me you kept 'Malfoy' on? You didn't have to. For that matter, why did you admit that you were at that meeting?"

Draco shrugged. "Just three days ago Dad gave me a grim lecture on the subject of misleading you. If you ask me, he's got some kind of phobia about it."

"What is it?"

Harry shook his head. "Nothing. Well, something. But I can't remember." He balled his fists. "God, this is frustrating."

"But you are remembering some little things, at least. The letter?"

"And Dudley at Hogwarts. I remembered that before you mentioned it."

Draco looked impressed. "That's not little at all, then."

Harry narrowed his eyes, wondering if that was meant as some sort of fat joke. Then he wondered why he cared. There was no love lost between him and Dudley Dursley. "Maybe not, but I haven't been able to remember anything about being adopted, or . . ."

Or anything that would let me use the mirror that calls Sirius, he thought, but didn't say. He couldn't say that. It might be all right to break down a bit in front of Ron, but he wasn't going to do it in front of Mal-- in front of Draco.

"It hasn't even been a week since your accident, Harry," said the other boy. His hands out of his pockets by then, he made the kind of abortive motion that Harry had made earlier, like he intended to reach out but changed his mind at the last moment.

"It hasn't?"

"No, it hasn't." Draco's voice that time was very quiet. Almost compassionate. "Are you all right? Do you want to go and see Madame Pomfrey?"

"I'm all right. It's just been a long week, I guess." Sighing a bit, Harry looked around the empty room. "We should go. Nobody's going to believe we stayed in here to study--"

"You don't need an excuse to spend time with me, Harry. We're brothers."

"Uh--"

"In any case, D.A. sessions usually end with the two of us alone. We talk about what to cover next
time, and it helps the other students to see that we're both still running things even if I'm the one
doing the actual teaching." Draco lifted his chin a little. "I suppose you'll want me to step down
from that."

Behind the voice coming through his ears, Harry heard another one inside his head. It was faint,
but spoke with the same aristocratic inflections. *Didn't you have enough talents before, talking to
snakes? Throwing off Imperius like it's nothing more than a blanket? Do you even know how
bloody irritating this is?*

"No," said Harry abruptly. "You did a good job tonight. And I think I have enough to be getting on
with."

Draco blinked. "Oh. Well, you do, of course. That's perfectly true. Like this mad idea you have
about dropping Potions--"

"That's not up for discussion."

"But--"

"Show me where Snape lives," interrupted Harry as he headed for the door.

Draco hesitated for a moment, but then he followed.

"Here we are," said Draco, holding his wand up to an expanse of stone that looked exactly like the
rest of the walls to Harry. Not that he could see them so well--*Lumos* only provided so much light.

"Slytherins don't believe in sconces?"

Draco shrugged. "The walls glow during daylight hours, and Slytherins can make them glow at
night, too, if we like. The incantation is *Lumosmurom* and you have to cast it every fifty feet or so.
Go ahead and cast it now."

"Very funny--"

"You still don't believe that you're a Slytherin?"

Harry did believe it. He couldn't fail to, after the way he'd tested the Veritaserum. He just didn't
want to believe it. Or act like he did. "You cast it," he said in a tight voice.

Draco sighed, but did.

That was when Harry saw quite clearly that just as Draco had explained, there was no door of any
sort. No portrait, either. "How am I supposed to knock? Just rap my knuckles against stone until
they bleed?" Didn't *that* sound like the way Snape would want to treat students trying to invade his
privacy?
"In the first place, one needn't knock for entrance to one's own home," Draco held up a hand to
stem Harry's heated retort to that. "In the second, just standing here causes anyone inside to know
there's a visitor awaiting entry."

"So let's just stand here, then."

Draco gave him a stern look, but obligingly leaned against the wall opposite Harry and crossed his
arms in front of his chest. "What shall we discuss as we wait? Slytherin's chances for the Quidditch
Cup?"

Harry scowled. "What are you trying to say, that Gryffindor doesn't have a chance?"

"No, I was trying to say that I wish I knew how to talk to you."

That gave Harry pause. Draco was either trying to manipulate him, or he was being brutally honest.
Harry couldn't tell which, and he didn't like the feeling. "Well . . . you didn't do so badly earlier."

The other boy scoffed. "Before my nap, do you mean?"

Harry actually hadn't been thinking of the Veritaserum. "I meant after the D.A. meeting. Um . . .
those things you were teaching us. Where did you learn them?"

"Some I learned in childhood. Lucius was what you could call an exacting father," he said dryly.
"But what I was teaching tonight came from Severus, mostly."

Harry gulped. "Even the things you started the session with?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about that in the corridor." Draco frowned. "Dad must not be at home.
That's odd. I wonder where he could be."

"Stalking the halls like a giant bat picking on Gryffindors."

"Do giant bats often harrass Gryffindors? Do tell."

"You know what I meant."

"I know you're too hard on Dad." Draco held up a hand when Harry would have spoken.
"Moreover, it's too early for him to be on rounds. I'm not waiting about out here. We can talk freely
inside."

Harry backed up a step; the wall behind him kept him from retreating further. "I'm not going in
there."

"Don't be stupid. Here, watch." Draco splayed a hand against the stone wall and used his wand to
tap his fingers in sequence. "Of course this only works for the three of us," he said as a wooden
door appeared, complete with archway. It swung open on its own, revealing Snape's sitting room.

Draco strolled in like he had every right, which Harry supposed he did. For his own part, he was
more hesitant. He didn't belong here, not the way Draco did. That Snape might disagree was beside
the point. What mattered to Harry were his own feelings on the matter, and--

"Get in here before I drag you in," called Draco.

When Harry still didn't move, Draco appeared in the doorway, his hands shoved deeply into his
pockets. "Please, Harry. I want to show you something. And I can't bring it out into the corridor."
Harry wasn't sure what, but something in Draco's voice caught at him. The sadness, maybe. Though how could it matter so much that Harry didn't want to go inside?

Well . . . his invisibility cloak was in there, anyway. The one Harry had come down here to fetch. So maybe that made it all right to wait inside. It wasn't like he was in there alone, intruding, like last night. He'd be with Draco, who did have every right to bring a guest along.

He stepped hesitantly over the threshold, holding his breath like he expected something dramatic to happen.

Draco closing the door and pointing to Harry's hook on the wall probably didn't count.

Harry didn't take off his cloak, but he did sit down when Draco waved toward the couch. "What makes you think we can talk freely in here?"

"Severus spelled the parlour to resist all surveillance magic. He said he didn't want you feeling like you had to talk to Marsha in the Prefect's Bathroom again. Though he also said you probably wouldn't accept his word that your privacy is assured here. Well, I will." Draco raised his chin and spoke to the walls. "I nicked your Veritaserum and I'm not ashamed. At least it got Harry talking to me again."

All right, so it was probably safe to talk here. Harry couldn't imagine Draco admitting that, otherwise. "You must be sure he's not home."

"I checked for that as soon as I came in," said Draco dryly. "Though it was hardly necessary. Severus would never let you stand outside his door, Harry."

Probably he wouldn't. At least, not now. Harry had a feeling that exactly that had happened before, though. It seemed like another memory just barely out of reach, but this one didn't glint like metal. It was more like . . . huh.

Warm cocoa.

Weird. Snape drinking cocoa? Ridiculous. That wasn't the sort of man he was at all.

"I'm surprised he doesn't already know that you stole a potion," said Harry. "This is Snape we're talking about."

Draco glared at him. "He's been a little distracted the past few days. Your fault. Though he says it's not and I'm not to blame you."

"But you do."

Another glare. "You're hurting him."

An awkward silence fell over them then, until Harry cleared his throat and asked, "What did you want to show me, then?"

Draco vanished for a moment into his bedroom, then appeared again, holding something reverently in his hands. Small and square, at first Harry thought it was a mirror like his own. But then Draco turned it around and Harry realised it was a picture frame holding a Muggle photograph. The girl in the picture had honey-blonde hair swept back from her face by a burst of wind, and large, smiling eyes. "Rhiannon," said Draco, his voice almost breaking on the last syllable.

"Oh. " Harry raised his eyes from the photograph and saw that Draco looked almost in tears. "She's
very beautiful."

"Yes." Draco's anger drained away before Harry's eyes. He wasn't thinking about Snape any longer, or about the way Harry had been acting lately. Clearly, he had no room in his mind for anything but his lost love. "If I could just see her, perhaps I could persuade her-- but-- but--"

"But?"

Draco's shrug that time looked painful. "I suppose . . . I'm afraid to see her, Harry. As long as I don't, I can tell myself that seeing her would change things back to the way they were. But once I go . . . what if she's truly moved on? She says that she has. She's found . . ." His voice broke again. "Someone new."

Harry had no doubt that all of that was honest to the core. And without any Veritaserum . . . actually, the heartfelt honesty reminded him of something Draco had said while under the influence.

"Draco . . ." Harry swallowed. He didn't know how to ask this. It seemed wrong to bring it up, but more and more he was getting the feeling that he and Draco were past that. Or . . . not that they were, but that they had been once. And could be again.

Strangely enough, that sounded good to Harry. It was almost like he could understand how they'd become brothers, even if he couldn't remember it. It felt like they could discuss anything. Like between them there was some sort of resonance that made it all right.

It was the sort of thing that Harry thought he should feel if he'd really been part of a family with the other boy. He didn't feel it at all when it came to Snape. In fact, the thought of spending time with Snape almost gave Harry a migraine. He was that averse to the prospect.

But Draco . . . with Draco he thought it could be all right.

Obviously, he'd formed some sort of bond with the other boy. Maybe the adoption had been pretend like Harry thought, but then Draco had turned out to be a pretty good brother, and they'd become friends. That made sense. It would certainly explain the way Draco had been acting towards him.

And being friends . . . well, that made it possible to go ahead and ask his question. "You said earlier that you were jealous of me. But Draco . . . I don't understand why you would be."

Draco reached forward and set the picture frame on the coffee table, angling it against a stack of books so that he could keep gazing into it, for all he leaned back again and looked over at Harry. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd think you were playing some sort of game, asking me a thing like that. But you're not much for games." He sighed, a long hiss of breath that said he was struggling to assemble his thoughts. "I can accept now that most of it wasn't deliberate, but you were always upstaging me, Harry. And then I had to accept that you'd been right all along to oppose the-- to oppose Voldemort. And of course you're the natural leader of the Light; I'll always be regarded with distrust no matter what I do." Draco pointed his wand at the hearth and caused a fire to flare to life. He stared at it as he continued, his voice proud and stoic. "Now that your magic is normal and everybody knows it, I suppose it's just a matter of time until you will want to take over Dumbledore's Army."

Harry surprised himself by shaking his head. "I meant it when I said that you did a really good job. I think . . . you have a perspective the students need to hear. Um . . . you were going to tell me more about that . . ."
"You don't have to be reticent. If you want to know why Severus decided to teach me all he knows about resisting torture, just ask." The other boy's voice grew caustic. "Or were you remembering that you don't have any truth serum tucked into your shoe at the moment?"

Harry wasn't about to say that he didn't need the potion, though he was starting to think that he didn't. "Just tell me."

"It's very simple," said Draco, shoving his hands deeply into his pockets again. "We had reports last year that if I could be captured, I'd be tortured for information about you. Severus could tell that I was petrified, so he started teaching me those things. He thought it would help me just to know that I had some techniques tucked away should they ever be needed. They turned out to be more useful than he'd anticipated, I warrant."

Harry gulped. "You were tortured? Was that when your father kidnapped us both?"

"Yes." Draco shivered. "The worst part was the snake pit. I never could have survived that with my sanity intact if not for the things Severus had taught me. I certainly couldn't have remained calm enough to kill a snake with my bare hands."

Harry drew back sharply. "You're never getting near Sals again!"

Draco looked at him like he'd gone mad. "That pit was filled with vipers, I'll have you know! Your horrid little pet isn't in any danger from me! And besides, I killed a snake so I could take one out of the pit without it killing me. Thanks to Severus' calming techniques, I retained enough presence of mind to think ahead to the moment when I was taken back to you. All I was trying to do was make sure you'd be able to unleash your dark powers."

"Oh."

"Oh ye of little faith!"

"That's a weird thing for you to say."

"Not really. Professor Burbage starts every class session with a saying from the non-magical world."

"I think it's all right to say 'Muggle.'"

"You didn't see the look on Rhiannon's face when she first heard that word. Well, you did, but you can't remember it. And anyway, using it now seems like a slap in her face."

Harry nodded, his features serious. He understood how a word or a phrase could make a person uncomfortable. "Dark powers . . ."

"They aren't dark in that sense," said Draco urgently, shifting over a few inches toward Harry. "It all depends on what you do with them."

And Harry had turned a man to stone. Though he had to admit, he couldn't really be sorry about it. The way Draco had explained it, as self-defence and an accident besides . . . it was just the idea that he'd been able to cast with that kind of raw power . . . that part was rather horrifying.

Harry suddenly wanted to be back in the Tower, surrounded by people he could remember as friends. Not this, sitting here with Draco, whose friendly overtures felt like a sheet of ice that could shatter at any time, since they weren't supported by anything. No good memories . . .
Not this, waiting for a man whose own overtures had only filled Harry with a sense of dread.

He could get his dad's old cloak some other time, he decided as he abruptly stood up.

"Severus should be back soon," said Draco. "Just give him a few more minutes. I don't know where he could be. This is really quite odd--"

"I have to go, Draco--"

"Let's have a Butterbeer while we wait. Or we could play Wizard's Scrabble." Draco trailed him to the door. "Please, Harry. Don't leave. You need to work things out with Dad--"

Wrong. Harry didn't have a dad, and as for what he needed . . . well, he needed his things, that was all. He didn't need anything else from Snape.

"I'll tell you more about last year--"

Draco would do that anyway, Harry knew. "I'll see you in class," he said, shaking his head as he jerked the door open to leave.

"Harry," said Draco in a much more quiet voice. "You came down here to see Severus and you should wait until you see him. How can you run away like this? You're a Gryffindor."

Oh, that was rich, Draco using Harry's house as leverage. Usually, he only mentioned Gryffindor to make fun of it!

"And you're a Slytherin," he said, almost snarling. "Trying to trick me into staying! If you want to stay friends, you'll stop it right now!"

Draco blinked and took a step back. Then just as suddenly, he took a step forward, his lips lifting into a tremulous smile. "Are we . . . are we friends, then?"

Harry ran a hand through his hair. "How should I know? Just . . . oh, hell. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

That time, Draco didn't say anything about Harry sticking around to talk to Snape. He just nodded, his grey eyes looking pleased.

It was wrong, thought Harry, that he should be able to read Draco's expressions so easily.

It was wrong . . . but it was somehow right as well. Draco Malfoy could never have been his friend, never.

But Draco Snape . . . Harry thought that Draco Snape probably could.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Twenty-Three: "Deal Breaker"
Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Deal Breaker

Chapter Notes

Many thanks must go to Kim, clauclauclaudia, Keira, Kristeh, and Susanna! Thank you, ladies!

By the next morning at breakfast, Harry was feeling relieved but puzzled. He'd sent off his letters the day before just after lunch, and he'd more-or-less expected some sort of confrontation by now. McGonagall in particular would want to argue with him, wouldn't she? After all, she was the one who'd promised to get him into the courses he'd need for Auror training, and here he was dropping one of them . . .

But of course, it wasn't required any longer.

Still, it seemed odd that not even Snape had demanded to speak with him. Harry wasn't under any illusions. Snape definitely hadn't wanted him in Potions in years past, but he would now, if for no other reason than to control his "son" and have some say over him. And Dumbledore would probably back Snape up. He'd certainly never bothered to rein him in before when it came to how he treated Harry; why would he start now?

When the mail owls sailed in, Harry began to understand what had happened. Hundreds of birds were circling overhead, but as Harry watched the head table, he saw three owls swoop down and at the exact same instant, drop one letter each in front of McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Snape. That alone was enough to tell him that the letter was his own, but the way Snape snatched up his copy was a further confirmation. He'd obviously recognized Harry's handwriting on the outside and had no intention of waiting until after the meal to see what Harry had written.

Harry frowned, not liking that on several levels. Snape shouldn't know Harry well enough to instantly identify his handwriting. Yeah, he'd had him in class for years, but he had hundreds of students. And he shouldn't be so . . . so eager to see what Harry had to say.

His face also shouldn't drain of colour like that, thought Harry as he stared. If anything, Snape was supposed to get angry that Harry had thwarted him.

A second later, though, the man did start to look angry. So that was all right, then. Harry looked away, straight into Hermione's eyes.

"Something wrong?" she asked in a rather pointed tone.

"No, why?"

"You were staring at your father."

"He's not my--" Harry gave it up. What did he care what everybody thought? Thinking fast, he came up with an explanation. "I was just wondering about the owls. I sent something off to Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape after lunch yesterday, and it's only just now been delivered. I thought that owl-post was a little more efficient than that. It's not like the letters had far to go."

Hermione looked like she could guess what the letters might have said, but all she answered was
that well, Snape hadn't been at dinner yesterday. Hadn't Harry noticed?

"I don't care if he eats or not. Why would I notice?" asked Harry crossly. In fact, he'd been trying hard not to look at the teachers during meals. He didn't like the way Snape tended to stare at the Gryffindor table these days, like he was checking up on Harry, trying to catch him chewing with his mouth open or something. "And what would it matter if Snape was missing? The other two owls could have delivered their letters."

"Did you write it out three times or use Duplicato?" Hermione smiled knowingly. "There you are, then. The owls could sense the charm and assumed you wanted the notice delivered contemporaneously. In fact, that's a common use for duplicating charms, and they're also really good for--"

Harry tuned her out and gathered up his books, his stomach churning a little. Against his will, he ended up glancing at the head table once more, only to see Snape glowering and Dumbledore pulling out a chair to sit beside him.

Yeah, talk him down, thought Harry caustically as he got up to head to the library. Just don't take his side against me. Not if you expect me to ever trust you again.

Not that Harry trusted Dumbledore now.

Which meant that the headmaster didn't have a lot to lose.

Shit.

"What's your rush?" asked Ron. "Classes don't start for twenty minutes and you don't have one to go to anyway."

Harry knew that. He was on the Slytherin timetable and seventh-year Slytherins had a free period on Thursday mornings while the Gryffindors attended their Charms class.

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione. "He's going to study with Draco again. Aren't you?"

"He's got Muggle Studies this morning."

"Oh, yes. He goes to both the sixth- and seventh-year classes. But that's good, isn't it? He's very dedicated."

From behind Hermione, Ron made a face.

Harry smothered his laugh. "Yeah. I guess he is. Well, I've got some research to do, so--"

"Good for you, Harry," said Hermione.

She wouldn't speak so warmly if she knew the details. Harry wasn't going to the library to research Defence or Transfiguration. He was going to hunt up some wizarding newspapers and see what he could find out.

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Half an hour later, an owl flew through an open window and landed on Madam Pince's desk. Mentally shrugging, he looked back down at the notice he was reading. It didn't say much; just that Professor Severus Snape was "hereby making known his application to adopt Harry James Potter, aged sixteen, a minor child currently residing at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

The article next to the notice was a lot more detailed, explaining the procedures that Wizard Family Services would follow to consider and then approve or deny the application. It then proceeded to positively fawn over Snape for rescuing Harry Potter when he was abducted and blinded by "Death Eaters unknown acting at the direction of You-Know-Who himself."

*Unknown, ha,* thought Harry. It had been Lucius Malfoy who'd blinded him. Draco had said so under Veritaserum, and Dumbledore had said it before that. Well, that was the Prophet for you. Their reporting was more warped than a soaked wand. Like this bit about Snape rescuing him. Yeah, Dumbledore had told him that too, but the whole truth was that Snape had been helpless until *Harry* had obliterated the anti-Portkey wards Voldemort had had in place. Snape didn't look nearly so heroic when you knew the full story.

It was pretty obvious what must have happened. Word had got out about Harry's ordeal, and the secrecy surrounding his dark powers had to be maintained, so the papers had only been given the part about Snape rescuing him. Well, at least that explained to Harry's satisfaction why Snape wasn't spying any longer. The Order had had to sacrifice that to the greater good of keeping Harry their very own secret weapon.

Which he wasn't any longer. But that was all right. Harry didn't want to stand out from the rest of the wizarding world like that. If he defeated Voldemort by turning him to stone like he'd done to Lucius Malfoy, and people found out about it . . . Harry didn't even want to imagine it. The public would treat him like Merlin reincarnated or something, when he wanted to be just Harry!

Snape had probably really enjoyed stories like this, even if they weren't true, but sooner or later he'd learned what Harry had known for a long time. The wizarding press liked to make heroes, but they loved to knock them down. In fact, that was probably why they made them in the first place.

Seeing that Madam Pince was coming towards him, Harry hurriedly closed the paper and tapped it with his wand as he murmured the filing charm that would send it back into the library archives. She didn't look like she'd been paying attention to what he'd been researching, though.

"Mr Potter, you are to go to the headmaster's office straight away," announced the librarian in a hushed tone. Actually, she sounded scandalized. Probably because owls weren't supposed to come into the library, thought Harry.

He wished this one hadn't. His timetable was his business, not Dumbledore's. And not Snape's, father or not.

Wait, scratch that. Snape wasn't his father. Not really. He couldn't be. He couldn't ever be.

"Is there some confusion as to the term 'straight away,' Mr Potter?"

*Somebody's been taking Snape lessons,* thought Harry as he got up, annoyed. He didn't talk back, though. No point in that, when you would just end up with a mouthful of suds . . .

What a weird thought. He hadn't had his mouth washed out with soap since he was little -- back before he'd learned not to mention magic in front of the Dursleys. He wondered for a moment
where Petunia was, now that she was dead. Did she ever think about the way she'd treated him? Did she ever regret anything?

All right, that was an even weirder thought to have. Of course she didn't regret anything.

Sighing, he turned around and headed for the door.

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Harry's first surprise was that he ran into Luna on the way. She was skipping back and forth along a corridor, and when Harry asked why she wasn't in class, she looked at him strangely and said that she had to count to a thousand six times in a row.

Harry didn't see what that had to do with skipping, but he let it go.

She fell into step beside him, still skipping. "Are you out of class for counting, too?"

Harry didn't know if she'd been kicked out of class for counting, or if she'd skipped class on her own in order to count. He decided it didn't matter. "I've been summoned to see the headmaster."

"Don't you see him every day at meals?"

Harry laughed, a little bit of the tension in his stomach unwinding. It was hard to stay anxious or upset around a person like Luna. "I meant that he wants to talk to me."

"Oh. Well, good for him." Luna beamed. "I can understand that. I also like to talk to you."

"Did I make you lose count, though?"

"Yes, but that's no matter." By then, they had reached Harry's destination. "I'll just start over. 'Bye, Harry."

"'Bye," echoed Harry as she ran off. Turning back to face the gargoyle, Harry started wondering which sweet he should call out to make it open. He didn't have to wonder long, though. The statue turned all by itself, revealing the spiral staircase.

Sighing, Harry stepped onto it and let it carry him upstairs.

His second surprise was that Dumbledore wasn't alone in his office. Harry scowled. It was just his luck that Snape would have a free period on Thursday mornings.

"Have a seat, Harry," said the headmaster in a jolly voice. That just made Harry scowl more, and slouch when he settled into a chair facing the two men, the three of them gathered around a little table boasting an array of miniature sandwiches. What was this supposed to be, tea time? Harry thought that Dumbledore ought to be behind his desk, not pretending that they were all great friends just having a bit of a chat.

"Let's just get this over with," he said sharply, before Dumbledore could offer him tea or a lemon
drop or some other ridiculous thing right after breakfast. "You both got my notice that I'm dropping Potions, and you dragged me up here when I could be learning a subject I actually need to harass me back into the class. Well, that's not happening. End of discussion."

Harry got up to leave.

"Sit down," said Dumbledore.

"I'm need to get back to my studies--"

"Sit down," said Snape, narrowing his eyes.

Harry's legs seemed to have a mind of their own. Instead of marching across the room and out the door, he found himself folding his body back into the chair, exactly as the man had said. Well, at least his mouth was well and truly under his own control. "Fine then, I'll sit," he said, folding his arms in front of his chest. "But you aren't getting me back into Potions class. Not you," he said, glancing at Dumbledore, "and certainly not you."

The last word came out in tones of loathing. But that was all right. Hadn't Snape spent years making his own feelings toward Harry perfectly clear? In front of the /or classes, too! He'd never once cared how much he humiliating Harry!

"You don't understand what is at stake," began Dumbledore.

Snape tensed, which was enough to set Harry off.

"I understand enough," he snapped, his angry gaze taking in both of them at once, though his words were directed at the headmaster. "I spent years in that man's class and now that an O.W.L. is enough to qualify for an Auror apprenticeship, that's it. I'm done, and there's nothing either one of you can do about it. I don't care if there's some sort of paper listing Severus Snape as my father! That means less than nothing to me, and now that I'm an adult and fully of age, he will not, I repeat will not be making my decisions for me." He deliberately calmed his voice. "Now, was there anything else, Professor Dumbledore?"

"You don't understand what is at stake," began Dumbledore.

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The headmaster's voice was equally mild, just as though Harry hadn't been yelling at him. "Perhaps you could explain your reasoning."

Harry gave a dry laugh. "I think we all know how much I hate Potions. There's no reason for me to take it if it's not required."

"No reason?" asked Snape, leaning forward, his features set in strained lines. "Your survival, Harry. Expertise in Potions could well mean the difference between life and death."

Harry hated the way the man sounded. So ragged. Like he really cared . . . Once, Harry would have been sure that the man was lying through his Slytherin teeth, but not now. No, he'd concluded already that in some bizarre way, Snape really did love him, even if he still was a manipulative bastard at heart. No, the problem was that Harry didn't want Snape to love him, didn't want him to care. The thought made a shiver run through him, and he didn't know what to do with the ugly emotions that wanted to spill up his throat and out his mouth.

They were going to emerge, of course. There was no stopping them. Trying just meant that they came out as a scoffing laugh instead. "Please. My survival? Yes, I really believe that Voldemort is going to pause a battle while I spend a few hours brewing something noxious to use on him. That's obviously out, which means that anything needed will have to be brewed beforehand, which means that somebody else can do it. I don't have to do everything myself, you know."
Ha, he thought, leaning back in his chair. Argue your way around that one.

Snape sighed, the sound as ragged as his voice had been the moment before. "Whom else can you trust to brew something critical?"

"My fellow Aurors, maybe?"

"At least two of your Defence instructors should be enough to illustrate the fallacy in that argument."

It took Harry a moment to follow. Then he got it. Quirrell and Crouch-as-Moody, of course. Two teachers fronting for Voldemort. Harry frowned, thinking that the same thing could be true of some of his fellow Aurors. In any group, there could be a bad egg or two, and if Harry became an Auror, it only stood to reason that Voldemort might try to get one of his own sympathizers into the programme. To spy on Harry, or trip him up at a crucial instant. So how would Harry know who to trust?

It came to him in a flash of inspiration. "Draco," he said, nodding at the thought. He wasn't exactly sure where the notion had come from, but the more he considered it, the more sense it made. "He's going into the Auror programme too, and he's hands down better at Potions than I'll ever be, class or no class."

For a single instant, Snape looked like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. Then his features cleared of all emotion, like maybe he was afraid he'd revealed too much. Or maybe he just didn't want to show his annoyance that Harry had outsmarted his "brilliant" argument for staying in Potions. "You would trust Draco?"

Admitting it should have been difficult, but somehow, it wasn't. There was already a place inside him brimming with confidence, and now that he'd taken the first tentative steps toward it . . . the rest didn't seem daunting at all. Harry knew in that moment that he really did trust Draco. He couldn't precisely explain why, because he didn't remember everything that trust was founded on. That didn't matter so much though, because what he did know for certain was that the trust was real.

"Yeah, I would," he said, watching Snape carefully for any reaction. There was none, though. Absolutely none at all. Harry couldn't understand it. Shouldn't Snape be pleased, at the very least? The fact that he didn't care if Harry trusted Draco or not . . . well, that could only mean one thing. They weren't the happy family everyone had tried to claim. But then, Harry had already known that. He just hadn't expected Snape to confirm it like this.

"When did this happen?" asked Snape, still in that emotionless voice.

Harry shrugged. "That's not really your business, sir."

Dumbledore had been nibbling at a watercress sandwich, but at that he put his plate down with a slight clatter. "As trust is essential to the success of the Order's endeavors, I would say that it is indeed our business, Harry."

That was true enough, so Harry nodded a little. "Last night, then. I saw Draco teaching the D.A. and I could see that he's different now. Still himself . . . but a better version of himself, I guess. I know it's true that he has a Muggle girlfriend, or had one, at least-- oh. Did you know about her, sir?"

"Yes, of course I knew," said Snape, nostrils flaring.
"I was asking the headmaster."

Interesting how an embarrassed Snape acquired a faint tinge of colour along the top of his cheekbones.

"Yes, I also knew," said Dumbledore calmly. "And while I laud your renewed confidence in your brother, Harry, I must agree with Severus that it's a terrible mistake for you to drop Potions. One never knows when one will need a particular bit of knowledge for oneself."

"I'm no good at Potions, though--"

"You earned an Outstanding on your O.W.L."

"Which means I don't need more Potions."

"We are going in circles, my boy. The simple fact of the matter is that your father must--"

"No," interrupted Snape in a harsh voice.

Dumbledore turned his head and looked over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "I beg your pardon, Severus?"

Instead of answering, Snape stared straight into the headmaster's eyes. Dumbledore stared back. Their gazes locked, and while nothing else was truly visible, Harry fancied he could almost see the information flowing in an undulating line between them. Information Harry wasn't allowed to have.

His temper snapped. "That's really rude," he shouted, jumping to his feet. "First you drag me away from studying and claim it's to better my education, and then you make me sit here while you communicate so I can't hear a thing--"

"Sit down, Harry," said Dumbledore, shaking his head a little as he broke off contact with Snape.

Harry waited for Snape to echo that like before, but the man looked like he was reeling while still sitting still. Harry thought that served him right. God knew he'd used Legilimency to make Harry sick loads and loads of times. Well, apparently the headmaster's Legilimency was too much for even Snape to handle without a reaction.

"I need to discuss the Order with you," added Dumbledore.

Oh. That was enough to make Harry sit down. "What is it? I'm a member now, or so I heard before somebody decided I wasn't to be told anything about my own life."

"Your therapist decided as much," chided the headmaster. "It's not kind to blame Severus for taking on the responsibility of informing your friends of the prohibition. One might even think that is, in fact, a father's job."

Harry ignored that last bit. "Well, it wasn't kind of him to make fun of me on my very first day in his class, and then make my life in there hell every day since," he retorted. "And you wonder why I dropped it the first chance I got?"

Snape stiffened and made a faint noise. Harry ignored it.

"And do two wrongs make a right? You know better than that, my boy."

Actually, it takes three lefts to make a right . . . Harry shook off Hermione's voice in his head, wondering when she had ever said a thing like that. "You were going to tell me about the Order, I
think. Or was that just a line so I'd stay so we could argue some more?"

"I've no wish to argue. As I was saying, Harry, the simple fact of the matter is that your father, like you, takes his responsibilities to the Order very seriously. In that capacity, he must do as I ask, and I can assure you that he has not always agreed with my decisions or enjoyed carrying them out. Now, I understand that you do not care to undertake any further studies in Potions, but as a junior member of the Order you are pledged to--"

"No," said Harry. "Forget it. I'm in the Order to fight Voldemort, not so you can muck about in my personal decisions."

"Being sure that you are prepared to fight Voldemort is hardly that."

"Potions won't help prepare me--"

"Do not be an idiot," Snape broke in harshly, clearly frustrated that playing the Order card, which they'd no doubt worked out during their impromptu Legilimency session, hadn't won the argument.

_Idiot child, idiot child, idiot child..._ The phrase rang inside his head, clanging like a bell with the clapper gone wild. He was hearing Snape's voice now, not Hermione's, and he was hearing it in every possible tone. Angry, calm. Impatient, indulgent. Loving . . .

Harry pushed that last thought away with a violent twist of his emotions. "I'm not an idiot!" he shouted. "You always say that! You call me that all the time, and it just proves what an idiot you are, _sir_!"

Dumbledore's voice grew stern. "You are, as you said, an adult now, Harry. I expect you to behave as one. Taking Potions will indeed help you and it is imperative that you not drop the course. If reminding you of your obligations to the Order is not enough to convince you of this, then I will simply forbid any change your timetable."

Harry smiled very thinly. "Potions won't help me. I won't learn from him."

"Of course you will--"

"No, I won't," insisted Harry. "There's too much bad history between us. And no offence, but if you deny me the courtesy of dropping Potions when I happen to know that you've granted it to other students, I'll have to make my complaints about the school public. And that will mean that my complaints about him are made public. I don't think you want all the bad press this will generate." He smiled, very thinly. "The _Prophet_ will have a field day with the stories I could tell. I bet I could even generate an official inquiry into his behavior. Are you aware that on at least one occasion Snape here deliberately destroyed perfectly good student work, just so that he could give a student he didn't like a zero for the day?"

Snape sat like a statue through Harry's diatribe, the only motion a flickering of his eyelashes when he blinked.

"I am sorry to hear that," said Dumbledore in a tone that said he was. "That would be years ago, though, Harry."

"Doesn't seem like it to me, and when I tell the papers what I know--"

"Severus is held in high esteem by the wizarding world--"

"He won't be held in much esteem at all when I'm through with him!"

Silence fell across the room after Harry's pronouncement. Harry almost winced when he realised what he'd just said. It sounded childish and petty and vindictive. He wasn't going to take it back, though. He wasn't going to let himself be pushed back into Potions when he absolutely, positively could not endure to spend that much time with Snape.

Being near the man just made him furious. The only time it hadn't was when Harry had been recovering in Snape's quarters, but then he'd been on a couple of strong potions and he'd been recovering from a serious attack. Short of major trauma like that, Harry could barely stand Snape's presence.

He shouldn't have to stand it, either.

"Headmaster," said Snape after a moment, his voice still rough but much more quiet than before. "Let Harry adjust his timetable if he feels so strongly about it. I will raise no further objection."

Dumbledore blinked like that was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

"The situation can be managed," added Snape, turning his face toward the window.

Harry didn't like the insinuation that he was a situation to be managed, but he decided that in this case, discretion was probably the better part of valour. "Fine. Then we're agreed on Potions. Now, about Ethics--"

"You will not be dropping Ethics," said Dumbledore. "It is required of all seventh year students. You will take it along with all your classmates and that is an end to the matter."

"It's not required for entrance to the Auror programme," said Harry in a tone of triumph.

"No, but qualifications in several subjects are. If you consult the appropriate Ministry career circulars, you will see that only students enrolled in Ethics will be permitted to sit their N.E.W.T.s from now on."

Harry clenched his fists. "That's outrageous!"

"On the contrary. It is an indication of how seriously the Ministry is about Hogwarts students receiving some instruction to help them choose what is right instead of what is easy," said Dumbledore with a little wave of one hand. "Ethics will remain on your timetable. I trust you have no further objection?"

"No," said Harry in a sour tone. "But Snape has to give back my invisibility cloak like he said he would. If he won't, you'll have to forgive me for thinking that he has no ethics."

"I brought it to Potions to give to you, but you neglected to attend class," said Snape.

"Because I was dropping it."

"All the same." Snape sighed. "Very well, then. Come to my rooms directly after dinner this evening and you shall have it."

Come to his rooms? No doubt he'd want a long chat, and if Harry didn't fall into line, he'd never see his cloak again. True, Harry had gone gone to Snape's quarters just the night before, but the thought of doing it again made him feel physically ill. "That's a deal breaker," he announced.
"I wasn't aware that we had any deal."

"Perhaps one can be forged," said Dumbledore hopefully. "Severus shall return your invisibility cloak, but you, Harry, will attend a single hour of Potions each week--"

"So that I can have my own property back? I don't think so!"

"I did already say I would return it, Albus," said Snape in a weary tone. "And contrary to what my son believes at this time, I do indeed possess some ethics."

"Must be a first in a Slytherin," said Harry, not caring that he was being nasty. Snape deserved it, calling Harry "my son" like that when he knew what Harry thought of the whole adoption mess.

"And yet you trust Draco, a consummate Slytherin."

Harry had no answer for that, except an extremely childish one. "Shut up."

"Harry," chided Dumbledore.

"I will ask you not to interfere, Albus. This is not properly a teacher-student matter any longer."

Snape turned his attention to Harry. "Come to my rooms tonight."

Instead of refusing again, Harry tried to turn the request to his advantage. "Give me my cloak and my map, and it's a deal."

Snape shook his head. "That is, as you say, a 'deal breaker.'"

"I should charge you with theft and be done with it. That's my map and you've got no right to it!"

"And now this is an Order matter," said Albus sternly. "Harry, your map is in use at the present time, for a very important mission that directly affects the Order's chances of defeating Voldemort when the time comes. More than that I cannot say, as I think you know our policies about disseminating information only on a need-to-know basis. You do not need to know what we are doing. I can assure you in all sincerity, however, that we do need your map of Hogwarts."

"Oh." Harry cleared his throat, feeling even more childish than before. Which was really saying something. "Um . . . all right, then. I didn't know. I thought . . . I just thought . . ."

"That I was keeping it from you out of spite, I imagine," said Snape in a tone that was still weary, but also as dry as sand. "Harry, what can I say or do to convince you that I do not regard you in that light any longer?" He swallowed and looked straight at Harry, his dark eyes haunted though his features remained close to impassive. "I acknowledge that it was once my practice to hurt you for the sheer joy of it, but I would no sooner do that now than I would slay the headmaster."

It wasn't an apology, but it was at least an admission of some sort.

"What can I do to convince you?" asked Snape again, his lips almost pale with stress.

Damn it. Harry hated being near him, but he also hated feeling like he was the source of this much pain in someone else. Even someone like Snape.

"But I am convinced," he said, tensing all over. "I mean, I know that things are different for you now. You make it very clear, sir. It's just . . . I can't see it unless I think about it, because whatever you say or do gets judged by five years of you being horrible to me."

Snape's jawline spasmed. "I regret every bit of that now, and not just because it stands between us.
I deeply regret that I ever hurt you, Harry, because . . ."

Perhaps sensing that Snape needed more privacy, Dumbledore silently rose from his chair and slipped away.

"Because I love you," finished Snape in a quiet voice.

Harry could guess what saying that out loud had cost a man with Snape's massive pride, but not even that could make it easier to take words like that from him. And yet for once he didn't want to lash out and hurt Snape. He just wanted rid of the whole situation.

"I know," said Harry, reaching up to swipe at his face when he realised it was damp. "I figured that out. But it doesn't matter, sir. I don't want you to love me. And . . . and . . . well, if you do, then . . . then do something for me. Don't say it again." Harry abruptly stood up. "I guess I can come down tonight to get my cloak if you promise not to make me come in and talk to you first."

Snape looked torn, which was enough to tell Harry that that had been his plan. "I will hand it to you first thing as you wish," he said after a moment.

"All right."

"Perhaps I should show you the way."

"Draco already showed me."

Snape nodded and stood up. "Very well, then. I must prepare for the N.E.W.T. Potions class now, but I will see you later today in Ethics."

Harry almost ground his teeth when he realised how brainless he'd just been. "Why can't you bring my cloak to Ethics, then?"

"I will not be returning to my quarters between now and then."

"But you could."

"But I won't be."

"But you could."

Snape gave him a look that quelled further argument. Harry wasn't quite sure how he did it, but he did.

"Fine, whatever," Harry said with bad grace. "I'll come down tonight."

"And I will see you in Ethics." Snape took a deep breath, almost as if he would say something else, but in the end, he merely swept out the door, his robes billowing majestically.

Harry looked around for Dumbledore, but the man had vanished completely. He waited a moment to be sure that Snape would have had time to walk well away from the gargoyle, and then let himself out. All in all the meeting hadn't gone too badly, he thought. He'd lost his temper more than he'd wanted, but at least he'd got his way when it came to Potions.
"You may keep these," said Madam Pince as she handed Harry the careers circulars he had asked for. "But don't fold down the edges or get them dirty!"

Harry nodded and started sifting through the pamphlets, looking for the one from the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Huh. It didn't say anything about students being required to pass an ethics course before they could apply. A dark suspicion began churning in his mind. Dumbledore had clearly wanted Harry to remain in Snape's classes; he'd even tried to use the cloak to bargain his way into an hour a week of Potions . . . Harry was positive that Dumbledore wouldn't be above lying to get what he wanted.

Which was a bit ironic, lying in order to force a student to take Ethics . . .

On the other hand, he hadn't claimed that MLE in particular required Ethics. He'd just said that it was now some sort of prerequisite to sitting the N.E.W.T.s, so maybe the pamphlet he should be looking in was . . . yeah, there it was: "Everything you Never Wanted to Know But Were Afraid to Ask about the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests."

Harry had seen better titles in his lifetime.

He flipped through the pamphlet, scanning page after page, his suspicions about Dumbledore growing all the while.

But then he found it.

Damn.

"Pupils in any course of preparation leading to the N.E.W.T.s are advised that said examinations will only be administered to students whose magical transcripts reflect one entire school year of study in the field of ethics. Normally this requirement is met during the seventh year of schooling. There will be no exceptions to this policy. See Ministry Educational Decree 14556, Paragraph 1346, Subparagraph b, Revision 16h, Subparagraph 12."

Harry didn't feel like wading through Ministry Educational Decrees, though Madam Pince no doubt had them on hand.

Damn, Dumbledore lying straight to his face would be better than having to put up with Snape for a teacher twice a week. Ugh. Double ugh.

Harry sat there for five solid minutes, more or less feeling sorry for himself and angry at the Ministry, but then he shoved the careers circulars into his school bag and decided he'd read more newspapers until lunch time. He knew he probably should be catching up on Transfiguration instead, but he just wasn't in the mood. And anyway, he could catch up on that faster when he wasn't working alone. Looking through last year's reporting was something he could do without help from anyone else.
"You weren't in Potions," said Hermione as she sat down next to him for lunch.

"I told you I was dropping it."

"Yes, but then the headmaster and your father got your notice. I imagine they had some things to say. Professor McGonagall too."

Harry focused on his cheese sandwich and deliberately didn't look at the head table. If Snape was watching him, he didn't want to know about it. "I haven't seen her yet, but I did get approval to drop the course."

"Harry, no--"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But--"

Harry gave her the same kind of look that Snape had given him that morning, and to his surprise, it worked. She closed her mouth.

The look in her eyes still said that she was disappointed with him, though, and after a minute she rallied to her cause, though in a slightly less obnoxious way. "Well, perhaps Professor McGonagall will be able to get through to you."

"Not bloody likely," said Harry. To underline his point he moved down the table to where the Quidditch team was gathering and spent the rest of his lunch talking strategy.

Harry decided that after what he'd said that morning about Draco, he might as well make his new feelings clear to everyone, so when he walked into his class after lunch, he veered away from Ron and Hermione and took a seat next to the Slytherin boy.

Draco arched an eyebrow, trying for a snooty look, Harry thought, but it didn't really come off. His eyes were pleased and he was barely able to keep a smile off his face.

"Rumour has it that you're brilliant at this," said Harry casually. "And I have a lot of catching up to do, so . . ."

"You seem to be in a good mood."

"Well, it's not every day I drop Potions." Harry grinned, ignoring the way Draco was frowning, his
brow furrowed with concern. "Snape and Dumbledore approved the change this morning."

"They couldn't possibly have agreed to something so very stupid--"

"But they did." Wait, that had come out wrong. "They agreed that it was my decision, I mean."

"You're making a stupid decision, then. You should know better."

Harry shrugged. "I'd rather not fight with you, but if you insist--"

"No," said Draco quickly. "I'd rather not fight, either. Not fighting is . . . good."

"Besides, fighting would be useless. I am not going to change my mind. The only thing we could accomplish is to annoy one another. So let's agree to drop any talk of Potions."

Draco looked reluctant, but he nodded.

Harry glanced down at the textbook on Draco's side of their shared table. "Animating the Animagus? I thought that was just some supplemental reading McGonagall had us buy."

"On Tuesdays we work on standard Transfigurations but on Thursdays we focus on Animagus training."

"Oh." Harry bit his lip. "Um . . . how am I doing?"

"You're having trouble finding your form."

"That's not right. I'm sure I'll be a stag."

"That," said Draco succinctly, "is why you are having trouble finding your form. You're far too convinced that you already know what it will be. But the truth is that James Potter's animagus tendencies don't necessarily dictate your own. Think about it, Harry. You don't play with Snitches like he did. You're a separate person, animagus included."

"It sounds like I told you quite a bit about my dad," said Harry slowly.

"It was a rather natural topic for two young men being adopted." Draco flashed him a smile. "We were sharing a room, remember, talking every night. Once in a while we needed a topic besides girls."

Harry wasn't amused. "Did you tell me loads about your dad?"

Draco's expression closed itself off. "No, and don't call him that. He's dead to me."

*He's dead, full stop,* thought Harry, but of course that was a secret known only to a select few. It was good for once to be in the "need-to-know" group, but the phrase only reminded Harry to wonder what Dumbledore could want with the Marauder's Map. What was he doing, watching the entrances to Hogwarts for Death Eaters? But then, Harry would need to know if any sort of attack was expected!

"I won't call Lucius your dad if you won't call Snape mine," Harry answered Draco. "Deal?"

"No. Severus *is* your dad."

"Only in a legal sense." Harry put a wheedling note into his voice, and used the argument he thought most likely to work on Draco. "Come on. Be a friend."
"You're pretty manipulative for a Gryffindor. Perhaps you should put a little thought into the contradiction."

"Perhaps you should blow it out your arse."

"Now that's an argument sure to win friends and influence people."

"I think that's a book . . ."

"Yes, I know. I'm reading it."

"But it's a Muggle book. Oh. You're reading it for Muggle Studies?"

"You really don't grasp the implications of my change of heart, do you?"

"Sorry," said Harry. He did grasp them, but it was hard to remember all at once things he couldn't really remember at all. It was like with Snape. The man obviously had good intentions toward Harry these days, but Harry could hardly see that through five years of anger. "I know you're serious."

"I am, but as it turns out the book is for class. I'm doing a special project on Muggle psychological theory, but that's been a pet interest of mine for quite some time now."

Harry's reply was cut off by the noise of McGonagall calling the class to order. Her imperious gaze swept the room as soon as it was quiet. When her gaze locked with Harry's, she frowned. "Where is your textbook, Potter?"

After what Draco had said, Harry hadn't got any books out. "I didn't know we were to bring the Animagus one on Thursdays," he said. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. For today you may share with Mr Snape as you have need."

It was beyond weird hearing Draco called by a new last name, but Harry had no time to ponder it. "You will begin by doing the self-visualisation exercises we learned last week," said McGonagall, addressing everyone again. "Potter, you will step into my office to speak with me."

Harry shrugged and followed her, assuming that she intended to tutor him so he could catch up to the others. She closed the door, however, which seemed odd for a tutoring session. When she sat down opposite him, her features were set in stern lines. "I thought that I would let you know that I received your letter and I don't approve, Potter. Not at all."

"I didn't think you would."

Her voice softened marginally. "Surely you can find a way to deal with Severus, even in these very trying circumstances."

"I have to deal with him in Ethics. That's more than enough Snape for me."

"Do you know that last year--" She bit off whatever she was going to say. "This situation is difficult for everyone, Harry. When you came to me to change your timetable . . . well, I can't help but suspect that I was a bit brusque with you. I hope that's not what set you on this rather drastic course of dropping Potions."

"It wasn't," said Harry, a little touched that at least she seemed to regret her lack of sympathy the other day. "Trust me, Professor, once I found out that I didn't need a N.E.W.T. in Potions, nothing
"A pity," she said, sighing as she took off her tartan cloak and wrapped it more tightly around herself. "Well, then, let me explain self-visualisation to you. And do try not to visualize yourself as nothing but a stag. I'm quite tired of watching you try that and fail. Now, the first step is to close your eyes . . ."

"Zabini's form is a worm, seriously?" asked Harry, leaning over to whisper to Draco once class was over. "How does he keep from getting stepped on?"

"He hasn't managed to transform completely yet."

"Ewwww."

"Ha. At least you can't remember seeing it. Wait until she has us try again and then you can say ewww."

Harry laughed, wondering if Draco had always been this witty. Then he realised that he had, but he used to turn his humour to being nasty. He probably still did that sometimes; Harry didn't think he'd changed into a completely different person. He had changed, though, and for the better.

And Snape . . . well, he wasn't quite the same, either, but somehow that mattered a lot less. Draco had been nasty to him in the past, but when that had all started, he'd only been eleven years old, and once the pattern had been set, it had stuck. Snape, on the other hand, had been an adult indulging a nasty streak -- what did that say about him as a person? He'd taken his rage at a man long dead and turned it on an innocent child who didn't even know why he was being verbally attacked.

Not that Harry hadn't been used to that sort of behaviour. Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon had done the same thing, year after year. All sorts of cutting comments that made no real sense to him until he learned, long after the fact, that magic was real . . .

Harry's relatives had never once regretted their vindictiveness; they'd probably gone to their graves still hating him. At least Snape did seem sorry, but as far as Harry was concerned, it was too little, too late. How could it be any other way? After all that had happened between them, his instincts pulled him away from Snape -- that would explain the way his anger seemed to spike whenever he spent time in the man's company.

And now he had to sit through two hours of Ethics with him . . .

"Come on," said Draco, echoing his last thought. "We've got Ethics next."

"I know," snapped Harry. "I can remember my own timetable." A second later, he sighed. "Sorry. It's just that I don't want to go."
"I'm sure you don't."

Draco could have made an effort to at least sound sympathetic, thought Harry sourly. Though, maybe that would count as misleading Harry. He was definitely trying to avoid that, at least for now.

"They should have let me drop ethics class too," complained Harry, still not getting up. He couldn't. The thought of spending the next two hours just feet away from Snape was unbearable. And then to do it week after week after week... Harry's head started throbbing.

"Well, they didn't. You're still enrolled, so come on."

*Enrolled...* The word caught at the edges of his thoughts. There was something he was missing, something to do with the precise meaning of that word... what was it that Dumbledore had said? You have to be enrolled in Ethics in order to take your N.E.W.T.s, that was it. And Harry was enrolled. He didn't need to earn a certain mark in the class, he just needed to be on the list of students taking it. Even the Ministry careers circular had said the same thing. His magical transcripts had to "reflect one entire school year of study in the field."

And they would reflect that, since he was, as Draco had said, still enrolled in the class.

Harry laughed as relief flooded through him, driving his tension headache away.

"Now it's amusing? You're a strange one sometimes. Do you know that?"

The headache tried to come back as Harry braced himself for an argument, but he was so happy that it didn't have much luck. Besides, he wasn't going to argue. "You go ahead without me."

Draco leaned over and peered at him closely, then shook his head. "Why do I have the feeling that I'll be wasting my time if I save you a seat?" When Harry shrugged, the other boy's voice grew harder. "What am I supposed to tell Severus?"

"Just the truth. I said for you to go ahead without me. Or make up some lie. I don't care."

"Harry--"

"Having trouble, Draco?" asked Hermione in a pointed voice as she walked up to their table.

"Maybe you can help. Apparently there's a latent Gryffindor tendency to suddenly begin skiving off classes in seventh year."

"Harry," said Hermione, "you're going to Ethics if Draco and I have to drag you there."

"Oh, so you want me to tell Snape to fuck off again?" asked Harry, almost baring his teeth as he stood up. "I will, you know. I'm that angry. Maybe I'm managing the best I can, have you ever thought of that? You two don't know what this is like for me. If I have to skip Ethics today in order to stay sane, then I'm going to do it, and all you'll get for dragging me there is my undying hatred and most likely, the three of us in the hospital wing, and I still won't end up in class like you want!"

Harry snatched up his school bag and stalked off, hating the sensation of everybody staring at him.

"He feels very strongly about this, doesn't he?" he heard Hermione ask in a shaking voice.

"Yes, he does."

The rest of Draco's reply was lost in a wash of noise as Harry reached the busy corridor.
Harry looked left and right, wondering where he should go instead of Ethics. He wished more than ever that he had his map back; he didn't want to get dragged to class after all, by somebody bigger and stronger and more magically powerful.

On second thought, though, Harry doubted that Snape would go that far. He didn't want to alienate Harry -- it had been Snape who had insisted, over Dumbledore's objections, that Harry could drop Potions after all.

Snape wanted a relationship . . . but all Harry wanted was to avoid him.

It was almost amusing how two such contradictory goals were going to work in tandem with it came to the issue of Ethics.

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:
Chapter Twenty-Four: "As Promised"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------------------------
Harry tightened his grip on his wand as he stood in the corridor outside Snape's quarters. He told himself that he wasn't nervous, even though he knew he was. So then he told himself that anybody with brains would be nervous to be alone this deep in the dungeons. Snape probably wouldn't hurt him, but the same couldn't be said of Zabini or Nott . . . although Nott was in Azkaban, Harry reminded himself.

A door shimmered into existence and then swung open before Harry could raise his hand to attempt some sort of knock.

"Harry," said Snape, his face etched with lines that seemed deeper than they had that morning. Maybe that was due to the shadows in the dungeons, though. "Come in."

Exactly what he didn't want to do. "I'll just take my cloak, thanks."

Snape leaned over a little, but not enough to make Harry feel crowded. "You neglected to attend your Ethics class. I thought we had an arrangement. You have dropped Potions but you are not excused from your other class with me."

All true. He wasn't excused from it. He just wasn't going to attend. He also wasn't going to blab all his plans out. "I couldn't go."

"Your reason being?"

"I just couldn't." Harry shifted on his feet. "Listen, sir, I'm going to be late for Quidditch. And you promised to give me my cloak straight away. Can we get on with it?"

Just as he had that morning, Snape looked torn. He clearly wanted to talk further, or at least get Harry to give him a reason for skipping Ethics. But he couldn't, not with Harry's jibe from before standing between them. If Snape had any ethics, he had to keep his word.

"Yes, of course." The man hesitated for one more moment, then flicked his wand. "Accio Harry's father's cloak."

A shimmer of fabric wafted through the air and draped itself over Snape's arm. Harry wasted no time snatching it when Snape held it out. He thought for a second about making some kind of jibe . . . Oh, so you admit you're not my father . . . but then it dawned on him that maybe Snape was making a little bit of a concession with his wording. It didn't seem right to pick at it in that case, so Harry simply turned to go.

Snape's quiet voice halted his steps. "Harry."

He didn't want to turn around completely, but he did look back over his shoulder. "Yes?"
"I wish that I had been at home when you tried to see me."

"Draco's got a big mouth."

"He's concerned about you."

_As am I._ The words seemed to hang between them, unsaid. Maybe because Harry had told Snape that if he loved him, he wouldn't say so. Was Snape trying to abide by Harry's wishes, the same way he'd finally given in on the Potions issue?

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "Well, I have to-- Quidditch practice. I told you that."

"Enjoy yourself."

The tone Snape used was completely neutral, but Harry bristled anyway. What was _that_ supposed to mean, that he knew how Harry had been too spooked to fly high a couple of days earlier? Was he ridiculing Harry, the way he always did? Was he making fun of how white Harry's face must have been that morning when they'd met on the steps of the castle, or making some kind of veiled reference to the way Harry's hands had been shaking--

Harry's thoughts screeched to a halt when he realised how irrational all of that was. All Snape had said was to enjoy himself, which was hardly a damning comment. Harry was doing it again, judging the man's words by five years of ugly history instead of what was plainly true today.

And what was true was that Snape cared about him . . . even though Harry didn't want him to.

"Thanks," Harry finally managed to say past the tightness in his throat.

He didn't run down the hall to get away, but he did walk faster than usual and breathed a sigh of relief once he'd turned the corner.

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He was late to practice, which wasn't surprising in the circumstances. He'd deliberately left it until the last minute to go and fetch his cloak, just so that he'd have a good excuse to leave when Snape tried to keep him for a while.

The man hadn't been too insistent about it, though. That was good, but Harry wasn't sure quite what to think. Maybe Snape was finally starting to figure out that the adoption had been a bad idea. Maybe that was why he'd mentioned James being Harry's father.

"Just going to watch then?" asked Ron as he came to a smooth landing alongside Harry.

Harry scoffed, mostly because the idea was tempting. "Of course not. The whole team is running drills. I'm on the team."

"Kaslov's Dare, then."

Harry nodded and mounted his broom, tightening his grip on the handle as he flew at a steep angle to reach the other players. He would have liked to fly closer to the ground as he had the other day, but he didn't have that luxury now. He was a member of a team and the team captain had announced a specific manoeuvre. It didn't matter that it was getting hard to breathe or that his head felt like it would start to float any second. All Harry had to do was concentrate, and it wouldn't.

He bore down harder on the broom handle and gritted his teeth, climbing higher and higher until
he finally pulled up alongside Ginny.

"Now that Harry's here, I'll oppose," she said at once, yielding the Seeker's spot to him.

Harry weakly thanked her. It was hard to be grateful when really, he'd rather she keep on as Seeker for the time being. He wasn't at all sure he wanted to take a sudden dive toward the ground in order to lure the other team's Beaters into targeting him so that they'd leave the Chaser alone to score. Actually, the more he thought about it, the more insane Kaslov's Dare sounded. Never mind that he'd been doing the move for years, or that his own team's beaters were supposed to be at the ready to protect him.

"All right then, go!"

Ron's shout cued the whole team into action. Gulping, Harry dived, the ground beneath him appearing to fly upwards at an alarming speed. It was all he could do to hang onto his broom, but letting go would be a lot worse, so he didn't have much alternative. The wind rushed through his ears and for a second he could swear he remembered falling like this after the Bludger hit. But that was ridiculous. He'd have been knocked unconscious and wouldn't have felt the fall at all.

Distracted by the not-memories taunting him, Harry misjudged the distance to the ground and came to a hard landing instead of elegantly skimming the pitch as Kaslov's Dare required. He stumbled, angling his broom so badly that he tripped over it and landed hard on his left wrist.

Ron was at his side just a few seconds later. "That looked a bit rough."

Harry felt like a worm, but he went ahead anyway and took the easy way out. "Er . . . yeah. My wrist . . ."

"Hospital wing?"

That was out of the question. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't need two seconds to know that the twinge he was feeling wasn't very serious. "It's not that bad. Probably just needs a rest."

"All right." Ron glanced at the team hovering a short distance above. "Again, but with Ginny filling in."

Harry picked up his broom and made his way over to the stands. Watching the team was a lot less interesting than participating in the drills, but his wrist did hurt a bit, so . . .

He probably should have listened to Ron in the first place.

"And that's when I single-handedly apprehended Darswaithe and saved you from certain kidnap," finished Draco in a preening tone.

"Oh, you did not."

"I did. You can ask me under truth serum if you don't believe me."

"You should stop saying that. I might take you up on it."

"Go ahead."

Harry laughed but didn't reach into the side of his shoe. He kept bringing the Veritaserum to his meetings with Draco, but he hadn't used it again. Maybe he would at some point.
"Severus came when I firecalled him. He discovered that Darswaithe was under the Imperius curse," added Draco. "Courtesy of Lucius; Darswaithe had a Portkey on him that Lucius had-spelled. Now, as you may not know, an unused Portkey resonates with the caster's magical signature--"

"The fact that you know so much about magic is not supposed to make you a prat about it."

Draco lifted his chin. "It's not my fault you were raised by ignorant peasants."

"What happened to turning over a new leaf and all that?"

"Was I speaking about all Muggles? The lot who raised you were ignorant peasants, Harry."

Harry could hardly argue with that. Well, maybe with the peasants part, but from Draco's point of view . . .

"Now, as I was saying before I was interrupted, that Portkey has turned out to be quite useful. We're leaching the 'Lucius' magic trapped inside it to make Lupin's fake dark mark seem like it's Lucius' real one. This lets Lupin feel the call when the Dark . . . when Voldemort summons Lucius, and it also means that Lupin's own magical signature is doubly repressed -- first by Severus' improved Polyjuice, and second by the magic present in the dark mark."

Harry followed that, but it took some effort. "What do you mean, trapped?"

"That's perhaps not the best term," said Draco, one hand rubbing at his chin. "I merely meant that the Portkey will continue to resonate with Lucius' magic until such time as it's used. Which isn't likely to happen, since we need that magic for the foreseeable future."

To help Remus, right. Harry tried to make sure his voice wasn't too plaintive. "What have you heard? Is he doing all right pretending to be your . . . pretending to be Lucius Malfoy?"

"As far as I know." Draco sighed and stretched out on his chair, crossing his legs at the ankle. "But I don't know much. I don't need to know. You understand how it is."

"Yeah."

"I'd have more news if my mother was still living in the manor. Not that she was ever a regular correspondent, but . . ." Draco sighed again. "Actually, I might not have more news, even if she hadn't gone to the Continent. She didn't write much last year for fear of Lucius, and since she thinks that Lucius is still alive . . ."

"Maybe she doesn't. Could that be why she left? She knew something was wrong?"

"In that case, why hasn't she denounced 'Lucius' to Voldemort?"

"No idea . . ."

"For all I know she's merely gone shopping," said Draco in a bitter tone. "Appearances always were very important to her. More important than her own son. Though of course she tried to excuse that as fear for my safety. She thought Lucius would be even more vicious toward me if she helped me and he found out. Or so she said when she could finally be bothered to drop me a line."

"At least you can wonder about her motives. I've got no doubt at all about how my Aunt Petunia feels . . . er, felt about me. She could barely stand to be in the same room, and never once wanted me to forget it. Oh, God. Harry's face flamed the instant he realised that he'd said all that to Draco
Malfy. In the next instant he remembered that he was talking to Draco Snape these days, but that hardly made it better. Harry didn't even say things like that to Ron and Hermione. Not like that, so openly . . . that he'd said them now to Draco could only mean that he'd got comfortable telling Draco just about anything.

Just the thought of that made Harry squirm inside.

A wooden goblet brimming with red wine suddenly appeared on the table next to Harry's chair. Harry almost held it up in some sort of sarcastic toast to how supremely fucked up his whole life was. Instead, he flung the contents of the goblet onto the fire.

"Strange that the Room could misread what I wanted," he muttered.

"You wanted to throw merlot on the fire, apparently."

"I'm still surprised that Hogwarts would supply me with alcohol when we're sitting here unsupervised--"

"Ah, but we're of age," said Draco sagely. "Observe."

He closed his eyes as he reached a hand out toward his own small table, his fingers waggling expectantly, but nothing happened.

"Huh," he said after a couple of minutes. "I was quite clear about wanting a bottle of Krug Clos d'Ambonnay."

"But did you want to drink it?"

"That's why I was also asking for a pair of flutes."

"Then that's why you didn't get it," said Harry grimly. "Now, if you had wanted to throw the bottle at the wall, it might have appeared."

"That's completely ridiculous. We're old enough to drink! And besides, the elves provided me wine with dinner all the time when we were living with Severus!" Draco suddenly drew in a sharp breath. "Speaking of which, I was hoping that you would dine with us some evening. Perhaps tomorrow?"

The goblet Harry had set aside suddenly refilled itself.

"Ha," said Harry, almost biting the word off. "This time I'm going to resist throwing that. And no, I'm not going to dine with Snape tomorrow. Are you insane?"

"I'll admit that asking you that probably was." Draco eyed the goblet, and then with a shrug, leaned forward and took it. "It seems the Room can be fooled, after all."

"Tomorrow Dr Goode is coming, anyway," added Harry.

"Perhaps you can explore with her why you've been faking an injury to your left wrist."

Harry blinked. "How did you . . . ?"

"Please," said Draco scornfully. "I've exaggerated an injury or two. I know the signs. Besides, the only way you'd need a bandage on it for four days is if dark magic was involved. If you were really hurt with anything less severe, Madam Pomfrey would have set it right by now."
"Four days . . ." Harry flushed. "I don't much like the idea that you're keeping such a close watch on me."

"It's not that close. We meet to talk every day and that bandage isn't exactly inconspicuous." Draco paused for a moment, clearly debating with himself what to say next. "Er . . . at first I thought you had hurt yourself at Quidditch practice like everyone is saying, but now it occurs to me to wonder if it isn't something else."

Oh, God, thought Harry. He's figured out that flying high on a broom really bothers me and that this is my way of buying time until I can figure out what the hell I'm going to do about that--

"Though I think you would hide the bandage in that case," added Draco in a questioning tone. "So people wouldn't ask about it."

All right, so Draco hadn't figured out anything. Why would Harry hide an injury he was faking? It wouldn't get him out of flying unless he played it up.

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

Draco leaned forward and peered closely at him. "Well, it's just that once in a while we get a student in Slytherin who has a hard time dealing with some issue or another, and the pressure gets to be too much, and . . . I believe the technical term is self-harm."

Harry stared. "You thought that I was doing something to myself?"

"You are under an unimaginable amount of stress--"

"You've been reading too many psychology books."

Draco sat back, though his eyes were still narrowed. "That sort of answer is known as deflection."

Harry almost replied, Is it? but in the circumstances that wouldn't be very amusing. Draco was clearly concerned about him. Harry wasn't very used to that yet. It still startled him. "I didn't hurt my own arm," he said instead. "But for you to wonder about it . . . I mean, is that very common in Slytherin?"

"Not very," said Draco, staring for a moment longer and then shrugging. "Perhaps you're right and I've just been reading too many books on such topics. Well then . . . what's going on that would keep your wrist bandaged for so long?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Consider talking about it to Marsha. She's been quite helpful in the past."

"To you, you mean?"

Draco smiled, the expression a little smug. "She wouldn't tell you if I'd seen her, would she? Well, good for her. I don't want the whole school to know, but you're my brother, so . . ."

Harry was finding it easier to let that word slide past without an argument. "How did she help you?"

"I'm less maladjusted." Draco rolled his eyes a little. "Apparently, being raised by a bigoted homicidal maniac has its drawbacks. Such as thinking that poisoning one's enemies is a good way to deal with life issues. Severus had me start seeing Marsha after it became blindingly obvious that
I had bigger problems than he'd realised."

"And me?"

"You got a bit wonky after having killed Lucius. Which was ridiculous, as that really was an accident. But the human mind takes strange and meandering paths sometimes. You explained your issue as feeling 'guilty that you couldn't feel guilty.'"

Harry gulped. "That therapist knows that I killed someone?"

"Well, no. We couldn't let her know, particularly as Lucius is supposed to be alive and she sometimes reads the *Prophet*. They do so love to cover the social scene."

"Then how could she possibly help me?"

"She knows the rest of your life story," said Draco softly. "Orphaned and horribly neglected by your own family, yet revered by a world you didn't know existed. Treated by the press like their own personal Quaffle. Captured and tortured to the point of blindness. And on top of everything else, adopted into a family exclusively made up of former enemies. Don't you think that's enough for her to work with?"

"You and Snape were never my *enemies*," said Harry scornfully. "You weren't important enough to be that. More like thorns in my side."

"Former antagonists, then. But you do see my point?"

"Yeah." Harry looked up from his hands, only realising then that he'd been staring at them. "I wasn't horribly neglected, though."

"Please. Your bedroom was under the stairs and they used food as a weapon."

All true, though hearing it from Draco gave him that squirmy feeling again. It was difficult to believe that the other boy wasn't going to use information like that against Harry. Or . . . no, it wasn't difficult. Harry already believed it. He just knew that it ought to have been difficult to get to that point.

In any case, he was sure he didn't want to talk about the Dursleys any more than he already had. "But they're dead now. Best not to speak ill of the dead, you know."

"No, I don't know. Your relatives don't deserve this 'respect the dead' rubbish. Would you like me to hold back when it comes to Lucius?" Draco bared his teeth. "My only regret is that he didn't live to see me fall in love with Rhiannon. I'd give my vault to be able to rub *that* in his pureblooded face."

Harry was just as happy to leave talk of his own relatives behind. "Maybe someday you can tell a portrait about it."

Draco's eyes gleamed like polished silver. "A portrait . . . what an outstanding idea."

Harry frowned. "Maybe you should talk with Dr Goode some more. You sound . . . I don't like the way you sound."

Draco waved a hand. "I have unresolved issues, no doubt. What we should talk about are your own sessions with Marsha. You'd better be careful, Harry. She's quite clever and if you let slip something that you shouldn't know, she'll know that someone has been speaking with you against
her express wishes. Merlin help me if she says as much to Dad."

"If I let something slip, I'll say it's just a memory flitting back," said Harry. "Which has happened a bit."

"Well, be careful anyway. Severus has given me a few dark glances. Lucky for us he seems off his game. It must be the stress, I suppose. He's clearly exhausted and not nearly as sharp as usual. Subdued, that's it."

"It's about time he was subdued. He's usually worse than a blood-deprived vampire when dealing with students!"

"Your cousin thought that Severus was a vampire, actually."

"No."

"Oh, yes. And then you couldn't name three characteristics of the common vampire when Severus asked." Draco stood up and pulled his robe on, fussing with it until it hung in neat lines from his shoulders. "Just be careful around Marsha."

"I'll be more than careful," promised Harry. "I have a plan."

"Merlin preserve us. A Gryffindor with a plan."

Harry jumped to his feet. "I'm starting to like you, but I hate the way you insult Gryffindor without batting an eye."

Draco blinked. "It never used to bother you--"

"Well, it bothers me now," retorted Harry. "Cut it out. I mean it. It's brainless and annoying."

"Are you trying to say that you never badmouth Slytherin?"

Harry frowned. "Well . . . but that's different. I mean, most of the people in Slytherin are pretty horrible sorts. Like you used to be, no offence."

"If that's your concept of Slytherin then it's no wonder you refuse to be my fellow prefect any longer," said Draco dryly. "I won't deny that I was a 'pretty horrible sort' to you or that the level of blood prejudice is higher in Slytherin than in the other houses. But most of the students in Slytherin aren't children of Death Eaters, you realise. There are half-bloods and Muggle-borns in Slytherin. There's even a charming little second-year named Larissa who fell in love with Sals and practically snake-napped her until you gave in and bought her a snake of her own."

A hazy memory began circling the edge of Harry's consciousness. He could picture a little girl . . . or almost picture her. She was mostly short with a mass of red hair, but her plaintive little voice came clearly through the image. But Drakey . . .

"She calls you Drakey!"

Draco scowled. "I've told her in no uncertain terms to stop that, but yes." His expression instantly brightened. "That was a new memory, just then?"

Harry nodded, though inside he was chafing with impatience. How long until he remembered casting in Parseltongue? How long until he could do it again, and call forth Sirius?"

"Well, some of us don't have a free period all afternoon," said Draco as he pulled open the door.
"Some of us still have classes to attend on Monday afternoons."

Harry couldn't miss the sarcasm, but what was that to him? Nothing could make him regret the fact that right now, he could stay in the Room of Requirement instead of heading to Potions.

The previous week, Harry had got out of Ethics by simply refusing to go, but he didn't imagine that tactic would work every time. He was going to have to be more creative, but at least Ethics was only twice a week. He'd manage. Somehow.

On Tuesday morning, Harry made sure that his invisibility cloak was tucked into the bottom of a trouser pocket. During Magical Creatures, lunch, and Transfigurations, he kept having to quell a strong urge to check that it was still there. Finally, near the end of Transfigurations, it was time to put it to use.

"I think I need to start over with a fresh apple," said Harry mournfully as he showed Ron the mushed thing he'd managed to achieve. They were working on "essential nature" and had been instructed to transform an apple into a lady's leather pump, the two things apparently being similar in essential nature, strange as that sounded. Harry hadn't had much luck, but then, Transfigurations never had been his best class.

"Yeah," said Ron with the barest of glances. His own apple resembled a cross between a shoe and applesauce.

Harry slipped to the back of the room where elves had piled apples earlier, waited until everybody's back was turned, and then whipped his cloak out of his pocket and over his head, hunching down as he crept to a corner of the room. A moment later, a bell chimed, indicating the end of the class.

"Where's Harry?" Draco asked Hermione amid the hubbub of the students packing up and filing out.

"Ron? Where did Harry go?"

"He needed another apple," said Ron in a distracted voice. "I don't know. Maybe he went on to Ethics without us."

"Maybe elves can fly," retorted Draco. "He's skiving off again. Severus is going to have a fit."

"He didn't last time," said Hermione thoughtfully. "He just stared at the attendance scroll for a moment and then went on."

"Oh, he says he's giving Harry 'time'." Draco sighed. "Granted, the man has been more than a little distracted lately, but sooner or later he's going to put his foot down hard. I just hope that Harry doesn't get squashed flat."

"Snape wouldn't hurt Harry," said Ron as he filed past. He sounded indignant about it. That was interesting.

"Figurative language," said Draco in a mocking tone. "You have heard of it?"

Hermione trailed the boys, Harry's school bag slung over her shoulder, her own bulging bag dangling from her other hand. Draco held the door wide for her, and took Harry's bag as she passed. "You're going to get a hernia. You already carry enough books for ten students. And if
your own boyfriend isn't gentleman enough to--"

"Oi!" protested Ron.

Draco yawned as though the entire exercise bored him. "You can take it up to Gryffindor when Severus dismisses class. Clout Harry with it. Maybe that'll knock some sense into his addled Gryffindor brain."

Harry would have whacked Draco for that, but he didn't want to give away his location. Instead, he waited until the last student left the classroom, then slipped through the door before it closed.

"Don't lecture me," said Harry as soon as Hermione sat down next to him at dinner. "It won't make any difference."

"I'd believe him if I were you," said Dean, setting down his glass of pumpkin juice. "I already told him that Ethics isn't so bad."

"It's not the ethics part that I mind."

"Oh, Harry." She sounded sad, but Harry hardened himself against that. She always thought she knew what was best for him, but in this case, she didn't. "You should give your father a chance."

"Don't you get it? I can't."

"Of course you can--"

Harry picked up his dinner plate and moved down the table until he spotted Luna, who'd taken to eating at whatever table she liked just as she popped in and out of classes according to her whims. She probably wouldn't know that he'd skipped Ethics class several times now, and even if she did, she'd just say something bizarre about it, and then move on to another topic. That sounded like heaven at the moment.

Harry gave her a wide smile and took a seat at her side.

She didn't disappoint. "You should eat more cucumbers, Harry."

Definitely bizarre, and just what Harry needed. "Why?"

He wasn't expecting the question to make her giggle. "Oh, Harry!"

The way she said it was miles away from Hermione's typical harangue using those words. "You're so silly!" Luna went on, still giggling.

Harry waggled his eyebrows at her. "Should I go down to the kitchens for some cucumbers, do you think? Ask Dobby if the elves can serve more cucumber-based meals? Cucumber salad, cold cucumber soup, cucumber sandwiches, with cucumber juice to wash it all down?"

Her face actually went pink at the thought. Well, Luna always had been odd when it came to vegetables. Or anything else, for that matter. But that suited Harry perfectly. She lived on her own Luna-plane which only intersected the real world in certain places. And since Harry's real world at the moment was anything but pleasant, time spent with Luna most definitely was.

In that single instant, Harry had an idea so startlingly brilliant that he wondered why he hadn't
thought of it before. "How about the Yule Ball, Luna? Are you already going with someone?"

"Oh, yes. All the older students in Ravenclaw are planning to go."

Harry chuckled, wondering why this had seemed so impossible with Cho. Now, it wasn't at all
difficult to be more specific about what he was trying to ask. "But I'd like to do more than see you
in passing during the dance," he said, leaning over the table a little. "I'd like to take you there as my
date. What do you say?"

She blinked, looking slightly owlish for a moment.

"How about yes?" prompted Harry.

Luna blinked again. "I'll have to consult my tea."

From anyone else, that would be a brush-off, but Luna probably meant exactly what she'd said. She
proceeded to pour herself a cup from the pot near at hand and peered down into it.

"Is there a date in our future?"

"The leaves don't say," answered Luna in a distracted tone. "But perhaps that's because there aren't
any. I suppose I should drink this and pour another--"

"Or you could assume that the tea is telling you to decide." Harry hadn't taken three years of
Divination without learning to interpret a given sign however he liked.

"Oh." Luna looked up and smiled. "Well then, yes, Harry. That sounds lovely. Shall I wait for you
at the doors?"

"Of course not. I'll come to Ravenclaw to fetch you like a proper gentleman and I'll bring flowers,"
said Harry, feeling grand about the whole enterprise. "Or would you prefer cucumbers?"

She blushed a violent shade of red, but somehow it didn't look bad on her at all. "Don't eat too
many."

"But you just said that I should eat more."

"I only said that because you've forgotten so much."

"Like what?"

She pinked again, this time a less intense shade.

Harry gave up on pressing her. At least it didn't seem like her reluctance to explain was a result of
Snape's coercion.

Against his will, Harry felt his gaze sliding sideways until it reached the head table.

Snape was there, which meant that the "dine with us" thing hadn't happened. Maybe it wouldn't
happen unless Harry agreed. That seemed a bit unfair to Draco, though. He probably wanted family
dinners even if Harry had no use for them.

Snape was staring at him, one eyebrow raised until it blended with the hair framing his face. And
there was something wrong about that, something beyond the fact that Snape should mind his own
business. Harry asking a girl on a date certainly wasn't his concern. But something else was
definitely wrong . . .
When Harry realised the truth, he yanked his gaze away and grabbed his utensils just for something to keep his hands busy. This wasn't fair. Snape was the greasy git, and he was supposed to stay the greasy git until Harry was well and truly away from this place, so Harry could always think of him as that and nothing else. But that name didn't precisely fit, or at least it didn't tonight.

The man had finally washed his hair.

Hermione, of course, waylaid him on his way out of the Great Hall.

"That was very childish, running off like that--"

"Oh, shut up," said Harry crossly. "For your information, I wasn't running off. I was moving to sit by a girl I happen to like so I could ask her to the Yule Ball."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Oh! And did she . . . I mean, what did she . . ."

"She said yes." Harry grinned, his annoyance dying a quick death. "After consultation with her tea."

"Good for you, mate," said Ron, standing just behind Hermione's shoulder. "I've already asked my date, too."

"He knew better than to wait this time." Hermione beamed. "So what colour will Luna be wearing?"

"How should I know?"

"Boys." Hermione gave a theatrical sigh. Strangely enough, it dragged some information to the front of Harry's mind. Draco sighed like that, too, didn't he? When he was trying to make a point? Harry couldn't exactly remember him doing it, but he was somehow sure it had happened. A lot.

"Girls," retorted Ron. "They're like another species, Harry."

"Oh, but they are," said Draco, stopping by their group on his way out of the hall. "There's even a book about it. *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus.* Fascinating reading, though I do believe the metaphor is overdone."

*I do believe . . . I do believe . . .*

Harry shook off Snape's voice in his head and tried to follow the conversation.

"And why are we discussing girls?" asked Draco.

"Harry's going to the Yule Ball with Luna," said Ron, a little fiercely. Harry didn't understand that at all.

"Who are you asking, Draco?"

That was Hermione, her voice, very, very gentle.

"No-one," said Draco in a clipped tone. "I'll attend, of course. It's expected of a prefect. But I won't dance and I certainly won't be sneaking out to the rose garden to snog anyone."

"I will," said Ron, still speaking almost like he was spoiling for a fight.
"Oh, Ron, do behave. Draco and I are just friends. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

"Yes, Ron," said Draco in a sing-song voice. "We're just friends. How many times do we have to tell you that?"

Ron scowled. "Let's go, Hermione."

"Draco and I have an appointment."

"Appointment!"

"Yes," said Hermione primly. "Draco's doing a project on Muggle psychological theories and tonight he's going to try to apply one of them. Psychoanalysis. He's going to be Freud and I'm going to be his patient."

"Who the hell is Freud?" asked Ron, raising his voice.

"You see, Harry?" asked Draco in a tone of mock pleasantry. "I'm quite even-handed these days. Enough to state that Ron also comes from ignorant peasants, and since they're pureblooded, that must mean I haven't a prejudiced bone in my body."

Trust Draco to compliment himself while he insulted Ron, and expect applause besides.

"Draco!" exclaimed Hermione. "Stop pretending to be rude!"

"You'd rather I were openly rude? That can be arranged."

"I want you to stop being rude, full stop!"

"If you can," put in Ron.

"I think he was pretending not to be rude, actually," said Harry. "But it would be better if you'd just explain Freud, Draco. I've barely heard of him either."

That made Draco grin like a cat who'd got the cream. "Certainly. Ron, I'm going to have your girlfriend stretch out on a couch and close her eyes, breathing slow and deep until she's in a relaxed state. After that it's very simple. We'll discuss her sexual fantasies in detail and try to determine if her desires stem from any sort of childhood trauma--"

Ron yelped and launched himself at Draco.

Sighing, Harry stepped between them.

"We're not doing that the way it sounds," said Hermione, glaring at Draco before she returned her attention to Ron. "It's a role-play. We have a case study of one of Freud's real patients and it's all just pretend." She went back to glaring. "And I won't do it at all if Draco doesn't stick to a professional demeanour. This wasn't a good start."

Draco nodded, looking a bit shamefaced, but when Hermione turned away again, his eyes glinted.

"You know how I told you to stop being a prick about Gryffindor?" asked Harry. "You have to stop being one to Ron, too. Or I won't want to spend time around you. And Draco . . . I've been enjoying our study sessions. I'd hate to lose them."

Draco gave another nod, a curt one this time, then headed down the hall with Hermione. Ron scowled as he watched them go, then appeared to try to lift himself above his annoyance. "Wrist
feeling well enough to have a go at some flying?"

Harry was never more glad that he had an appointment of his own. "Eh, I have to head up to Dumbledore's office. You saw me get that note yesterday at breakfast."

"Yeah. Forgot." Ron looked a bit lost for a second, and then appeared to shake it off. "Well, good luck with whatever it is."

Harry leaned in close. "Nothing you can't know about. Just the good doctor."

The good doctor . . . the good doctor . . . Strange. Harry wasn't sure where he'd heard that phrase before, but it sounded oddly familiar.

"So you're already remembering bits and pieces," said Dr Goode as she sat on a rather austere chair the Room of Requirement had conjured. "That's encouraging."

"None of them seem to mean much."

"Without more context, they won't, no."

Harry scowled. "If you'd let my friends answer my questions, I'd have a lot more context, Dr Goode."

The lines around her eyes crinkled like she was amused. "If I hadn't stopped the random flow of information surrounding you, you wouldn't have begun to remember even those bits and pieces, Harry. The reason you're remembering things now is that your mind is motivated to do so."

No, thought Harry. I'm remembering things because Draco's stories are helping me. He had proof that her theories were wrong, but if he said as much, he'd get Draco in trouble. Harry wasn't about to do anything that might cut off the only source of information he had.

Of course, there were the newspapers, but Draco knew a lot more than any reporter would.

He wanted to grind his teeth at the unfairness of it all. His plan for his therapy session had been to convince the woman that he wasn't remembering anything yet, so he could use that as leverage to make her change her stupid rules. But just as Draco had feared, he'd let slip a couple of details he shouldn't know. He should have excused that by saying that he was told those things in the first couple of days after his accident, before she'd lain down her rules in the first place. He'd been worried, though, that that might contradict things he'd said to her the last time they'd met.

So now, she thought that her ridiculous memory-healing system was actually working.

Oh, well. Too late now to make her think differently.

"So who calls you the 'good doctor'?" asked Harry.

She was too clever to fall for that, it turned out. "I'm hardly likely to break my own rules when it comes to giving you information," she said gently, crossing her legs at the ankle as she leaned forward a little to study him.

"Worth a try--"

She ignored the muttered comment. "Besides, Harry, I'm not here just because you've lost access to your memories of the last year. How is the rest of your life going?"
Harry stared at her. "No offence, but I can't imagine baring my soul to you. I don't know you, and even if I felt like I did, what could I possibly tell you that you'd understand?"

"You might be surprised."

"All right, then. We talked a bit about hydas in Magical Creatures class. I guess Hagrid was breeding them last year, and a couple escaped into the lake and now he's worried about them killing Merpeople, or possibly mating with them. I can't even begin to imagine what sort of monster that might create."

Harry hid a smile, confident that she'd have nothing to say to all that. She probably didn't even know what a hydra was.

"I can't either," she said calmly. "I can imagine, however, that the prospect probably concerns you."

"It would concern anybody with a speck of intelligence."

"But you in particular?"

Harry flushed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Perhaps not to others, but I have a fairly keen understanding of your basic personality traits," said the therapist. "Those haven't changed because of recent events. If a monster emerges from the lake, you'll feel that you have to protect the other students, so of course the idea of such a monster bothers you quite a bit."

"I think I had a nightmare about it," Harry admitted. He wasn't sure he should tell her that, but she did seem to understand some things if not others.

"Did the monster take any particular form in your nightmare?"

"I . . . well, that's the thing." Harry bit his lip. "I think it was a nightmare about the monster, but mostly it was just about the lake. There was water everywhere. And I was in the water. Over my head, but I wasn't drowning. It was like I couldn't drown, because I was the water. Except, I was still myself."

"And?"

"It was just like that. For hours, but you know how dreams are. It might have only lasted a moment that seemed like hours while I was asleep."

"First you called it a nightmare, and now you call it a dream," she observed, her expression neutral. Harry knew what that meant. She was trying to draw him out, but not trying to tell him what to think. She'd been doing a lot of that during the half-hour they'd spent in the Room of Requirement.

"It was a dream, I suppose."

"Then why did you call it a nightmare at first?"

"Because I thought the water meant I had to be dreaming about the lake, which would mean the hydra problem. I mean, I'd heard about the escaped hatchlings earlier that same day," explained Harry, feeling defensive. "I assumed I'd forgotten about the monster. You know, how parts of your dreams can be hard to remember. But now I think that maybe there wasn't any monster at all. Just . . . water."
"Why think that? Perhaps there was a monster and you simply don't recall it."

"No, because now that I really think about it, the dream seems like it was really calm all the way through."

"Possibly not related to the hydra story, then. Is that your greatest worry at the moment, Harry?"

He wasn't sure why he wanted to tell her his real worry. Maybe because it had actually been pretty helpful to discuss his dream with her. He felt a lot less unsettled about it now. "Um . . . well . . . you've never flown on a broom, so I'm not sure you could have any insight into this, but . . . um . . . I seem to have developed a little . . . er . . . fear of heights."

"Perfectly understandable, from what I know of your Quidditch accident."

Her calm, accepting tone was annoying. Damn it, a fear of heights was a serious problem! She shouldn't talk like it was nothing. "It's not understandable. I can't even remember getting hit by a Bludger. Or falling. There's no reason I should be alarmed to fly high now!"

"Your conscious mind can't remember those things yet. Your subconscious mind is perfectly well aware of them, and is reacting to them."

She was still talking in that infuriatingly calm tone.

"Well, I have to get over it," snapped Harry. "I'm a Seeker, which means--"

A very faint smile crossed her lips. "I know what a Seeker is."

"Then you know that I have to be able to fly!"

"I would certainly think so."

Harry gripped the arms of his chair. "So tell me what to do!"

Her smile grew a little bit wider. "I didn't want to push, but since you ask . . . We call this technique 'desensitization.' It consists of using tiny incremental steps to become more comfortable with your fear, beginning with some very benign version of it."

Harry relaxed his grip. "Um . . ."

She understood at once. "Suppose you wished to overcome a paralysing fear of spiders. The first step might be to--" She suddenly jerked as a pad of parchment and a charcoal stick appeared on the table at her side, but then she chuckled. "Interesting room. All right, here."

Taking up the art materials, she quickly sketched something in broad strokes.

When she flipped it around, Harry almost chuckled. She'd drawn a cartoon spider, its legs folded beneath it, a goofy smile on its humanized face. "Even Ron might not be afraid of that one."

"Taking Ron as an example, then, when he could hold and touch this sketch without any anxiety, we might move on to a stuffed spider. One that is a tiny bit more realistic. And when he was comfortable with that, something marginally more realistic, and so on. Until, in the end, his final challenge might be to allow a live tarantula to crawl about on him."

That time, Harry did chuckle. Tarantulas were nothing compared to acromantulas, but he supposed that she couldn't be expected to know that. "So what do I do?"

"Harry," she said patiently. "I used the example of spiders in order not to tell you what to do. It's
"Hmmm. Well, I suppose I could go up to the Owlery, and--" That thought brought him up short. "But I already did that, and it didn't bother me at all. I was standing right at the window, talking to Hedwig. I even looked down--" He'd been trying to spot the statue of Lucius Malfoy. "--and it never even crossed my mind to worry about falling."

"Then you aren't afraid of heights."

"But when I fly too high I start to get dizzy and my palms get slick and it feels like my heart is going to burst through my chest, it's pounding so hard--"

"Classic symptoms of an anxiety attack," she agreed. "Have you told anyone else about the problem?"

"No."

"Desensitization is an appropriate treatment for a phobia, but what you're describing is, as I said, more akin to anxiety. My recommendation is that you tell someone you trust that you're having this difficulty. Someone who is a good flyer and would be willing to work with you to overcome it."

"By flying low to the ground at first?"

"Does that bother you, flying low?"

"Not at all."

"Then that wouldn't have a therapeutic effect. Fly high, but in the company of someone who can assist you if your anxiety causes you to lose your concentration. Eventually you won't need the crutch."

Harry frowned. He didn't like the idea of telling anyone. What would they think, a Seeker who couldn't go more than fifteen or twenty feet in the air without feeling like the world was starting to spin beneath him?

"Harry," said Dr Goode. She waited until he'd looked up at her. "Those who can admit to weakness are stronger than those who can't."

"Maybe so, but they don't look stronger to others, do they? And I have to-- I mean, people expect--" Harry sighed. "I don't know how to explain without making it sound like I'm full of myself. Or without mentioning things that are supposed to stay secret--"

"This is why I advised you to tell someone you trust about your flying problem. A true friend won't think less of you for admitting that you need help."

Harry knew that, but . . . "I don't want people knowing that I can't fly like I used to."

"But you can fly like you used to." The therapist smiled. "You just need to allow yourself to accept it."

"I . . . I . . ." Harry wasn't sure what to say. He supposed he'd think about it, but he didn't really want to admit it out loud, so he stood up instead. "I should be getting back to Gryffindor."

"Feel free to owl me if you wish," said Dr Goode as she rose to her own feet.

Harry nodded, telling himself he shouldn't be surprised. She was more conversant with the
wizarding world than he'd thought. "We should head back to Dumbledore's office so you can get
started on your way home."

"I must say, I enjoyed this room a great deal more than the bathroom."

Harry flushed. "Sorry about that. I just couldn't think of a good place."

"Don't trouble yourself over it." She smiled again, the expression somehow gentle yet probing all at
once. "We can meet wherever you wish. Even the bathroom again if that suits you. Next week,
then?"

"Why ask me? I didn't get a say about this session."

"I'm giving you a say about the next one."

"Um . . . I'll let you know," decided Harry.

The therapist nodded and then stood still as Harry draped his invisibility cloak over her and cast a
spell to muffle their footsteps for the walk back to Dumbledore's office.

"Your determination to avoid Ethics class is ridiculous," said Draco in a hard voice on Friday
night. "It was bad enough on Tuesday when you disappeared at the end of Transfiguration. What
you did yesterday was appallingly rude. Vanishing in the corridor while we were talking to you?"

"It's your own fault." Harry shrugged. "I'd rather have slipped out of Transfiguration again, but you
and Ron and Hermione were keeping such a close eye on me that it didn't seem feasible. So I
decided to leave on the way there."

"'Leave' is an interesting turn of phrase. You vanished into thin air in the middle of a sentence!"

Harry shrugged. "You don't want me to say 'sorry' when I'm not, do you?"

Draco's eyes glinted like steel. "Next time I'll keep a hand as well as an eye on you."

"Go ahead." Harry already had his next idea mapped out.

"What are you planning? Besides avoiding Ethics, that is."

"What makes you think I'm planning anything?" Harry reached out for the cup of tea that had
appeared on his side table. Strange how the room was always offering him a drink of one sort of
another. "Anyway, this is a boring conversation. I'd rather talk more about that new spell you
showed the D.A. last time. Do the Death Eaters use a lot of incantations like that?"

"Non-Latin, I presume you mean." Draco stretched his legs out, hovering them in the air until an
ottoman appeared. Then he lowered them with a faint smirk on his features. "Not a lot, no. That
spell originated outside of the European magical tradition, and Death Eaters on the whole are a
rather prejudiced lot, as you may have noticed."

"Master of understatement, aren't you?"

"I could go further and point out the obvious Voldemort-Hitler parallels. World domination,
obsession with bloodlines . . ."

If he'd been trying to impress Harry, he had succeeded. "You've learned a lot about Muggle
"I hardly think that being aware of the single most significant event of the century qualifies as 'a lot.' And in any case, I'd already heard of World War II before I started taking classes with Professor Burbage."

"I can imagine," said Harry dryly. "Hitler sounds like just the kind of person Death Eaters would admire."

"No, I learned about him only in Muggle Studies. But Lucius did teach me about the atomic bomb. He thinks it makes a good argument for eliminating Muggles at the earliest opportunity, since magic probably can't defend against it if they learn enough about the wizarding world to want to eliminate it." Draco slanted him a glance. "Don't worry if you don't know what to say to that. You didn't know the last time we discussed it, either."

Harry nodded. He wanted to ask if Draco had heard from his Muggle girlfriend, but he thought he'd better not bring her up. She probably hadn't written again and it would just upset Draco to have to think about it.

So he asked what he'd been wondering about since earlier that day when he'd gone through his trunk and all his pockets. "Do you know where my vault key is?"

Draco's eyes glinted again. "Oh, yes. I certainly do."

Harry didn't like the sound of that. "Don't tell me -- I was keeping it in Slytherin?"

As plans went, that one sounded absolutely brainless, but Harry supposed it meant that he'd had a lot of faith in the wards on his trunk. Otherwise, he'd never have trusted the Slytherins to leave anything of his alone.

"It's in the dungeons, but not in Slytherin."

Harry saw red. "That black-hearted snake! He took it, didn't he? He took my key away the same way he took my cloak and my mirror and my map of Hogwarts!"

"Don't be an utter arse," said Draco scornfully. "All you're proving is that you have no idea what sort of man our father is."

"He's not my father!"

"He is, whether you wish to acknowledge it or not, and the way you like to argue the point is tedious. Now, as I was saying, Severus took the mirror because it was leaking black magic after you had used it in a way never intended, and he took the map in order to help exonerate me when I was wrongfully accused of murder. And when he took your cloak away, it was because I had misused it and was likely to do so again. There's not a lot to fault him for in all that."

"Of course there is," said Harry hotly. "He took my map to help you. Which I suppose I can understand if there was a murder involved, but when it came to the cloak he took it away from me because you were being an arse! Don't you see how unfair that was?"

"He was doing the best he could--" Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yes, it was unfair, all right? But blame me, not him."

Harry didn't want to. He felt like blaming Snape. For everything. The urge was irrational and he knew it, but that didn't stop him from feeling it. "Yeah, well . . . did you know that Snape and
Dumbledore are still refusing to give my map back?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what?" asked Harry. "What do you know? What are they using it for?"

"They haven't told me."

"But you know something, all the same," said Harry, leaning closer. "You have some kind of idea. I can tell."

"It's nothing more than a logical inference. Severus is concerned about you and you won't go near him without a court order. At least by using the map he can see where you are--"

Harry had already thought of that. "There's something else going on. Dumbledore made it sound like an Order mission."

"Oh. In that case, I can't help you. I told you that they don't tell me much."

"What about my key, then?" Harry's voice grew scornful. "I presume that Snape demanded it but with good reason."

"He never demanded it at all. You gave it to him."

"I did not!"

"Either stop calling me a liar, or let me have the Veritaserum."

Harry scowled. "All right, fine. I gave it to him. Any particular reason why I would?"

"You said you wanted to be dependent. That you'd missed that growing up. It was as though you didn't think you'd ever be a whole person without going through that stage. I'll admit that I thought you an imbecile at the time, but now that I know a little more about psychology . . . I don't know. Perhaps it was valid realisation on your part."

"I wanted to be dependent," said Harry, feeling sick. "That can't be true. I've known for years that I can't rely on anybody!"

"You don't think you rely on Ron and Hermione? And now, perhaps, just a tiny bit . . . me?"

Harry's eyes flashed scorn. "I meant adults."

"All I can tell you is that you found Severus to be reliable." Draco sighed. "Really, Harry. Be reasonable. That man would do anything for you."

"Including giving my key back, then," said Harry, narrowing his eyes.

"I don't know. You asked him to keep it until you were grown up."

"I am grown up."

"Grown up and on your own. You didn't want it back while you were still in school."

"Well, I do, now!"

"If you need money I can certainly--"
Harry recoiled. "I'm not taking money from you!"

"I don't see why not. It's not as though it's filthy lucre derived from questionable Malfoy dealings. The money I have now is from Sirius Black, as you well know. And it's yours in a sense."

"I'm still not taking it. I want my key."

"Well then, ask Severus for it," said Draco, clearly exasperated. "And if he won't return it then ask him for your allowance!"

"Allowance!"

"Yes, allowance. He pays us every week, rain or shine, but in your case he probably thinks it would stir up a dragon's nest just now."

It would definitely do that. And it wouldn't help, anyway. "I wanted to owl-order something and I don't want to send coins through the post," muttered Harry. "I need my key."

"Then--" Draco raised an eyebrow. "Who told you about owl-ordering?"

Harry tried to think back. "No idea."

"I told you last year, and until I did, you'd never heard of it." Draco smiled. "You're remembering more than you think!"

Harry might have been excited, but knowing about owl-ordering wasn't going to help him reach into the afterlife to call Sirius. "Good, but I still want my key."

"Then you have to speak with Severus."

Harry bit his lower lip. "Can't you get it for me?"

"It's behind his wards."

"But you managed to get the Veritaserum--"

"Yes, I did," said Draco grimly. "But I'm not suicidal enough to broach his wards twice in as many weeks. Particularly not when it would work against my interests. I want you to talk to Severus, Harry. If it takes needing your key to do it, then so be it."

"Fine," said Harry, jumping to his feet. "I'll go talk to him right now!"

"Don't tell him that I said he had your key."

"I should tell him." Harry scowled. "But I suppose that would work against my interests, so I won't."

Draco stood up and put a hand on Harry's sleeve when Harry started to walk away. "One other thing. Be civil. I know you don't like Severus, but that's because you can't remember the good things about him. Please, Harry."

He stopped, the frustration on his face saying that he thought he was wasting his breath.

He wasn't, though. Not completely. Draco had said please. Harry knew it shouldn't affect him so much, but somehow, he couldn't ignore that word. Not when it came from Draco. "I'll do my best."
"Would you like me to come down with you?"

"No. I know the way."

Harry let himself out of the Room of Requirement then, and headed straight to the dungeons.

Snape wasn't at home, though. No matter how long Harry stood in the corridor, the door to the man's quarters never appeared.

Harry brooded about his key all night, falling into vague dreams of water long after midnight.

As soon as he finished breakfast on Saturday morning, he made talking with Snape his top priority. Since the man was so hard to track down these days, Harry approached him at the head table. At least that would help to keep the initial exchange civil. Harry could imagine yelling at Snape in private, and he'd done it in front of Dumbledore, but doing it with all the teachers looking on was different.

"Sir?"

Snape glanced up over the Potions Quarterly he was reading. The moment their gazes connected, he almost dropped the journal in his hand.

"Harry," he said, his voice very faint. In the next moment he regained some of his usual composure. "What can I do for you?"

_You can give me my key . . ._ That wasn't the way to go about this, though. Harry wasn't going to admit what Draco had told him. "I need to find something," he said, looking away from those dark eyes. They saw too much, and he didn't like it. "Um . . . I've looked everywhere else it could be, so I think I must have left it . . . um . . . in your quarters."

"Quite likely. I encouraged you to leave some of your things at home."

_Home._ Harry hated the way that word produced a small pang somewhere inside him. Mastering that emotion -- it was useless since he didn't have a home no matter what Snape said -- Harry made his face as expressionless as he could. "I need to look around, then."

"The wards will admit you, of course. You needn't even ask."

If Harry had sincerely been intending to search for his key, he might have agreed to that, which would have been a mistake. Thankfully, he didn't want to be alone in Snape's quarters, so he didn't accidentally give the impression that he already knew how to get in. "Um, do I just stand in the hallway and the door pops open?"

Snape's eyes seemed to grow darker, though surely that wasn't possible. "Draco said you'd seen him tap out the correct sequence to enter."

"I wasn't paying attention." When Snape didn't reply to that, Harry decided he'd have to make the lie more believable. "Why would I? From what you yourself told me, I didn't have any magic for most of last year, so I assumed the door wouldn't work the same way for both of us. Does it?"

"Yes. I will show you, if you wish."

There was a slight hesitation in the words, like Snape was expecting a refusal. Harry shook his
head, reacting to the tone and not the words.

"Ah. Of course." That time, the man's voice was stilted. "I will ask Draco to show you again, then."

"No. I meant--" Gulping a little, Harry raised his eyes. "You can show me, sir. Can we do it now? Or when you're through with breakfast?"

"We can see to it now. I hope you can find the missing item."

Snape stood up, which made his breakfast plate vanish. Harry had a vague impression that it had still been full of food; there was no doubt that the man's teacup was more than half-filled. He began to feel a little guilty, then. It was sort of stupid, because he knew he shouldn't care if Snape skipped a meal.

But somehow, he did.

*It's just because I know what it's like to be hungry,* he told himself as Snape gestured for Harry to go around the edge of the head table.

Dumbledore had been out of his seat, speaking to Hagrid throughout the exchange, but he'd probably heard every word of it, judging from the way he turned his head and beamed when Harry came to stand beside Snape.

"This route is shorter," said Snape quietly, leading the way to a door behind the head table.

"Good." Harry would just as soon not walk the length of the Great Hall with Snape, anyway. He didn't want people saying that they were mending fences or something. That wasn't going to happen.

For a few minutes neither one of them said anything, but when they reached the first set of stairs descending into the dungeons, Snape broke the silence. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Your bandaged wrist would suggest otherwise."

Damn. Another pang. Did Snape know that he was pushing Harry's buttons with remarks like that? Did he know how many times a younger Harry had come back from school bruised, hoping that somebody would notice, that somebody would care, only to learn that--

"It's not serious," said Harry quickly. He couldn't think about the other. Aunt Petunia was dead, anyway. There was no point in dwelling on the past.

"Have you seen Madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes."

"That's interesting, considering she has disclaimed any knowledge of your injury," drawled Snape.

Well, at least that was more like the Snape Harry knew and hated. Trying to trap and trick Harry was second nature to him. "Nice of you to ask when you already knew the answer."

"But I didn't know the answer to the larger question of who you are these days. I am attempting to get to know you again. It is useful, though disheartening, to learn that you will lie to me with impunity."
"I didn't lie to you," snapped Harry. "You asked if I'd seen Madam Pomfrey, and I have seen her. I just haven't seen her in the last week."

"I suppose you will take offence if I observe that your verbal evasion is somewhat Slytherin."

"You suppose right."

"Then I will merely point out that it is also childish."

Harry ground his teeth and walked faster, wishing that he could just demand his key outright. Anything to get this whole ordeal over with.

"How are your classes?" asked Snape, easily keeping pace.

"You know, you don't have to make polite small talk with me," said Harry, trying his best to stay civil. It wasn't just because Draco had said please, either. Harry wasn't stupid. He wanted something from Snape, and he was less likely to get it if he said what was really on his mind, which was something like, We don't have anything to say to one another, so could you please stop trying to find something?

"As you wish."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes more, but it was a lot less satisfying than Harry had expected. He kept wondering what Snape was thinking. Maybe it was easier to keep the man's attention on something innocuous, so he couldn't start applying his keen intelligence towards wondering if Harry's uncharacteristic behaviour had some motive besides the obvious.

"I suppose all the teachers have been told about the hydra problem."

If Snape was surprised to hear Harry speak, he hid it well. "Yes, but the general consensus is that there will probably be no serious ramifications. A few young hydras are unlikely to be able to defend themselves against the other creatures in the lake."

"That's what Hagrid's afraid of."

Snape chuckled slightly, a sound so odd and unexpected that Harry almost stumbled. "I meant that they would be eaten, not that they would find themselves mated."

"What eats baby hydras?"

"The shraknels, for one thing."

"Shraknels?"

"A species of magical shark."

"Oh, wonderful." Dumbledore had sent students out to swim with sharks.

"The Second Task took place during their hibernation season," added Snape.

Harry shivered. He didn't like the idea that Snape knew him well enough to tell what he'd been thinking. It wasn't through Legilimency, either. No eye contact.

By then, they had reached the wall that concealed Snape's door. "Splay out your hand on this stone," said Snape, indicating it and waiting for Harry to reach his hand up. "Then use your wand to tap your fingers in this pattern."
He touched his index finger to several of Harry's fingers, but left it to Harry to repeat the action with his wand and open the door.

"Maybe you should change that sequence," said Harry as he stepped in. It wasn't right that he could let himself in at any time. He didn't really belong here, after all. "And adjust the wards on your Floo. I mean . . . I mean . . ."

"No," said Snape in a low voice. "Should you desire entry, I wish you to have it."

Harry tried to pretend he hadn't said that. "Well then, I suppose I'll look around in . . . in the room."

"Your room, or the parlour?"

"The bedroom." Harry certainly wasn't going to call it "his" room.

Snape leaned down slightly and looked into Harry's eyes. "Would you prefer that I leave?"

Harry would, but it would defeat the purpose of getting Snape to give up the key once Harry's "search" failed. Yet he couldn't bring himself to say that he wanted Snape to stay. That wouldn't be fair to him, to make him think that Harry was coming around when he wasn't.

And yet . . . when had Snape ever been fair to Harry?

The answer to that was as obvious as it was unwelcome. Snape had clearly made some effort during the past year, and he was making that effort again now, helping Harry get in here so he could find his things.

"Uh . . . up to you," Harry finally murmured.

"Very well. I will sit out here and finish reading my journal--" Snape's features twitched a little.

"What?"

"I appear to have left it at breakfast," he said, looking down at his empty hands as he shook his head. "Perhaps that's not surprising, considering."

Harry certainly thought it was surprising. How could Snape have let himself become so distracted, just because Harry spoke to him for a minute? It wasn't like him at all. But then, Draco had said something about the stress of this situation affecting Snape.

Harry didn't like that idea. He didn't want to be important to Snape. He didn't want to be anything to Snape.

As quickly as he could without looking ridiculous, Harry went into the room that was "his" and closed the door.

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Harry thought that fifteen minutes ought to be enough.

At the end of that time, he opened the bedroom door. "It's not here," he said, making sure he sounded bleak. "I don't suppose you might know where it is."

"I might," said Snape, opening his eyes and standing up. He looked like he'd been meditating or something. "What is the object of your search?"
"My vault key."

It took all of Harry's willpower and self-control not to glance at Snape triumphantly as he said the words. Or curiously, maybe. Truth to tell, he was dying to know how Snape would handle this situation. Would he lie straight to Harry's face? Would he claim he had no idea where the key was? Would he pretend to help Harry look for it?

"Ah." Snape cleared his throat. "I should have anticipated this. But with Hogsmeade visits curtailed this year due to . . ."

"Voldemort's attacks. Everyone thought he'd target the students, starting with the Express." Harry shrugged. "And no, nobody's been talking to me. I've read the newspapers. Are you going to take those away now?"

"Per the good doctor's instructions, those are allowed."

_The good doctor._ Harry shivered. "What were you saying about my key?"

"I didn't anticipate that you would want it."

Harry narrowed his eyes in a glare, but tried not to overdo it. "What do you mean? Do you know where it is? Do you have it?"

"I have it."

"You took my key!" shouted Harry. Probably that was overdoing it, but suddenly, Harry wasn't acting. The anger was real. "You took away my key like you took my cloak and my mirror and my map, which you still won't give back!"

"I took your key only because you gave it to me."

"Right. Why would I do that?"

"Why would I answer that when you will merely doubt any explanation I offer?" asked Snape in a mocking tone. "But perhaps you will believe yourself."

"Huh?"

"Wait here."

Snape vanished down the corridor that led off his living room. He was back in less than a minute, a scroll of parchment in his hand. "I should warn you that you may find the contents of this upsetting."

"More upsetting than you confiscating my vault key?"

"Much more so." Snape gestured to the couch. "Perhaps you should sit down."

"I'll be all right."

By the third sentence in, Harry's legs felt wobbly enough that he did sink onto the couch.

_Dear Professor Snape,_

_Would you take this key and put it away somewhere safe for me until I'm grown and out on my own? You told me not so long ago that that was what you would "really like," and after I'd thought_
about everything we'd discussed, I realised it was a good idea. You see, I told you once that I didn't know how to be anybody's son, and while that's probably still true, I do know one thing that I didn't then. You do know how to be a father. You're actually really good at it.

I want to be your son, I really do. But it seems like up until now, I've really just been saying that I am. I haven't actually been being it. And that's where the money comes in. I'm just so used to looking after myself. But in doing that, I feel like I've missed out on some huge part of life, and as long as I remain a "quasi-independent adult," as you put it, I'll never know what I'm missing. You thought I didn't even realise you were supposed to support me, but I do realise that. It was just out of reach for me, if that makes sense. But now I think it's not.

So... would you take this key and put it away somewhere safe for me until I'm grown and out on my own?

With deepest respect,

Harry James Potter

"I feel sick," moaned Harry when he'd finished reading.

"Would you like a potion?"

"No." Harry cleared his throat. "I'd just like my key back, I think. Are you going to give it to me?"

Snape opened a hand, and there it was, glinting black against the pale backdrop of his palm.

Harry tried to reach out and take it, but he ended up snatching it instead. "I'll just be going, now."

"Stay for a few moments. You've had a shock."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. The words in the letter kept ringing through his head. They were all wrong, but not because they were forged or something stupid like that. He could tell that they were his. Worse, they sounded like things he'd long ago decided he'd never say to anyone. He'd known for a long time that he'd missed out on things that other children took for granted, things that other children didn't even know they had. The fact that he'd told Snape he felt that way . . . it made him feel sick all over again. "I . . . I . . . that letter's not really valid any longer. You know that, I hope."

"Hence the key."

"Oh, yeah. Right." Harry cleared his throat again, and then miraculously, he managed to think about something other than the fact that he'd obviously made a colossal fool of himself the year before. "Aren't you a complete hypocrite, showing me that when you've forbidden all my friends to tell me a single thing about what happened when I used to be adopted?"

"You are still adopted," said Snape dryly. "And no, I don't believe that showing you a piece of writing makes me a hypocrite. It's not so very different from Filius giving back your essays from your sixth year here."

"This is hardly an essay." Harry flung the scroll to the table in front of him. He wasn't sure why he'd still been holding onto it. "And . . . wait. How do you know about the essays?"

Snape gave him a speaking look.

"Stop talking to the other teachers about me!"
"I will not. You are my son."

"And you think that gives you the right to--"

"Harry," interrupted Snape. "You look almost green. Are you sure you wouldn't like a stomach-calming draught?"

Harry drew in a huge breath, but it still felt like his insides were churning. "Fine. But don't lace it with muscle relaxant or something else to make me stay here!"

"You have my word."

"The word of a Slytherin. Ha." The minute he said it, Harry remembered Draco pointing out Harry's hypocrisy about houses.

Flushing, he pressed his lips together and crossed his arms in front of his chest. When Snape returned, Harry unwound enough to drink the potion, though he made a show of sniffing it first.

"I don't feel any better."

"Give it five minutes. Now, as I was saying, I will indeed continue to speak to your professors about your progress. That is within the purview of a responsible parent, and as long as you are my son I will--"

As long as you are my son . . .

"That's it, then," interrupted Harry. He wasn't sure why he hadn't thought of this before. Maybe because he had no memory of what it had taken to get adopted in the first place. Or maybe it was Draco's earlier mention of a court order. Adoption was some kind of legal procedure, obviously. In the wizarding world it was probably magical as well, but if it could be done, it only stood to reason that it could be undone. Somehow. "We'll just erase the adoption. Then I won't be your son."

Snape sat down in the chair nearest Harry and leaned forward over his hands. "That would make no difference to me."

"Then you won't mind starting legal proceedings, or whatever it takes."

"On the contrary, I mind very much."

"Why? What does it take for . . . uh, for an unadoption? Is that even a word?"

Snape ignored the second question. "Mutual repudiation."

"That doesn't sound very difficult--"

"Did you hear the first word?" Snape's voice took on a cutting edge Harry had heard many times before, though now it sounded like a knife that had been blunted. "Mutual. And Harry? I will never agree to repudiate you."

"But I'm an adult now," said Harry, trying to keep his voice reasonable. "No offence, but I don't need a father any longer. We could just undo it, and then maybe you'd feel free to, you know . . . back off a bit."

"Would you want James to 'back off' were he here? What would you think of him as a father if he did agree to end your relationship on your request?"
A much stronger pang than the other ones seemed to stab through Harry. "That's not fair," he said, his voice so rough he wished he hadn't spoken. It took a minute before he felt like he could speak again. "He . . . he really is my dad. Or would be, if he were here."

"So it is only inheritance through blood that makes a true family?" Snape leaned back in his chair, a faint sneer on his face as he regarded Harry. "I shall let Draco know at once. How should I begin? With the news that he isn't really my son, or with an announcement that he ought to change his name back to Malfoy?"

"No need to be nasty."

"Pardon me. Based on numerous statements of your own, I thought there was."

"Draco's different," exclaimed Harry. "He wants all this. I don't."

"You did. It wasn't a trick, or a lie, or a hoax. It also wasn't pretend. You did."

"All right, so I did!" shouted Harry. There wasn't much else he could say, considering the letter he'd read earlier. "But I don't now. Why can't that be enough for you? Why can't you let me go?"

"Because," said Snape softly, but with every word intense, "you are my son."

"But we could undo it--"

"Love made you my son. I can't undo that just because you would wish it so."

"I told you not to say that--"

"I have tried to respect that, as I have no wish to discomfit you. But Harry . . . it will remain true whether I speak of it or not."

 Fuck.

"Fine. So love me," said Harry desperately. "I can't stop you. That doesn't mean you can't help me out with this mutual repudiation thing. Let's just do that, all right? I'm sure I'll feel better about everything once I can tell myself I'm not adopted any longer. I don't think you know how much that bothers me--"

"Of course I know. May I speak frankly?"

Harry gaped. "You mean you've been holding back?"

"You have no idea."

"Go ahead. Whatever--"

"The adoption upsets you because you feel conflicted, if not terrified, by the entire concept of family. You have a pathological fear of emotional abandonment, which is unsurprising considering that you formed no healthy attachments until the age of eleven, and none at all with adults until much later still. You are pushing me away with all your might because that is far easier than trying to trust that I will never abandon you."

"What makes you such an expert?" sneered Harry.

"Mainly experience."
"Well, you're mental! I don't fear you'll abandon me. I'm trying to get you to do it, in case you haven't noticed!"

"Well, I won't do it."

Harry felt like he was reaching some sort of boiling point, and if things inside him got any hotter, he'd have to start screaming. "Why not?"

"Several reasons I have already explained. But there is one more: because I promised."

"You promised!"

"Yes. I will never repudiate you, Harry. No matter what. As promised."

"But-- but--" Harry knew he was sputtering, but he couldn't help it. "But I want you to!"

"Nevertheless."

"But--"

"From a purely practical standpoint, you shouldn't even ask," added Snape. "The wards here are very strong and constructed specifically to deny entrance to anyone who wishes you harm. They are based on several factors, one of which is your legal right to reside here. We should do nothing to undermine that."

"So you won't unadopt me because it could affect the wards--"

"You misunderstand. Wilfully, I suspect."

"All right, fine! The only reason you mentioned the wards was to shut me up!"

"Not precisely, but you are, in fact, old enough to understand what you're requesting when you speak of 'unadoption.'"

Harry swallowed. "Maybe these wards are already gone, though. Have you thought of that? I mean, I am of age now, and I always had the feeling that the protections at the Dursleys were going to fade off when I turned seventeen."

"These are more formalised; they are tied into the legal basis of our relationship." Snape drew his wand and flicked it toward the walls, which immediately appeared to be covered with a brightly glowing green fog.

"That's the colour of an *Avada Kedavra*--"

"Yes, because it all goes back to your mother's sacrifice."

Harry closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to see it. "But I don't feel adopted any longer. I mean, not at all, sir. Doesn't that make any difference?"

"Thankfully not. It might, were we foolish enough to pursue an end to our legal relationship. But do not misunderstand again. My determination not to repudiate you has *nothing* to do with needing the wards."

Harry ignored that last part. He understood, but he couldn't talk about it. He didn't want to hear again that Snape loved him or that he was Snape's son no matter what. "I . . . well, I do see why mutual repudiation wouldn't be a very good idea right now. But, uh, maybe after I manage to kill
Voldemort-- or maybe he'll kill me. Then I won't have to worry about any of this."

"Don't talk that way. Voldemort will not destroy you. The Order will see to it."

"Is that why you need the map? To make sure that Voldemort won't destroy me?"

"Yes."

"Care to elaborate?"

"That would be counter-productive."

Harry sighed. "Of course it would. Well, this has all been very interesting, sir, but my stomach's feeling better now, so I'm going to head back to the Tower."

"One more moment."

"What?"

Snape gestured at Harry's bandaged wrist. "I need to see your injury."

"Good luck," muttered Harry.

He was shocked a second later when Snape flicked his wand again and the bandage vanished.

"Do you mind?"

"Evidently, I do." Snape furrowed his brow. "You don't appear to be injured."

"That's what I meant! Good luck seeing it, because there's nothing to see!"

"Then why has your wrist been bandaged for over a week?"

Snape, thought Harry, definitely didn't qualify as someone he would tell about his Quidditch phobia. Or anxiety. That probably was a better word for it. "That's none of your business!"

"And the reason you needed your key?"

If he only knew. "That's definitely none of your business!"

"If you are in need of funds I would be very happy to resume paying your allowance. Or if you would prefer, I can arrange to take you to Gringott's--"

"I have to go," said Harry desperately.

"Very well." Snape flicked his wand again, restoring the bandage. "Enjoy your weekend."

"Yeah. Uh . . ."

"Feel free to come in if you recall anything else you need from your things here. My quarters will always admit you."


Snape merely waited, one eyebrow slightly raised.

The trouble was, Harry didn't know what he was trying to say. It made him angry to be anywhere
near Snape. Reasonable or not, the emotion was still there, and nothing could change it. Not the letter about his key . . . not the Potter goblet sitting in a place of honour on the mantlepiece, proving that Snape had indeed welcomed a Potter into his home. Into his life.

Though of course the Snape goblets were in the centre, weren't they . . .

Harry peered hard at the row of six gleaming goblets, feeling like something was wrong. He had a strong feeling that the Snape ones shouldn't be here . . . but that was ridiculous. These were Snape's quarters, after all. Why shouldn't he have heirlooms from his own family?

And why shouldn't Harry have heirlooms from his, and have them where they belonged, which was up in the Tower where Harry really lived? This wasn't his home, not in any sense of the word that mattered. Maybe it had been once, but it wasn't now, and--

"Harry?"

Harry blinked. "Oh. Uh, wool-gathering. Sorry, sir."

Was it his imagination, or did Snape wince then? Just a tiny bit?

Maybe it was Harry's imagination. The man's voice was certainly level when he replied. "You're staring at the mantle."

Harry didn't want to ask about the goblets. The whole idea filled him with a vague sort of horror, in fact. He couldn't understand why . . . but then he remembered the conversation they'd just had about repudiation. Harry asking for the Potter goblet and one of the Black ones was probably a bad idea in the circumstances. But he had to say something to explain why he'd been staring at the goblets like that, didn't he?

"Uh . . . do you suppose it would be all right for me to use your Floo?"

"Of course you may use it." Snape leaned down a fraction. "Are you still tiring so easily?"

"I don't need another potion," said Harry quickly, heading toward the hearth. "Floo powder . . ."

Snape wordlessly opened a brass box, extending it so Harry could take a pinch.

"Thank you, sir." Stepping into the Floo, Harry lifted his hand. "Gryffindor Common Room!"

The flames roared up green and began to whirl him away, but not before he heard Snape say two more words. Two simple words that hurt, though he could tell they weren't supposed to. They were just the sort of thing that any man might say to a boy he regarded as his son.

Be good.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Twenty-Five: "Snakey Snacky Gryffindor"

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Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Many thanks must go to Kim, clauclauclaudia, Keira, Kristeh, Jen, and Susanna for reading over my drafts and offering me their suggestions.

"Who's that from?" asked Ron as a tawny owl dropped a small box in front of Harry Tuesday morning at breakfast.

Harry grinned, relieved to see it arrive before the next session of Ethics. He was even more relieved that the twins had done as he'd asked and sent his order in a plain box rather than one emblazoned with their logo. Of course, that might have a lot to do with their products getting banned from Hogwarts during fifth year; Harry wasn't sure if the ban had ever been lifted. "I'd rather not say."

Hermione gave him a sly glance. "A present for Luna?"

That was just as good an explanation as he could hope for. Harry didn't even have to lie to go along with it. He turned a mock glare on Hermione as he repeated himself in a firm voice. "I'd rather not say."

"We'll know soon enough," said Hermione as she jumped up and began sweeping books from the table into her school bag.

"What's your rush?" asked Ron through a mouthful of scrambled egg. "You have a free period."

"Yes, but I'm due in Muggle Studies this morning. Draco and I are going to perform a demonstration of psychoanalysis."

"Why?"

"It's part of his project."

Ron set down his fork with a thud. "Why can't he just write an essay, for Merlin's sake?"

"Because," said Hermione patiently, "the project as approved by Professor Burbage included a demonstration as well as an essay. Why do you think we were practicing that case study last week?"

"You're not even in Muggle Studies any longer," muttered Ron.

Hermione leaned down a bit to speak right alongside his ear. "No, but Draco's had a hard time lately. He needs all the support we can give him, and if I can help take his mind off . . . other things . . . I think it's only right that I do so."

"You don't have to--"

Hermione straightened up again and spoke more firmly. "I do have to. I like the thought that I can help reinforce Draco's new habits of mind. In years past he'd never have dreamed of asking a Muggleborn for any sort of assistance. That he can do so now . . . it shows great strides, don't you
"Don't let him badmouth Gryffindor," said Harry.

Hermione smiled. "I won't."

"See you at lunch, then?" asked Ron.

"Actually, I've plans to revise Arithmancy--"

"With Draco." Ron scowled.

"Well, you don't take it, do you?"

Hermione's tone had sounded reasonable to Harry, but Ron obviously didn't feel the same way. His scowl got deeper as a flush rose to tint his skin the shade of a ripe tomato.

"I didn't meant that," said Hermione quickly. "Not everybody needs it. But I want to do well on the N.E.W.T.s, you know. They're only seven months off, and Draco has been coming up with some wonderful palindromes that help us both remember the most complicated formulas, and--" Leaning down, she dropped a quick kiss on Ron's cheek. "I'll see you in Transfigurations and Ethics."

Her glance at Harry was critical. "I'll see you there, too. Especially in Ethics."

"Wouldn't dream of missing it again," said Harry in a jolly tone, ignoring the face she made at him.

He expected Ron to take up the attend-Ethics theme Hermione had left them with, especially after Harry's cheeky answer, but the other boy was too morose. The moment Hermione was out of earshot, he groaned and leaned his forehead down on the table.

"What?"

Ron's only reply was a longer groan.

"What?" Harry shook Ron's shoulder until the other boy sat up again.

"I don't even know what a palindrome is!"

Harry blinked. "Uh . . . so? That won't be the last time Hermione's natters on about something neither one of us can follow."

"Yeah, but . . ." Ron gave a heavy sigh. "She gets on so well with Draco."

"Good. I don't want my friends at odds."

"She gets on too well with Draco, if you ask me."

Harry got it, then. "Don't be ridiculous. He's still--" He remembered in time not to say anything in a public place like this. Draco had been insistent, practically frantic, that Rhiannon could be in danger if word got around how he felt about her. "Well, you know."

"And yet they're going off alone to discuss sexual fantasies," muttered Ron.

"That was just a role play!" exclaimed Harry. "They explained that."

"Maybe we should skive off Magical Creatures and go to Muggle Studies instead," said Ron
darkly. "See how this so-called role play looks. See how they act towards each other when I'm not there, or when they think I'm not there, that is."

"No, no, we have to go and hear if there's been any more news of the escaped hydrazs." Harry plucked at Ron's sleeve to get him to move. "Come on."

"I think I'd rather watch this role play. Can I borrow your Dad's old cloak, mate?"

"Ron." Harry waited until his friend looked him in the face. "If you don't trust her to be alone with Draco, then what you have with her isn't worth much."

"Yeah, well, that's easy for you to say." Ron's hands clenched atop the table. "You can't remember the things he said last year, the way he flirted with her sometimes--"

No, Harry couldn't. Or maybe he could. A glimmering memory sprang up in his mind then, of Draco waggling his eyebrows and laughing as he said something about getting Hermione to leave Ron for him, about how the only reason he'd do it would be to see Ron's face turn purple . . .

Harry's own fists clenched, then. Draco wasn't a Malfoy any longer, but he could still be just as big a jerk as ever. "He only does it to get to you. He told me so."

Ron looked away. "You're just saying that."

"No, no, he really did." Harry shook Ron's shoulder to get him to look up again. "Last year. I just remembered."

"Why, that--" Ron's anger seemed to snap in two. "Wait, you remembered something?"

"Yes, definitely. In the hospital wing, after . . . well, I don't know exactly. But yeah, Draco said that." Harry peered closer at Ron. "And do you know what made me remember? It was a reaction to you mentioning that Draco would flirt with Hermione last year. That was . . . like a key turning in a lock, and the memory popped free. My therapist means well, but when it comes to amnesia, she's full of shite."

"That could be a coincidence," said Ron doubtfully.

It wasn't, but Harry couldn't explain how he knew that, not without breaking faith with Draco.

"Well, just don't watch what you say as closely," he said lightly. "And we'll see. Now come on before we're late for Magical Creatures."

Ron cast a longing look in the direction Hermione had gone, but then he sighed and made his way outside with Harry.

Zabini was gloating as he left the Transfiguration classroom.
Draco waited until he was out of sight and earshot, and then slumped in his chair. "I can't believe that he should be so favoured. The only Animagus among us? I'm supposed to be one too. I'm supposed to be something marvellous, something magnificent and majestic and profound, and--"

"You're supposed to be a ferret and you know it," said Ron as he came up to Harry and Draco's table.

"Oh, hush, Ron," said Hermione, close behind him. "I'm disappointed, too."

"You're both taking it too hard," said Harry. "McGonagall didn't say that Zabini was the only Animagus among us. She said that he was the only one whose powers were blossoming enough to be worked with right now, and so the rest of the class would move on to other topics."

"She also said that the statistical likelihood of a second Animagus in a group this size was low," moaned Draco.

Harry could hear what he didn't say: And it was supposed to be me, me, me....

Ron snorted. "Why'd we waste two months on this rot then? That's what I'd like to know!"

"She told us that at the start of the sequence," said Hermione impatiently. "The Ministry wants Animagi to register and so they're using the seventh-year class to try to identify them early. Which means that they suspect most aren't registered, which certainly matches our personal experience, doesn't it . . ." She abruptly brightened. "Cheer up, Draco. Their statistics are based only on known Animagi. The Ministry probably has no real idea how many there are, or how many are likely."

"Oh. Good thinking. Of course, I should have thought of it, but . . ." Draco pushed his chair back and stood up, looking a little less brittle than before. "Thank you, Hermione."

Ron made a low growling noise under his breath.

"Indigestion?" asked Draco, perhaps just a shade too courteously for the courtesy to be authentic.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Be good, both of you."

Be good . . . be good . . . be good . . .

Harry shook his head to get Snape's voice out of his head. He wasn't sure why those words reverberated like that, anyway. It was what any man might say to a boy he regarded as his son. That didn't mean that the boy had to respond in any particular way. Or respond at all.

Never mind that a certain letter told him that he'd once felt very, very differently.

He didn't feel that way now, and that was what counted.

"Yes, let's be good," echoed Draco, laying what felt like extra stress on the last two words. "And what better time than right now?"

With that, he clamped a hand onto Harry's arm and began to manoeuvre him toward the classroom doors.

Hermione caught on at once. "That's right, Harry. Starting today, you're going to attend your Ethics class."

"No need to manhandle me--"
"Yes, I completely believe that," said Draco in a tone that said the exact opposite. "Considering that last Thursday you vanished in the corridor on the way there, and the session before that, you disappeared during Transfiguration."

"I'm not going to do that today--"

"That's right, you aren't," said Ron as they reached the corridor and began to head toward Ethics, the three of them more or less herding Harry there. "It was a good thing I thought about your invisibility cloak this morning. I pinched it during lunch, just in case."

Harry gnashed his teeth. "Well, the fact that I didn't know that ought to show you that I didn't intend to use it, shouldn't it?"

"And I suppose if I let go of your arm you'll just come along to Ethics on your own, will you?"

Draco's question was shot through with so much sarcasm that Harry didn't bother trying to answer it. He just lifted his head high and marched along, waiting until they were half-way there to make his move.

It didn't take much. Just a surreptitious reaching of his hand into a pocket so that he could grasp hold of the skiving snack he'd stashed there earlier. Then a feigned yawn as he brought his free hand up to his mouth and popped the magically-laded sweet in.

Harry didn't even chew it, since for all he knew, that might give the game away. He swallowed it in one go, using the spit he'd saved up in the last few minutes, and then waited for the results.

They were more spectacular than he'd expected, though probably that wasn't the best word to describe what happened next.

A deep rumbling started in his belly and then without any more warning than that, something shot up his throat, making him gag.

Harry yanked his arm from Draco's grip as he bent over, his stomach convulsing horribly. Black vomit spewed from his mouth, emerging with such force that when it hit the stone floor, it splashed back up, spraying foul liquid in all directions.

"Ewww," said someone, but Harry couldn't tell who it was through the buzzing in his ears.

His stomach kept constricting, tighter and tighter, like it was one of Aunt Petunia's dishrags being wrung out, and every time it twisted itself into a smaller knot, another huge rush of vomit surged up his throat and out his mouth. Harry didn't know where it was all coming from. It seemed like gallons of the stuff was pouring out, making the stones slick.

He slipped the next time a convulsion wracked him, and started to fall, but somebody caught him before he landed in the mess on the floor.

Harry didn't know who, though. Before he could turn his head to see, he fainted.

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He came awake by slow degrees to the noise of pages being methodically turned, the noise steady and somehow crisp.

That alone was enough to tell him who was probably in the room with him, and also where he was.

When he opened his eyes it was to find out that he was only half right. Snape was sitting in a chair alongside his bed, but he wasn't in the man's quarters like he'd expected. He was in his usual bed in the hospital wing.

*Shall I owl the hospital wing to have your favourite bed made ready, Mr Potter...*

The moment Harry's eyes slitted open, Snape thrust his potions journal to the side and leaned forward, though he wasn't anywhere near close enough that Harry should feel cornered.

Harry felt cornered anyway. He braced himself for the barrage of verbal abuse sure to come his way. Snape could cut you to ribbons with a few words, and when he really got a head of steam up... Harry braced himself again.

Snape only said three words though, and he said them very softly. Almost sadly. "You idiot child."

Harry gulped. He supposed he deserved that, since it seemed he'd been exactly that. Sweets from a skiving snackbox weren't supposed to incapacitate you for long. They certainly weren't supposed to land you in the hospital wing. He wasn't sure what had gone wrong. "Uh..."

"Awake then, Mr Potter?" Madame Pomfrey bustled over, her skirts swishing. It was a relief when she stepped alongside his bed and cut off his view of Snape's dark, staring eyes. Harry didn't like the feeling he'd been getting, which was that the man could see right through him.

And that he didn't like what he saw.

That hurt, though there was no reason on earth why it should. Harry didn't care what a greasy git like Snape thought.

Though it would be nice if he were greasy like he used to be, he thought mulishly.

The mediwitch clucked when he stuck out his tongue on request, her wand waving in curlicues as she sent some sort of spell winging downwards into his throat. "Oh, dear. More blood replenisher for you, then."

"Why should I need blood--"

She stopped the question by inserting a spoon brimming with thick liquid into his open mouth. *Ugh.* Harry swallowed, wincing. It felt like a troll had stomped all over the inside of his throat.

"You need it because you nearly bled out," she said when he had finished three spoonfuls of the potion.

"I did not. I--"

"You vomited out a large percentage of your body's blood volume," she announced in a smarmy tone as she began to turn away. "I would advise you in future to read labels, Mr Potter."

"Labels?"

She had bustled off already, so Harry looked to Snape. No choice.
"Perils of Skiving Snackboxes."

Oh. So he knew.

"Yes. I do know."

"Stop that," said Harry crossly, batting a hand in front of his eyes. "I don't want you mucking about in my head."

To Harry's surprise, Snape bowed his head slightly, as if acknowledging that. "I was not using Legilimency, Harry. I could not do that to you at the present time even if I wished."

"Even if you wished," mocked Harry. "You loved blasting through my memories last year. I mean, fifth year."

"Yes," admitted Snape, looking fully at him again. "I used those lessons in a vain attempt to exorcise my own demons and to vent my anger at you. It was ill-done of me. No, worse. It was abusive, and I have no excuse."

Harry stared at him, the wind completely taken out of his sails. The only reply he could think of was a feeble, "But you just did try to excuse yourself. Something about . . . demons."

"Not literal ones," said Snape.

If he wasn't using Legilimency, then he was pretty damned good at reading the questions in Harry's eyes. That was probably even more unsettling that the alternative, thought Harry.

"What kind then?"

"Memories of my own." Snape gave him a hard look. "They hardly matter now. When you recover your own sense of self, you will know all about them. For now I would merely wish you to understand that I will not use any arts of the mind against you, Harry. Not ever again."

The vow-like quality of his voice made Harry shiver. "Not ever again?" he echoed. "But a minute ago you only said that you couldn't use Legilimency at the present time."

"I was referring to the Occlusion shielding your mind from any intrusion."

"It's still there?" Harry frowned. "I still can't feel it."

"You're unaware of it, but it is most assuredly there."

Harry couldn't help but scoff. "And you couldn't break through if you wanted, right. You."

"The shields are strong enough to hold off Voldemort himself," Snape pointed out.

God, but it was strange hearing him use that name. No matter that he'd done it a number of times that Harry could remember.

"And, as I said, I have no wish to misuse Legilimency on you again, Harry," he added.

"Good. Well, if that's agreed, then--" Harry began to shift over, intending to get out of the bed. That plan was cut short when he got dizzy just sitting up.

"You'll be here until the morning," said Snape. "Lie back down."
Harry did, a little resentfully. "How long have I been here, anyway?"

"Dinner is almost over. No doubt your friends and your brother will return soon."

"Return?"

"Of course. They only left in the first place because I ordered them out."

Harry felt his teeth clench. "You had no right to do that, sir."

"On the contrary," said Snape, his own tones mild. "I am your father." He went on before Harry could interrupt. "As well, I doubted that you would want them to go hungry on your account."

"The elves could bring them something here--"

"I doubted even less that you would want them to listen to our discussion about labels," interrupted Snape as he drew his wand.

Harry tensed, though some part of him knew that the man wasn't about to cast anything against him. All he did, in fact, was wave a privacy ward around them. "Did you read the instructions printed on your Skiving Snackbox?"

Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest. He wasn't going to answer that. After a moment, he started feeling childish, though, and he ended up giving a curt shake of his head.

"May I inquire as to why not?"

"Because I've read them before."

"No doubt just as true as your claim that you had seen Madam Pomfrey," drawled Snape. "Not, I think, the whole truth."

"All right, fine." Harry blew out a breath. "I didn't want anyone to know what I was planning. Too many people would have recognized a Skiving Snackbox being dropped off for me. So I asked Fred and George to ship me the sweets in a plain box. So there weren't any instructions. So there."

Fuck. Now he felt even more childish than before.

"Then I fault them as much as I do you," said Snape in a stern voice. "You chose one of their newer sweets, Harry. The instructions say most specifically to chew it slowly in order to gradually release a potion which induces vomiting. According to Poppy's diagnostic spell, you swallowed it whole and incurred an overdose."

"Which made me vomit blood? But it was black--"

"Effect of the overdose."

Harry frowned. "And I nearly bled out from all the vomiting? That seems like a reckless product even by the twins' standards."

"I'm certainly not pleased with them," said Snape darkly. "However, I doubt the overdose would have had an effect as dramatic on anyone else. You've had a history in the past year of needing your potions dosage adjusted because of the damage to your magical core. Then, I had to brew your potions five times normal strength."

"But . . ." Harry tried to make sense of Snape's logic. Tried and failed. "Shouldn't I be more able to
tolerate an overdose, in that case?"

Snape drew in a deep breath. "No, because many repetitions of such strong doses have induced in you a sensitivity to certain potions ingredients."

"Then it's your fault I reacted so badly--"

"Yes."

Oh. Harry hadn't expected that admission, probably because the accusation itself had been so unfair. "No, it's not," he said grudgingly. "I'm sure I needed those extra-strong potions, whatever they were."

"Yes," said Snape again. "You did."

"So then . . ." Harry cleared his throat. "This was just an accident--"

"One most deliberately caused. And what will you do the next time you wish to avoid Ethics class with me?" asked Snape, his eyes narrowed.

Harry actually hadn't thought past the Skiving Snackboxes plan.

"Harry, my boy. Severus, my boy," said Dumbledore in a hearty voice as he walked straight through the privacy ward Snape had cast. One flick of his wand and he had conjured a pink chair with yellow frills, the thing so overstuffed it was a wonder it could take his weight. It could, though. He proved that by sitting down and sighing with evident pleasure. "All is well, I trust?"

"If you count my son being so reluctant to spend time with me that he prefers to induce vomiting, why yes," said Snape, scowling, first at the chair and then at the man in it. "Would you excuse us, Headmaster? Harry and I were just getting to the core of the wand, as it were."

"Oh, I doubt that very much. I believe that this particular wand, in fact, contains a double core."

Harry pushed up on an elbow, which only made him a little bit dizzy. "I didn't know that was possible."

"It's a metaphor," said Snape in a heavy tone. "Very well, Albus, I shall play along. What can you possibly mean?"

"Only that young Harry is no doubt at fault for his determination to avoid Ethics class--"

Young Harry? Harry slumped back down onto his pillow.

"--but that you, too, are just as much at fault."

That was more like it, thought Harry, forgetting the wording that had annoyed him. "That's right," he said. "How can anybody blame me for not wanting to be in the same room as him? In the first place, he doesn't know how to teach, he only knows how to yell. Are you aware that he just waves his wand to make potions recipes appear, and then lets us blow ourselves to Mars because we don't have the slightest idea what to do, let alone what to avoid? And then there's the constant sniping. Even if he doesn't hate your dad's guts he uses class time like a cat uses a mouse it likes to torture, and if he does hate your father, then you can expect to get a zero for perfect work, 'cause he'll drop it and say Oops and not even pretend to mean it, and--"

Harry stopped then, because Dumbledore was looking at him with sad blue eyes, no twinkle in
them at all. "That is all most unfortunate, my boy, yes. I am very disappointed in Severus, and I understand that what you are describing is uppermost in your mind. To me, however, it is hardly news. I am much more disheartened by his recent mistakes."

Well, that sounded all right to Harry. As long as Snape got in trouble, which seemed likely. "What's he done lately, then?"

"Albus--"

"Now, Severus, if you will persist in ignoring the expectations I hold of Hogwarts instructors--"

"Must we discuss the matter in front of my son?" Snape rose to his feet, black robes swirling around him like they were animated by the force of his anger. "I do believe that your office would be the most appropriate venue for a headmaster reprimanding a member of his staff."

"Oh, indeed we must discuss it here," said Dumbledore. "After all, you are the one who has pointed out to me numerous times that Harry does better with more information rather than less. Would you deny him this rather illuminating glimpse into your character?"

"Yes, damn it--"

"He doesn't think I do better with more information," interrupted Harry. "He won't let my friends tell me anything about last year."

"Now, that is a special case and you know it, Harry." Dumbledore peered at him over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "As to what Severus has done lately, shall I just say that it involves falsifying his attendance records?"

That definitely wasn't what Harry was expecting to hear. In fact, he couldn't even follow it. "So?"

"His attendance records in Ethics," added the headmaster.

The knut dropped, then. Harry glanced once at Snape, but couldn't hold that dark gaze for long. He swivelled his head to look at Dumbledore, sitting there in that hideous pink chair. "What, you mean he hasn't been marking me absent? Is that it?"

"Oh, far worse than that, my boy," said Dumbledore in a jolly tone. "The attendance scroll marks itself, of course. Severus has been charming it to lie."

Harry's breath left him in a whoosh.

"If he had not done so, I would have realised much sooner that you were failing to attend Ethics," said the headmaster. "I assure you, Harry, I would have taken steps to resolve the situation. You most definitely would not have coated the third floor corridor with congealed blood in this absurd attempt to avoid your father."

"He's not my--" Harry swallowed, remembering what he'd had to read in order to get his vault key back.

"Severus," said Dumbledore, turning toward the other man, who slowly sank back down into his chair. "Perhaps you would be so good as to explain why you would act in such an uncharacteristic manner. Allowing a student to skive off class? Actually assisting in such behavior? I must admit, you have managed for once to shock me."

Snape scowled. "You must allow me some leeway in how I deal with my son."
The headmaster's voice hardened. "Your reasoning, Severus."

"Harry wanted to avoid me."

"And what in Merlin's name decided you that your best course was to let him?"

For once, Harry didn't mind being the center of the discussion. He wanted an answer, too. He'd been surprised all along that he hadn't ended up in detention or worse for skipping class so many times. Now, to find out that Snape had been helping him to skive off? It was beyond strange.

Snape said nothing.

"Severus," prompted Dumbledore, his voice hardening still further. "Tell me. And yes, in front of Harry."

Snape glanced up at that, his black eyes glinting. "Harry needed time and I thought it best to give it to him. Better than alienating him still further, Albus."

"Yes, I can see how it could look like that to you," said Dumbledore slowly. "But it will not do, Severus. It simply will not do. You know perfectly well why." The headmaster turned to Harry. "My boy, you must believe me when I say that I understand that you are in turmoil. Nonetheless, that does not excuse the shameful way you have treated our bargain. I excused you from Potions on the understanding that you would, indeed, attend Ethics."

Harry bit his lip. "Well . . . I never said I'd attend, you know. I just let you think I would."

And that had been more than a little Slytherin of him, hadn't it?

Harry shook that thought off. "But it's out in the open, now. So let's settle it. I'm not going to attend Ethics, all right?"

"No, it is most certainly not all right," said Dumbledore firmly. "All seventh-year students are required to take the class, and I will not make an exception in your case."

"But I can't stand--" Harry glanced apologetically at Snape. "Sorry, all right? But I can't, and what we talked about, the other night . . . that doesn't change anything for me."

"I understand," said Snape gravely.

"It does not matter whether you can 'stand' Professor Snape or not," said Dumbledore, his stern tones now directed at Harry. "Part of growing up is learning to work with others despite such difficulties. And for the sake of the war effort, Harry, I need you to do as I have asked."

"Ethics can't be that important--"

"It can, and it is not subject to debate."

Harry tried to imagine class with Snape and found himself falling into thoughts of what had happened the one time he'd tried to attend Potions since his accident. Well, what had happened before Voldemort had tried to rape his mind. That anger, the rage . . . the way he'd ended up swearing, telling Snape to fuck a fairy stone.

That would happen again, he just knew it. He could manage to stay civil with Snape in a corridor or even the man's own living room, or even here in the hospital wing, but in any real teacher/student situation, all the old, ugly memories of mistreatment would rear up to drown him, and he'd end up
screaming and swearing again, making Hermione hate him, making Draco disgusted with him . . . making a spectacle of himself, as if being a fucking amnesiac who used to cast all his spells in Parseltongue wasn't enough.

"I can't," he said dully, raising eyes that felt dead in his own face.

Snape leaned forward in his chair, looking like he wanted to rise but was checking himself. "I swear by Merlin's own wand, Harry, it will not be the same as it was before. My teaching could no doubt still use vast improvement, but I no longer use it as an opportunity to belittle students."

Sure he didn't. Never mind that he actually hadn't been doing that in the one class with him Harry had attended. "Not even Gryffindors?"

He knew he was sniping, but he couldn't seem to stop himself. It was like there was a wound inside him, and it just ran too deep to ignore.

"My own son," said Snape softly, leaning even further forward, "whom I chose to be my son, is a Gryffindor."

Harry shuddered at the affection he could hear in the man's voice. And if he could hear it, he couldn't even imagine what it sounded like to the headmaster. "But you don't want me to be Gryffindor. I know you don't want me to be. You made me a Slytherin prefect--"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "I think that Professor McGonagall would have had something to say had I tried to appoint a Gryffindor prefect, Harry. But yes. I gave you a position of honour in Slytherin, and I did it knowing that you are a Gryffindor as well."

Harry brushed all that aside. He wasn't even sure why he had brought it up. The Slytherins were the ones that made house rivalry such a big deal, after all. "It's not you," he finally said. "All right? You could be the most wonderful teacher and . . . uh, father, in the whole world, and it wouldn't make a difference. I still couldn't bear to be in class with you. Don't make me." He abruptly remembered that Snape wasn't the one he had to worry about. Snape had been letting him skip class, though Harry still didn't think he really understood why.

No, the one he had to convince was Dumbledore.

"You will be in Ethics on Thursday or you will be dropped from the class," said the headmaster, looking directly at him. "Need I remind you that only those students enrolled in Ethics will be permitted to sit their N.E.W.T.s?"

Shite, shite, shite. "Can't I be enrolled and not attend? There's no requirement that I pass the class, after all. I know. I checked. So . . . just let me stay on the roll. Can't I do an independent study?"

By the end, he was pleading and he knew it. He also knew that it was going to be pointless.

"No, you may not. When I agreed to let you drop Potions, Harry, it was in part because you were within your rights to demand that I treat you like any other student in similar circumstances. You cannot now object if I follow that same principle again. Nobody in your year has been excused from Ethics. Nor will you be."

"I could still go to the papers with my complaints--"

"But now they will sound petty," said Dumbledore. "Now, you are demanding special treatment. Harry, do calm down enough to think beyond your dislike of Severus."
Snape winced, then wiped his face clean of all expression.

"Look, I'm trying here. I really am. I'm trying to spare him my-- I'm trying to spare him, and that's all I can manage right now. Forcing the two of us together is a bad idea, Professor Dumbledore."

"A pity, because your punishment for skipping Ethics three times is to serve three detentions with Professor Snape. But I see no need for rancour. Dinner detentions, Severus. In your quarters, and do feel free to invite Draco if that would make the atmosphere more social."

"But-- but--" Harry growled. "That's not fair! Draco was already inviting me around to dinner down there!"

"Was he?" Snape's nostrils flared. "I shall speak with him. I told him not to pressure you."

"And your punishment for falsifying school records, Severus, will be to supervise three sessions of the Defence Association. There, I think that will do quite nicely."

"Headmaster, I really don't think--"

"That has been the problem."

Harry gaped. He certainly never thought he would hear anybody call Snape . . . well, stupid.

"Albus!" snapped Snape, his sallow skin looking sickly as a wave of pink rose up beneath it.

Dumbledore stood up, looking less like a grandfather in that moment and more like the powerful wizard he was. "Consider the evidence, Severus. Allowing Harry to avoid you has done neither of you any good. You will treat him as your student if not your son, and that is an end to the matter."

"I would be most pleased to treat him as my son," snapped Snape. "How dare you insinuate otherwise?"

"It is you who have done that. I cannot imagine the Severus Snape I know allowing his son to skip class several times with nary a consequence."

"There are extenuating circumstances."

"Be that as it may," said Dumbledore as he peered intently at Snape. His features softened as he went on speaking. "I know you mean well, Severus, and that Harry is not the only one floundering about--"

Harry narrowed his eyes at that, but nobody paid him any mind.

"--but still, you are proceeding like a wizard without his wand, my boy. I told Harry near the end of last year that he could not regard you as his father without truly treating you as such, even when the past made that uncomfortable. Think on that, Severus."

"Headmaster--"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "One more thing, Severus. I will be taking some extra measures with regard to your attendance scrolls. If you attempt to alter them again, rest assured, I will know."

Snape slumped back in his chair and nodded. Dumbledore nodded back, a single brisk motion, and then laid a hand on Harry's arm. "Get well soon, my boy."

With that, he swept out of the hospital wing, his garish robes fluttering as if to prove that Snape
wasn't the only one who knew how to make a dramatic exit.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes, his mind racing as he tried to pick apart Dumbledore's words and find some way around the requirement to attend Ethics. There wasn't one. But maybe he could get Snape to ignore the three detentions.

"You know how you told Draco not to pressure me?" Harry cleared his throat. "Well . . . the headmaster won't know whether or not I really do come down for dinner three times, will he?"

Snape gave the barest of shrugs, his shoulders hardly moving at all. "I suspect that he will make it his business to know."

Harry glared, not liking that answer, and liking even less the feeling of being trapped. "Look, if you're really so interested in not alienating me, then I think you'd be only to happy to let me out of a few detentions--"

"I would not claim to be happy about any of this," said Snape dryly.

"You know I didn't mean it that way," snapped Harry. "I just meant that you did let me skip your class, and skipping detention isn't much compared to that."

"Neither is it treating you like my son."

Harry glared. "We both know that I don't want you to treat me like your son."

"The young often want things that are not appropriate or even good for them. If you want to run naked through the Great Hall, shall I allow you your way in that also?"

"No-- yes--" Harry blew out a breath. "I wouldn't want to do something that stupid."

"No, of course not." The sarcasm was mild, but present. "You wouldn't, for example, flirt with getting yourself thrown out of a class that is required if you are to fulfil your life's dream of becoming an Auror."

Harry scowled. "That's not the same thing. And you were the one letting me do it."

"Because you wanted it." Snape shook his head. "And now you want to skip detention. I see now that I should have considered more than just your wants. Instead, I have let them interfere with my responsibility to you as a father."

"You aren't really my father! Not now, not after--"

Snape clenched his fists on the arms of his chair, his face looking like a man on his way to his own execution. He waited, his dark eyes fixed on Harry, and then finally rasped a single harsh word. "Yes?"

"I don't know," said Harry, frustrated. "There's . . . there's something. I know there is. You lied to me. Or broke faith with me. I know that much, but I . . . I can't remember. Unless you'd care to fucking explain something for once?"

"Language," rebuked Snape.

"Like my language matters! I don't give a shit about that, and--"

"Language!" roared Snape. "I will act as a father should from now on! I will do right by you, whether you appreciate it or not!"
"Fuck you!" snarled Harry. "Or since I know how you feel about respect, maybe that should be fuck you, sir!"

Snape drew in a long, deep breath and spoke in a more level voice. "That will be four detentions, Harry. And you will attend them, make no mistake. I am through accommodating your desire to destroy everything good we built together."

Harry rolled on his side, away from Snape, so angry that he was shaking with it. He didn't know what he was going to do. Not about Ethics, not about the prospect of several dinners with Snape, not about anything. "Go away," he muttered after a moment. "Just . . . just go away."

"I will not. I am a father visiting his son in the hospital wing. Albus was right."

Harry managed, just barely, not to tell him to fuck off again. He closed his eyes and breathed in and out, counting to ten and then a hundred, but it didn't help. He was just as angry at the end of it as he'd been before, but if he said anything about it, he'd probably just get assigned a fifth detention. And a sixth.

Well, if that was the way Snape was going to be, then Harry wouldn't talk to him at all.

So there.

He heard a murmured incantation and thought for a moment that Snape must be leaving; why else would he cancel the privacy ward? But no, he'd done that because Madam Pomfrey was bustling over again, a spoon in hand. Harry saw her as soon as he rolled onto his back once more.

Harry almost refused the medicine, whatever it was. If he stayed sick, he could stay in the hospital wing and avoid Snape . . . except he couldn't. Snape would just visit him here, whether Harry wanted him to or not.

Like he was doing right now. He'd taken up his book again and was turning the pages, glancing at Harry every now and then.

Harry closed his eyes in despair and tried to wish himself someplace else.

A hushed voice interrupted his concentration. "Professor? Is Harry asleep?"

"I suspect not, Miss Granger."

Harry cracked open one eye, just barely, and saw that Ron was there too, one arm slung around Hermione's shoulders. Draco came into view a moment later.

Harry sat up then and braced himself. He didn't know how much they knew about the reason he'd got so sick. "Hallo."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione rushed forward and grabbed his hand. "Are you feeling all right?"

"'Bit under the weather, actually--"

"'Bit under the weather, actually--"

"You're lucky it wasn't worse. A Skiving Snack, Harry. Honestly!"

Her tone said that it had been a very second-year sort of thing to do. Which it had, Harry supposed.

"I see that you are in good hands," said Snape, standing up. "I will see you tomorrow evening for dinner in my quarters. Draco, you are invited as well. Good night, Harry."
Harry firmed his lips and didn't reply. He wasn't talking to Snape.

Snape didn't say anything about that, though he did raise an eyebrow as though it gave him food for thought.

Harry sighed with relief when he had gone, but the relief didn't last long. "Well, that was immature," drawled Draco, stepping closer.

"Shut up."

Draco sighed a little. "I was so hopeful, too, when Dad said you'd be coming down to dinner. Why did you agree to that if you're still so angry?"

"It's not dinner, it's detention. Dumbledore assigned it."

"I thought I spied his handiwork in the chair." Draco turned to Hermione and made an elegant waving motion. "Would you care to sit down? It looks comfortable, at least."

Hermione shook her head. Meanwhile, Ron sort of crowded forward, almost elbowing Draco out of his way. "How long are you in the hospital wing for?"

"Just overnight."

"My brothers--" Ron shook his head.

"It wasn't their fault. Me getting so sick was more like a coincidence. I'm oversensitive to certain potions ingredients, that's all."

"Deciding to skive off class was no coincidence, Harry," said Hermione sternly. "What do we have to do to convince you that you ought to attend Ethics?"

"Nothing," said Harry sourly. "I'm stuck with it now. Dumbledore just threatened to drop me from it if I skip class again. And that would mean I can't take the N.E.W.T.s. Happy?"

"Oh, Harry--"

"Well, at least one good thing's come of it," said Ron, sitting down on the edge of Harry's bed. "Madam Pomfrey must have cleared you for Quidditch, eh?"

It took Harry a moment to figure out what he was talking about. Then he glanced down at his left arm and realised that the bandage he'd been wearing was missing.

"Oh," he said, stalling for time. "Um, yeah. That's right. She, uh--"

He couldn't do it. The expectant look on Ron's face was just too much for him.

"My wrist was never hurt at all," Harry said miserably, blinking as he looked to the side. Draco was there, though, sitting in the pink chair by then. Harry hurriedly looked to his other side. "I was just trying to get out of Quidditch. Sorry."

"Trying to . . . " Ron was quiet for a moment. When he did speak, his words were gruff. "Harry, I told you that you didn't have to come back so soon after that Bludger hit. If you needed more time, all you had to do was say so. You didn't have to . . . to lie to me."

"I didn't want to talk about it," whispered Harry.
"It's understandable that you'd be confused right now, Harry," said Hermione, moving forward to pat his arm, right where the bandage used to be.

"I'm not confused. I just-- I just--" Harry squeezed his eyes shut, hating this. But maybe Dr Goode was right on this one point. He should admit his problem to people he trusted.

And not even Draco, Harry knew, was going to make fun of him for this. Or if he did, it would be much later, when the problem was long-since solved.

"I'm having trouble with heights. Or, not with heights. Just with flying high. I can't remember getting knocked off my broom, but some part of me obviously knows it happened." Harry opened his eyes and looked at Ron. "That's what happened during Kaslov's Dare that time. I lost my nerve. If you want to bench me I'll understand."

Ron narrowed his gaze. "Do you want me to bench you?"

"No, but what use is a Seeker who--"

"What complete rot," interrupted Draco. "Pitiful doesn't suit you, Harry, not at all. You clearly need some training to help you feel comfortable at heights again, and who better than another Seeker? We'll stop meeting so much in the Room of Requirement and go out to the pitch instead, and I'll get you through this."

He made it sound so simple. But he was forgetting something.

"I'm on the Gryffindor team, Draco."

Draco leaned forward in his chair. "Yes, but if you think I'm going to let my brother go about afraid of heights just because it would give me an advantage in a fucking Quidditch match, then--" His eyes widened further, reflecting disbelief. "You don't really think that about me, do you?"

"I didn't mean it that way." Harry sighed. "I just think that Ron should help me get my flying back on track. He is my team captain, after all. And . . . well, no offense, but you wouldn't be doing right by your team if you helped the rival Seeker improve."

"I'd be doing right by the war! Broom skills are good for more than just Quidditch--"

"Right," said Harry, his mind made up. "And I'm going to work on them with Ron."

Draco looked faintly outraged, but Hermione managed to smooth things over. "That's perfect, Harry. Draco and I can shift our study times to the hours when you and Ron are working together."

Harry smiled. "So, that's set, then."

"I don't suppose anybody would think to ask me," said Ron, making a face.

"We all know you want to help Harry," said Hermione.

"And you are my Quidditch captain," added Harry. "But I'll ask if you like. Would you help me get over my thing about flying?"

Ron smiled. "Of course, mate. Have you had dinner? Hermione and I will go down to the kitchens and fetch anything you fancy."

"Um . . . a burger, maybe? With chips and--"
"Orange juice," said Draco.

That did sound good. "Yeah, orange juice," echoed Harry.

Once his other friends had left, Harry turned to Draco. "Thank for taking care of the bandage. How did you manage that?"

Draco shrugged. "I slipped it off right after Severus laid you down on the bed. I assumed you wouldn't want Madam Pomfrey poking her nose into your issue, whatever it was. Now that I know, though--"

Harry shivered at the implication that Snape had carried him through the castle. Snape. He'd carried Harry before, of course . . . like when Voldemort had attacked his mind during Potions, and made Harry collapse, but this seemed different, somehow.

Maybe because if a student collapsed in Potions class, it really was Snape's place to help. But this time, Harry had been in the corridor, and Snape had still helped him.

Harry couldn't think about it.

"Ron's helping with my flying issue," he said to Draco, crossing his arms over his chest.

Draco tilted his head to the side. "Well . . . more than one person could help, you know."

"Yes, but I want Ron to help with this." Harry lifted his shoulders. "No offense."

"But I want to do something for you!"

Draco sounded so petulant that Harry grinned, lowering his voice when he replied. "You are doing something, remember? You're doing the one thing nobody else is willing to do."

Just as Harry had known he would, Draco preened at that.

"And if you want to do something else," added Harry, thinking he might as well, "you could talk to Snape and see if you can get him to let me out of these stupid dinner detentions--"

"Oh, no. I like the idea."

Harry had expected him to say something like that, but he still didn't like hearing it. "They won't do any good."

"Maybe they will."

"No," said Harry. "It's like with the potions ingredients. I had too much of some of them last year, and now I can barely tolerate them. I don't even know how I'm going to get through Ethics."

"Oh, Ethics is fascinating. The whole course is built around stories that challenge you to think harder about what's right and why it's right. I wish I'd grown up with a father who thought about things like that--"

"It's time to leave Mr Potter to his rest," said Madam Pomfrey as she bustled towards them. "Out, out!"

"But I'm family!"

Harry almost snickered at the indignant way Draco said that.
"Then you should know that he's delicate and needs his rest, Mr Snape."

"Hey!" objected Harry. "I am not delicate!"

"Can't I stay a few more minutes, just until his hamburger arrives?"

"Burger!" Madam Pomfrey sounded scandalised. "Of all the ridiculous things to eat after a stomach upset. No, you may not stay." She turned to Harry. "And you are on a bland, simple diet this evening. You may have rice cooked in beef broth with applesauce for dessert. Now, say your good-byes to your brother."

She hurried over to the floo, presumably to arrange the meal.

Harry shuddered. "Rice and applesauce, ugh."

"You deserve it after that stunt." Draco abruptly grabbed his hand and squeezed, so hard that Harry winced. "Don't do that to me again. Don't ever do that to me again. Avoiding Dad is not worth your life."

Harry gulped. He'd never expected to feel guilty. "I didn't know I'd have a reaction like that."

"Don't do anything else so ridiculous." Draco squeezed again, but not as hard. "All right?"

Harry didn't see a way out of Ethics, anyway. Not now. "All right," he muttered.

"I'm going to hold you to that."

"Are you still here, Mr Snape?" asked the medi-witch in her best exasperated voice. "Out, I said!"

Draco gave Harry's hand one last squeeze and let go. He made a sweeping bow toward Pomfrey, as if to formally announce his departure, and then he turned and left.

"You'll have your dinner and then you'll sleep," said Pomfrey.

"Can my friends stay if I don't eat the burger?"

"Certainly not." Pomfrey sniffed. "They won't be coming. I caught them in the kitchens."

She sounded like she'd caught them doing something wrong. But then, she thought that rice and applesauce made for a good meal.

And Harry was hungry, damn it.

A wavering thought came to him, like a series of memories dancing on the wind. A table set for three, food appearing out of nowhere, sometimes the same, sometimes different for each person . . . Harry kneeling in front of a Floo and flinging powder in . . . being able to order whatever he wanted for breakfast, lunch, and dinner . . .

Huh. Living with Snape hadn't been all bad, obviously.

But that didn't mean that Harry was going to like having dinner in the dungeons. He wasn't going to, full stop.

He wasn't going to enjoy spending time with Snape. Not ever. Not ever again.
Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Twenty-Six: "Ethics"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
"That," said Draco in a furious whisper as he pushed Harry up against a stone wall, "was appalling behaviour. How \textit{dare} you treat Severus that way?"

Harry shrugged and when that didn't work, shoved Draco out of the way so he could keep walking away from Snape's quarters. "I told him he should let me out of detention."

"And that's a reason to not say one \textit{bloody fucking word} the entire time?"

"I can't talk to him," said Harry, speeding up. "Dumbledore assigned three of these so-called dinner detentions, and Snape added a fourth. If I'd kept my mouth shut, he wouldn't have. So I decided I'm better off keeping my mouth shut."

"That is some of the most twisted logic in the history of . . . logic!" Draco lengthened his stride so he could leap in front of Harry to stop him again. "Just what did you say to him, Harry? I know, I know he's been unreasonable to you in the past, but that's the past. He's not unreasonable now. Not usually, anyway. So . . . what did you say to earn yourself a fourth detention?"

"I swore."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "There's more to it than that. I swear all the time and all he ever does is say, 'Language, Draco.'"

"Well, you're both Slytherins, aren't you?"

"You're a Slytherin too, you prat!"

Harry didn't dignify that with an answer, maybe because it brought to mind a number of Slytherin things he'd done in the past week.

"Really, Harry. He didn't give you any sort of warning about your language before he assigned a detention?"

"All right, fine. He warned me first, and I swore again anyway, because it's none of his fucking concern how I speak when I'm not in class, and \textit{then} he added to my detention, so I decided--"

"You decided to be a baby and never speak to him again." Draco's voice that time was cold all the way through. "Snape doesn't deserve that. He loves you and he's just trying to do what's best for you!"

"I can't talk to him if it's just going to get me another detention," said Harry as he side-stepped Draco and started walking again.

"But it won't." Draco hurried to catch up. "That's the part you don't understand, Harry."
"But it will."

"Harry--"

Draco fell silent when Harry held up a hand that shook slightly. He wasn't angry any longer, not really. He just felt exhausted. Staying quiet through dinner had been harder than he'd expected. Snape's initial overtures . . . and the look on his face . . . and then the way he'd finally begun conversing with Draco . . . that had been the most surprising part, actually. Harry would have expected the two of them to lock him out; Draco had certainly seemed angry enough to do so. But Snape kept winding the conversation back to something he could ask Harry to draw him in, over and over.

But Harry hadn't let himself be drawn in. How could he? "That's the part you don't understand, Draco. I tried to tell you. Don't you remember? Most of the time when I get near Snape I just . . . I'm overcome with rage. I will end up telling him to fuck off again. The best thing I can do, for both of us, is stay away from him. That's no longer an option, so I'm settling for second best. If I don't talk at all, I won't lose my temper and end up spending even more time with him."

Draco laid a hand on Harry's sleeve, momentarily halting him. "But . . . why should you be so angry at Severus? Can't you see that he's changed toward you? He's not the same man who singled you out that first day in class, Harry. He's not."

"He's not," Harry admitted. "I can see that. I'd have to be blind not to see it. But that doesn't help. I still get so angry that I'm almost shaking with it."

"Why, for Merlin's sake? What has he done?"

"I don't know," whispered Harry. Draco had called his behaviour at dinner appalling, but as far as Harry was concerned, that was the truly appalling part. "I don't know," he said again, swallowing so his voice wouldn't break. "All I know is . . . is that he lied to me. I can't figure out why that would upset me, though. It's not like I expect him to be truthful--"

All of a sudden, it was like a brilliant *Lumos* lit him up from the inside out. That was it in a nutshell! Once upon a time, he had expected Snape to be truthful. He must have. Otherwise, why would it bother him so much to know that the man must have lied to him about something?

The revelation was frightening in its scope, because it proved something real to Harry. The letter from last Christmas had demonstrated that he must have once felt differently about having Snape for a father, but this . . . this proved how very much Snape must have once meant to him.

Harry swallowed, feeling almost like he could reach out and grasp that depth of feeling again, if he wanted to.

But he didn't want to, and then the moment was gone.

"He's usually truthful with us," Draco was saying in a quiet voice. "The times when he's not, he has a good reason. I don't know that he lied to you, Harry, but I do know that he must have thought it was the right thing to do at the time. Why don't you ask him about it?"

"Because I'm not talking to him."

"Now you're just being a stupid Gryffindor!"

"And you're being the arsehole I *do* remember!" shouted Harry, his anger surging back into full force, killing every trace of exhaustion. "You're so fucking proud of yourself for not being
prejudiced any longer! Except you're still a prick about Gryffindor, and I told you what I thought about that. I'm a Gryffindor and if that makes me stupid in your opinion then we don't have anything else to say! And as for Snape, there's no point in asking him when he wouldn't tell me anything, anyway!" Harry bared his teeth for a second. "Whatever he lied about, it happened during the year I can't remember. Which means that if it didn't make the newspapers, and you don't know--"

"Shut up, shut up," hissed Draco, looking around frantically.

Harry looked around too, but it didn't seem that anybody was nearby. He shot Draco a grin that was probably vicious, not that he cared. "I told you I was better off not talking to him. Maybe you'll believe me, now."

With that, he took a turn toward the Tower.

"There's a shortcut this way--"

"I'll come to D.A. with my house mates," said Harry stiffly.

"But you said--"

"After what you said, I don't feel like helping you get ready. But that's all right. How much help could a stupid Gryffindor be?"

Before Draco could recover from that parting shot, Harry had turned another corner.

"The wand gesture should be directed more to your left, Mr Longbottom," said Snape that evening in the Room of Requirement.

Harry scowled and edged away. When Snape had been assigned to supervise three sessions of D.A., Harry had assumed that the man would sit in a corner marking essays. As far as Harry could tell, he hadn't even brought any to mark. First he'd watched without comment as Draco instructed the whole group. Then, when groups of students began practising what Draco had demonstrated, Snape began circulating and helping people.

Harry hadn't thought he would help Neville, though. Yell at him, yes. But not help.

"I think your dad really enjoys teaching Defense," said Neville, shrugging as they were walking back to the Tower later.

"We're not supposed to tell Harry about last year," said Hermione primly.

"Yeah, so stop doing it," said Ron, staring at her.

Hermione flushed and moved ahead of their group, tossing her head.
"I knew about Snape taking over from . . . er, Aran, anyway," said Harry. "That duel they fought made the newspapers." It had, but Harry knew a lot more than the Prophet had disclosed, thanks to Draco. He spoke to Neville again. "But . . . but how can you stand him, Neville? I think he was more awful to you than me!"

"Maybe. But he's been a really good dad to you, Harry." Neville's voice grew wistful. "And . . . well, you know. I understand how important that can be."

Harry nodded, but not to agree that Snape had been a good dad. He did understand how Neville might have longed for one, though. He could remember feeling that way himself.

Neville must have felt like that was encouragement to go on. He had a lot on his mind, as it turned out.

"I'm disappointed in you, Harry," said Neville quietly. "I know you can't remember being adopted, but your dad's trying so hard, and for you to stand there like a statue while he's talking to you . . . it's not like you to deliberately hurt people."

"Snape didn't look hurt to me--"

"He's not likely to show it in a room full of students. He's too proud for that," said Neville. "But I'm sure that you were hurting him. And . . . well, he just doesn't deserve that, Harry."

"He should have expected it," said Harry stubbornly. "I didn't talk to him during dinner tonight, either. He should have known better than to come up to me during D.A."

Neville stared at him, his lips a little pursed. "You should be ashamed of yourself."

Ron waited until Neville had walked off. "He's right, you know."

"What nobody seems to understand is that I can't do any better than I am," said Harry, frustrated. "And why should Neville care so much? I mean, he's not the only one here who never had a father."

"You did have one, though. You still have one." Ron cleared his throat. "Neville saw how happy you were last year. And . . . I suppose I'm not supposed to tell you, but if it'll spare you from making such a berk of yourself . . . Snape did find him a private tutor for the summer, abroad somewhere. Somebody with a different teaching style, so Neville could finally really master Potions instead of struggling so much."

"Snape did that," said Harry flatly. "For Neville. For Neville Longbottom."

"He probably did it for you, because Neville's your friend. The same as he included Hermione and me in some things he might have preferred to keep in the family."

"I think you're confusing him with a giant marshmallow," said Harry, and walked away.
Harry had Ethics the next day, and Transfiguration right before it.

It was like torture sitting there waiting, knowing that Ethics was next and if he could just think of something clever enough, he could get out of it . . . but he was all out of ideas.

No, Dumbledore's idea to drop him from the class if he skipped it again . . . that ruined every plan Harry could think up.

"Stop fidgeting," said Draco in an undertone.

Harry scowled. He hadn't forgotten being called a "stupid Gryffindor" and he'd tried to sit as far as possible from Draco, but he'd basically been herded into place -- Ron and Hermione sharing a table behind him, Neville and Dean in front of him, Draco at his side.

All so he'd have to attend Ethics.

Which he had to do anyway, Harry thought glumly.

"You didn't have to pinch my invisibility cloak again," he said, turning around to glare at Ron. "I told you already, I'm not going to try anything."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"Shut up--"

"Mr Potter, is there a problem with your Transfiguration?" asked McGonagall from the front of the room.

"No, Professor," said Harry, turning back around to face the apple he was trying to turn into a book.

"This is taking Muggle emphasis lessons a bit far," he heard Hermione remark behind him. "It wasn't an apple in the Garden of Eden. It was a fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil."

"Nevertheless, the common cultural referent is to an apple," said Draco smoothly.

"But that story she told us, it never even happened," said Ron. "It's Muggle mythology."

"But endemic to Western culture, so if we want to understand the non-wizarding world, we should become conversant with it," argued Draco. "And in the spirit of toleration, I suggest you remember that some non-magical people consider the word 'Muggle' to be offensive."

"Didn't notice you objecting when Hermione used the word," sneered Ron.

"Ron," said Hermione in a warning tone.

Harry gave up on listening, then. He felt sick of everything. Sick of the prospect of going to Ethics, sick of listening to his friends squabble, sick of the feeling that he should probably be as ashamed of himself as Neville had said--

"So," said Draco in a casual voice, "Rumour has it that your things aren't safe in the Tower. I must say, I'd be delighted to safeguard them for you in Slytherin."

Rumour had it, right. Eavesdropping had it. "Oh, sure. They'd be safe in Slytherin."
"Did I hear you correctly? You just insulted people on the basis of house affiliation?" Draco affected a mock-astonished look.

"That's different," said Harry crossly.

"How?"

"It just . . ." Harry sighed. "I don't want to talk about it."

"We could talk about something else. For example, the fact that your bed in Slytherin getting rather dusty by now. It's looking positively forlorn. Perhaps you should visit. Spend a night, that sort of thing."

"It's not getting dusty. The house elves clean everything."

"It probably misses you, though."

"I'm not going to spend a night in Slytherin and get murdered in my sleep."

"Of course not. You slept there numerous times and were never murdered once."

"You know what I mean," said Harry crossly.

"Yes. That you judge on the basis of house. That you look at me and see a Slytherin, when you should see your brother."

"Well, you look at me and see a stupid Gryffindor," sneered Harry.

"I only see that when you're being one, which is a lot of the time lately--"

"Shut up!" shouted Harry.

"That will be five points from Gryffindor and five from Slytherin, Mr Potter," said McGonagall with a sigh. "Please do attend to the task at hand."

Harry scowled down at his apple. As soon as the teacher's back was turned, he bit into it and swallowed a sizable chunk.

Later on, it meant that his book was missing a corner from several dozen pages.

"Yes, we know that your book actually had a table of contents instead of blank pages, Hermione," said Ron in a long-suffering tone. "You've mentioned it five times."

"But don't you think it's fascinating that the entries were drawn from what I was thinking about while I was performing the transfiguration?"

"I just want to know why you were thinking so much about sexual fantasies!"
"I wasn't! I was thinking about the case studies Draco and I read to get ready for our role-play--"

"His role-play, his!" yelled Ron. "You didn't have to do it! You're not in Muggle Studies. And yes, it is called Muggle studies, because there is such a thing as Muggles--"

"Such a thing," said Draco. "A thing. Listen to yourself, Weasley."

"You're a fine one to talk! You only learned the word 'Muggle' to placate Harry! Before the two of you were brothers you called them Mudbloods, every time!"

"I can't believe you lot," said Neville as he caught up with them and took hold of Harry's sleeve. "What matters right now is making sure Harry doesn't disappear again or make himself sick."

"I don't need to make myself sick," said Harry, yanking his arm away. "I'm about to vomit at the idea that I have to take a class with Snape! That's probably half the reason the Skiving Snack made me sick up so much!"

They came around the corner half a second later and saw Snape standing at the open doorway, his face white instead of its usual sallow shade.

"Harry!" hissed Hermione.

"What?" asked Harry belligerently. The truth was that as soon as he'd seen Snape standing there, he wished he hadn't said that bit about vomiting. Or at least, he wished he hadn't said it so loudly. But he wasn't going to show Snape any regret.

"Oh, Harry."

That time, she just sounded sad.

Harry ignored that too, and pushed away from his friends, going past Snape without a word. It was enough that he was going into the fucking classroom. He didn't have to pretend to like being here.

And he sure as hell didn't have to sit with anybody that would expect him to like it.

Harry headed to the back of the class and sat down, slouching, his face screwed up into an expression of utter disdain. After a moment, though, he wondered why he should show Snape any emotion at all.

With that thought in mind, he sat up straight and made his face as perfectly blank as possible. It probably wasn't very blank, he knew -- he did tend to show his emotions too much, which was why he was pants at Occlumency.

Or why he had been, he supposed. To hear Snape tell it, Harry had learned to Occlude so well that now he was doing it unconsciously. So then . . . maybe his blank expression was better than he thought.

Draco had gone down to the front to say something to Snape. Ha, probably a report that Harry had in fact shown up. But he'd finished his tattle now and was heading toward Harry.

"Sod off," said Harry as soon as Draco was near enough to hear him.

"I thought I'd sit by my brother."

"I'm not in the mood for company--"
"Then you're apt to be disappointed. There aren't any extra desks in here. Severus likes to encourage discussion; in this class he's got an entirely different teaching style than his Potions-persona--"

"You will refer to me as 'Professor' while in class, Mr Snape," said an unmistakable voice from the front of the classroom. "And you will take a seat in the first two rows."

Harry scowled. He didn't want any favours from Snape. But then, maybe Snape could tell that Harry might start screaming any second. He couldn't have that, could he? He might have to take points from Harry, and half of them would come from Slytherin!

Except . . . it would give him an excuse to give Harry another detention.

So that didn't make a lot of sense.

Hell, nothing made sense.

All Harry knew was that he was going to keep his face as expressionless as possible, and if Snape had the nerve to call on him when he knew Harry didn't want to be here and wasn't speaking to him, then Harry would . . .

Harry would . . .

Fuck. Harry had no idea what he'd do, except hate Snape forever.

His Gryffindor friends had more sense than Draco, as it turned out. None of them tried to sit near him; they could tell that might push him off some sort of ledge. But Draco had been right about all the seats filling up. Harry ended up sitting next to Terry Boot, who took one look at him and decided to mind his own business.

"Today we will consider another hypothetical case study," announced Snape as he rolled up a scroll that gave off blue sparks and set it rather forcefully on a table at the front of the classroom. "I'll begin with a question. Is it better to save one life, or five?"

Harry couldn't help but stare incredulously, his resolve to stay blank completely forgotten. What the hell kind of question was that?

"Your answer to that question, once you hear the scenarios posed, will help you determine whether consequentialist ethics dominate your habits of mind, or if at heart you prefer a more categorical interpretation of right and wrong."

Harry had no clue what any of that meant, but he decided he didn't care. It was better to save five lives than one -- that was the only answer that mattered. And if Snape argued otherwise, then that would prove he had no ethics, and no business teaching the subject!

"Yes, Miss Bulstrode?"

Millicent put her hand down. "But doesn't everyone rely on a mix of consequentialist and categorical ethics, sir?"

"Indeed. Five points to Slytherin. However, you will find in yourself a tendency to prefer one over the other. Now, for our first scenario . . ."

Harry scrambled to get out some parchment, but not because he had any intention of taking notes. Those five points to Slytherin had given him an idea.
He drew three vertical lines down his parchment, using a stub of pencil he found buried in the bottom of his bag, and labeled the top of each column with a letter: S, G, R, H. Then in the first column, he noted +5(?), since the points had seemed a little questionable to him.

Then he sat back, relaxing a little, wondering why he hadn't thought to do this years ago. It should be easy to collect evidence about how biased Snape was, after all. Maybe if Harry could prove, mathematically, that the man had no ethics when it came to the houses, he'd be removed from teaching this course and Harry's problem could be solved that way.

"Consider the following situation," Snape was saying, his robes swishing as he strode between the aisles of desks. He came near Harry on his circuit, but didn't attempt to make eye contact. Harry kept his chart under a book whenever he wasn't jotting something down on it. He didn't want Snape to catch on and suddenly start acting more fair. "You have lost control of your broom and are going to plough into a crowd of five people. For the purposes of this thought experiment, you must accept the premise that if you hit the crowd, you will cause the death of all five people. At the last instant, it becomes possible for you to veer sharply to the right. You have no other alternative. If you veer to the right you will strike and kill one person. In this situation, should you fly straight ahead into the crowd of five or turn and hit a single person instead?"

"Maybe if you hit the five the impact will be less on each and the hospital wing will be able to save them," offered Hannah Abbott after Snape gestured to her upraised hand.

"You must accept that you will cause either five deaths or one," insisted Snape. "Two points from Hufflepuff for not listening to instructions."

Harry wrote -2(u) in the H column. Those two points were definitely unfair. Harry could understand questioning the limits of the "thought experiment." And who was to say that all five people would die?

"So then, a show of hands," said Snape. "Who believes that the correct course is to careen straight ahead into the crowd of five people?"

To Harry's surprise, several hands went up.

"And who believes that the correct course is to veer right?"

"'Correct course,' clever pun," murmured Terry as he raised his hand.

Harry didn't raise his own hand for that option, any more than he had for the other one. He wasn't talking to Snape.

He saw Snape raise an eyebrow in reaction. For a second Harry had the horrible feeling that all he'd done was make sure that Snape would call on him. Nothing like that happened, though.

"Of those who felt you must change course, who will explain the reasoning behind the decision?"

"If someone's going to die in any case," said Hermione, "then of course you have to save five lives at the cost of one."

"Please raise your hand if your own reasoning agrees with the rationale given by Miss Granger," directed Snape. "Very well . . . two points to Gryffindor for avoiding prolixity."

Harry blinked, startled, and wrote +2(?) in the G column. He couldn't possibly decide if that was fair or not, since he didn't know what the hell prolixity was.
"And of those who would not change course, who will explain that reasoning?"

It would be a Slytherin defending the "kill five" option, thought Harry as he listened to Zabini talk. "Veering the broom to one side is making a choice to kill, Professor. Fate has already selected the five for death. The immoral choice here is the one that requires you to decide to kill rather than the one that merely allows death to happen on its own."

Damned if he didn't make it sound reasonable to plough into five people, thought Harry.

"A valid rationale," murmured Snape. "Two points to Slytherin."

Harry jotted that down on his chart.

"So let us alter the thought experiment based on Mr Zabini's point. Assume now that it is impossible for you to fly forward on your careening broom. You must either pull to the left or the right, and the choice is yours to make. To your left stand five people and to your right stands one. It is not possible to 'let fate decide.' What will you do now, Mr Zabini?"

"Veer right," said Zabini, shrugging. "Of course."

"Notice how the right answer is always to veer right," murmured Terry.

Harry glanced his way, irritated.

"Who else would agree that in the revised scenario, the ethical choice is to veer right and not left?"

Every hand in the class went up. Even Harry's.

He yanked it down, fast, and reminded himself not to get so caught up in the discussion that he forgot his resolve.

"So would you all concur that other things being equal, such as fate, is it without a doubt better to kill one person rather than five?"

There was a general chorus of agreement.

"And will this always hold true?"

Beside Harry, Terry grimaced. "Uh-oh . . ."

"You have something to add, Mr Boot?"

Harry firmed his features as Snape's gaze sought out the back row.

"Yes," said Terry. "Now that you've got us to agree that it's always better to kill one than five, you're going to turn that on its head, aren't you, sir?"

"How very perceptive. Five points to Ravenclaw for seeing the inherent complexity of the topic."

Harry noted the points, frowning.

"Another twist to the scenario, then," announced Snape. "Instead of being astride the broom, you are in the Quidditch stands observing the situation and aware that you have recently developed a highly accurate weight-flinging charm. Accept that for the purposes of our discussion, you know for certain that your charm will work and will save the five people in the crowd, if only you can find a weight large enough to knock the careening broom off course. There is no other way to avert
the disaster. However, whatever you fling will be destroyed on impact with the broom. Can anyone predict the ethical dilemma this time?"

Ron raised his hand. "The only weight nearby, the only weight large enough . . . it's going to be a person, isn't it?"

"Indeed. Five points to Gryffindor."

Harry bit his lip that time as he slid his chart out from under his book.

"You can save five people at the cost of one. Essentially, the same choice you made a few moments ago. Please raise your hand if in this situation you will stand by the principle that it is better to kill one than five."

A few tentative hands went up, some of them bobbing like corks on the ocean.

"And let us not rely on fate to explain our ethics," said Snape in a slightly sneering tone. "Assume that the same fate directing the broom toward the five has providentially provided fodder for your weight-flinging spell in the form of one unusually large person. We are in no position to judge what is fated in this case."

Snape waited, but the class remained silent.

"The choice is a simple one, surely," he prompted. "Five, or one? Who can make their choice and defend it?"

"Five," said Padma in a strong voice.

"You would choose to let five people die rather than one."

"Yes."

"Defend your ethics."

"The five are going to die if I do nothing." Padma looked around as if expecting an argument. "If I cast my spell, that's a deliberate action on my part. I would literally be killing the person. In the case of the five . . . I'm not killing them. The broom is."

"So to salvage your conscience you would allow the deaths of four additional human beings. In effect, you value ethics itself more than human life. Is that ethical?"

"No, I--" Padma opened her mouth and then closed it, and then tried again. "I didn't mean that, exactly--"

"Three points to Ravenclaw for the attempt, muddled though it was."

Harry jotted down both the points and the insult.

"Five or one?" said Snape again, sweeping his gaze across the classroom. It alighted on Harry for a moment, but didn't linger.

"Five, because the person beside me isn't mine to fling," said Draco.

"But are the five yours to condemn?"

"No, but I'm not condemning them. Circumstances are doing that."
"That's merely a return to the fate argument. Three points from Slytherin for not moving the discussion forward."

_Slytherin?_

"You have to let the five die," said Susan Bones. "You . . . you just have to."

"Miss Bones," said Snape quietly, but with a definite edge, "you know quite well that in this class I expect you to defend your ethical choices."

"You have to let the five die because a broom crashing into you at a Quidditch match is a foreseeable risk," said Ernie Macmillan, earning himself a grateful look from Susan. "The spectators at the match assumed that risk when they decided to attend. It's _not_ a normal thing to be flung from the stands by a fellow onlooker. You might go to the pitch expecting an accident. You don't go expecting to be . . . to be murdered."

"That's it," said Susan. "The one is murder. The five aren't."

"So some decisions to kill are murder, and others are not?"

"Yes," said Susan. "You might have to kill in self-defense; that's not murder. You might have no reasonable way to prevent an accident that leads to death, like in the scenario you posed, sir. The fact that people died when you could have stopped it, if your only way to stop it is taking an unreasonable action, like deliberate murder . . . well, that's not murder, either."

"Five points for clear logic if not the best means of expressing it," said Snape crisply. "So now we come to the crux of the issue. Some decisions to kill are murder; in some cases we can't trade one life for five and feel that we have undertaken the right ethical decision. You will now discuss with a classmate how the scenarios posed today reflect the difference between consequentialist and categorical ethics. When you have exhausted that topic, prepare a written outline of a scenario that illustrates both types of ethics in wartime."

Harry quickly slid his parchment out from under his book and wrote down the last points awarded. When Terry looked at him, he shrugged. "Private project."

"You might want to code it better," said Terry dryly. "S, G, R, H is pathetic. And from the way you're hiding it, I presume you're trying to keep it from your father."

Harry scowled at the last word as he rubbed out the initials, replacing them with S, L, E, B.

"Marginally better. How about this?" Terry snatched the pencil, looked at it curiously for a second, and wrote B, N, G, F. "It at least gets Slytherin away from the S range, and now G means something other than Gryffindor."

Harry thought about it for a second. "Yeah, all right." He set to erasing his scheme based on the house mascots while he spoke. "I don't have a clue what consequentialist or categorical ethics are, by the way."

"No reason why you should, since this is your first time in this class since the Quidditch match." Terry peered at him closely, then appeared to realise that Harry wasn't going to volunteer anything. "Consequentialist ethics are when you judge right and wrong purely by the effects your actions would have. By that measure you should always kill one instead of five, assuming you have to kill at all. Categorical ethics are when something is right or wrong by its very nature, regardless of the situation."
"Like when it was wrong to fling an uninvolved bystander to his death, even if it would have saved some other people," mused Harry. "Huh. Well, I think--"

Snape's voice rang out, directing students to form larger groups and share their wartime scenarios.

Harry reluctantly left his chart behind when Terry drew him to some other Ravenclaws. From then until the end of the class, he had to make do with keeping mental track of the points awarded and deducted. He couldn't hear everything, of course; Snape circulated throughout the classroom, listening to the discussions and asking questions so pointed that they often bordered on rude.

Harry kept track of what he could hear, and was more than a little dismayed when the growing tally wasn't what he expected. Where was the open bias toward Slytherin and the blatant disgust of Gryffindor?

Not that Snape appeared to love Gryffindor, or Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw.

But he wasn't completely unreasonable about the points, either. By Harry's mental count, he favoured Slytherin by a lot less than he used to.

But then, he knew that his count wasn't complete, so perhaps that explained it.

"Written outlines, please," said Snape at the end of the session.

Harry frowned as he swept all his things back into his school bag. He and Terry hadn't ever got around to making up a scenario.

He was expecting the worst when Snape approached, but Terry whipped out a sheet of parchment and handed it over. Huh. He must have jotted something down while Harry was preoccupied eavesdropping and tallying up points.

"Dinner in my quarters on Saturday," said Snape. "Would you let Draco know?"

That last bit was a transparent attempt to make Harry talk to him, but Harry was determined not to let it work. He stared straight ahead, not even looking at Snape, who sighed under his breath after a long moment.

"I'll let Draco know."

Harry gave a curt nod and turned away. He didn't know how to feel. On the one hand, it was a relief to have a couple days' reprieve before he'd have to see Snape again. On the other, Snape had probably delayed until Saturday so that Harry would have time to change his mind about not speaking to him.

But that wasn't going to happen.

Harry quickly filed out of the classroom, almost running down the corridor.

"Dinner, eh?" asked Terry, walking fast beside him.

"It's not. It's detention."

"Only because you're being a toerag to Dad," snarled Draco, catching up to them.

"He's your dad, not mine--"

"On that note," murmured Terry, "I think I'll leave you to work things out with your brother,
Draco took a deep breath, the expression on his face saying that he was going to get through to
Harry no matter what it took. He waited to speak, though, until the last students from Ethics filed
past. "What's your problem?" asked Draco once they were alone. "Severus didn't humiliate you in
class, and he could have, since you don't know anything he's been teaching."

"What a character reference! He didn't humiliate a student so far today. Should he get an Order of
Merlin first or second class for that?"

"You're impossible--"

Harry held up a hand. "I have to cancel our tutoring session this evening, Draco."

"Because I told you what I think of the way you're treating Dad!"

"No, because Ron and I are going flying. I already had it arranged," said Harry calmly. He didn't
want to be at odds with Draco. He really didn't, though Draco might not feel the same way. "I have
to get over my fear. You know that."

Draco blinked, a strange expression crossing his face. "Fear," he said, the word emerging so slowly
that it was almost slurried. "That's it, isn't it? Fear. You're afraid."

"I told you that myself--"

"No, you're afraid of coming to depend on Severus," said Draco, his tone full of wonderment. "Of
course you're pushing him away with all your might. You're afraid to let yourself hope for family. I
don't know why I didn't see it before. I did the same thing myself, when I was first adopted . . ."

"Shut up," snapped Harry. "That's not it. I'm not afraid. I know I can't depend on Snape for
anything. I stopped talking to him so he'd stop talking to me and we could put an end to this farce--"

Except there wasn't going to be an end to the farce. I will never repudiate you, Harry, never . . .

"You're testing him," said Draco, that time in tones ringing with certainty. "And I suppose I should
be a little more tolerant, considering my own rather spotted past. At least you're not doing it with
poison."

"I wouldn't poison anybody!"

"I wasn't referring to you."

Oh. Oh. It took Harry a moment to put the pieces together with what he'd heard during his private
talks with Draco. "That was why you . . ."

"Yes, though I hardly realised it at the time. It's not easy being adopted. I know all about it, Harry."

"Well, it's easy for me." Harry gave Draco a grim smile. "It's just not very important."

"That comment would have annoyed me five minutes ago." Draco's own smile was wide and
bright, though his eyes still glittered with determination. "Now I understand it. But you'll find out,
sooner or later, that Severus can't be pushed away."

Harry clenched his fists as the urge to hit Draco washed over him. "Stay out of it. Just . . . stay out
of it. Leave me alone."
"Not even if you stop talking to me, too."

"I just might!"

Draco gave a smile that said he didn't believe that for a second. "I'll see you tomorrow in Defense."

Harry scowled, but Draco obviously took no notice of that; he merely gave a friendly little wave and headed down the corridor alone.

"So, I found your Ethics wartime scenario rather intriguing, Harry," said Snape over dinner on Saturday evening.

Harry didn't know why Snape thought he would reply to that. But then, Harry's silence didn't appear to bother him very much. He didn't yell or cajole or threaten; he just kept on making remarks and asking questions as though this were a normal family dinner.

Normal family dinner. Harry didn't know why he'd thought of that phrase. It wasn't as though he'd experienced many of those in his life.

Maybe I have . . . The thought came sneaking into his mind of its own volition. He could even remember some of them, if he tried. Oh, not the details or anything like that. Just some random images. The table set for three. All of them with the same food, or each of them with different dishes. Draco drinking wine . . .

Of course, he was drinking wine tonight too. So was Snape. He'd offered to pour Harry a glass, but Harry hadn't replied.

That was a drawback of deciding not to speak. He thought he could probably do with something stronger than the butterbeer he'd ordered through the Floo when prompted. He told himself that those words didn't count; he'd been speaking to the kitchen elves, not to Snape.

Maybe next time he'd see if they'd serve him some wine. Or maybe not. Snape might take that as an indication that Harry needed something to bolster his dislike of him. And that wasn't true at all.

"Did you intend your scenario to exhibit such strong parallels to the war with Grindelwald?"

Harry shrugged. In this case the silent treatment worked to his advantage, since it meant he didn't have to admit that he had no idea what the scenario said. Terry had written it all by himself while Harry had been caught up in watching Snape without it looking like he was watching.

Snape waited a moment, then turned to Draco. "How is Defense class these days?"

"Morrighan's a bit more even-handed with me. Perhaps because she caught me playing with Loki. She really does adore animals." Draco grinned, the expression mischievous. "Now there's an idea. Someone should suggest that Hagrid ask her to the Yule Ball."
Harry reminded himself that it was only Snape he wasn't talking to. "I know you've always hated Hagrid, but calling him an animal just because he's part-giant is--"

Draco abruptly set down his wine glass. "I wasn't calling him that. I meant that she likes creatures and so does he!"

"Oh."

"And I don't hate him," insisted Draco, his chin held high. He stared at Harry for a moment more, then turned his attention to Snape. "So then . . . no comment on the wartime Ethics scenario that I wrote?"

Snape's features, Harry saw, had tightened. Had Draco's scenario been that bad?

All he said, however, was: "Your avoidance of the word 'Muggle' creates unnecessary circumlocutions."

"I dare you to use 'circumlocution' the next time we play Wizard's Scrabble. And that's a good idea, isn't it? Let's have a game straight away after dinner."

Harry didn't even shake his head. He let his expression speak for itself.

"Another night," said Snape smoothly. "Dessert, Harry? Feel free to order some through the Floo if you'd like."

What Harry would like was for his detention to be over.

He stood up without a word and headed for the front door of Snape's quarters, slamming it on the way out.

That time when Draco caught up with him, he was full of understanding comments instead of rebukes. Of course Harry was acting out. He was in that difficult phase, the one that Draco knew all about . . .

Harry didn't bother correcting Draco. It wasn't worth arguing over, not when there was no chance he'd be able to convince him of anything.

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The next time Harry had to serve detention, it was on a Wednesday before D.A. again. By then, Harry had figured out Snape's thinking. Or part of it, anyway. He didn't want to schedule dinner detentions on days when he had Harry in Ethics class.

It went about the same as the others, except that Draco decided to mention that Harry had invited Luna to the Yule Ball. The words seemed loaded in some way that Harry couldn't understand, like Draco was trying to make a point to Snape.

What that point could be, Harry had no idea. He hadn't been dating Luna during his missing year;
Draco had already confirmed that for him.

The final detention was scheduled for Saturday again. As Harry trudged his way down to the dungeons, he told himself that at least this would be the last time. He'd have been finished on Wednesday if he'd been clever enough not to get assigned a fourth detention. But after this one, it would all be over.

Or it would be over assuming that Snape and Dumbledore didn't come up with asinine excuses for assigning more detentions.

That time, Harry did order wine through the Floo. To celebrate, he told himself. What did he care what Snape might think?

What type of wine . . . Harry didn't know, so he said "red" and ignored the way that Draco began rattling off fancy French names.

The dinner started off like the other ones had. Small talk and questions about their classes, questions about their week. Harry concentrated on eating as fast as he could without choking.

Then Draco lit the match that eventually set off the explosion.

"So Harry's afraid of heights, now," he remarked, just as if he had every right to put Harry's personal business on display in front of Snape.

"I am not," snapped Harry, turning to face Draco fully. That way Snape couldn't think Harry was relenting about talking to him. "I went to the Owlery and looked down and it didn't bother me at all."

"You're afraid of heights on a broom, though."

"And Ron's helping me get over it."

Snape cleared his throat. "Is that wise, Harry?"

Harry pressed his lips together to keep from saying what he thought about a question like that coming from Snape, of all people.

"Harry," said Snape, his voice so deep and low that it almost sounded like it was breaking. "Please don't do this any longer. Please. Speak to me."

Harry swallowed, feeling absolutely terrible by then. He hadn't expected Snape to beg, and he didn't like the feeling it gave him, like his insides were crawling, trying to get away . . . but not from Snape. From himself, this time.

Still, he shook his head back and forth.

"Why won't you talk to me?" asked Snape, his voice actually breaking that time. "I have made these dinners as amicable as I can. Is it truly not possible for us to be . . . friendly, if not familial?"

The silence that time went on and on, until Draco finally broke it. "He's got some load of rubbish in his head, Severus. He thinks you'll give him more detention if he puts a word wrong."

"But I would never--" Snape abruptly cleared his voice. "Ah. The hospital wing."

Yeah, the hospital wing, thought Harry mutinously.
Snape suddenly leaned forward over the table, ignoring the way Harry reared back. "I stand by my word to you, Harry. Inside these walls, you may say anything you please to me. Anything, without fear of retribution. Even open defiance, as in the hospital wing. That was in a public venue, but this . . ." He made an expansive gesture. "This is your home, whether you consider it in that light or not."

Harry licked his lips, suddenly tempted.

Or maybe he was just tempted to make Snape break his word. There were some things, Harry knew, that Snape would never, ever stand for. This would be a case of categorical ethics -- something that Snape considered wrong by its very nature.

He stopped leaning back and sat up straight, looking Snape in the eyes. "I can say anything? Well then, fuck you, sir!"

Draco had been holding his breath; at that, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Relief. That alone told Harry that he'd miscalculated.

"That's better than silence," said Snape in a level tone. "Is there any context to the comment?"

Harry gaped, taken aback, but he wasn't flummoxed for long. "Yeah. How about the way you assign me detention for saying that last time?"

"You said it in front of another staff member."

That was true, but Harry was hardly mollified. "Well, I know you've been just itching to make me spend time with you, and I wasn't going to, so it only stood to reason that a man like you would abuse his power to get his way."

"I can't fault your assumption; I was once quite likely to behave that way," said Snape, leaning back and folding his hands together. "But if I were still inclined to treat you so, wouldn't I have taken advantage of your silence also? All I needed to do was ask you a question during Ethics. Your refusal to answer would have been ample grounds for additional detentions."

"He does have a point," murmured Draco.

"Stay out of this!" shouted Harry. "And it's not just that I thought you'd throw detention around, sir. I also thought I'd lose my temper if I started talking to you. Which look, I have!"

"Yes. But here, you are perfectly free to lose your temper. You may even throw things, if you like."

Harry gritted his teeth. He wasn't a baby. He wasn't going to start throwing things, and he didn't like the suggestion that he might.

"Now, about the notion of Mr Weasley helping you feel comfortable on a broom again--"

"You just don't want Gryffindor to win any matches!" shouted Harry. "You want me to sit them out because I'm not over my, my--"

"Phobia," said Draco.

"It's not a phobia. Dr Goode said so!"

Snape tilted his head. "You've consulted the good doctor?"
"Yes, and she said that I should start flying with someone I trust," spat Harry.

"In that case I withdraw my concern, which had nothing to do with who might win matches," said Snape in a heavy tone. "I merely wished for you to do nothing that might make the situation worse. Is your time in the air with Mr Weasley helping?"

"Uh . . . hard to say," mumbled Harry. "I . . . I think so."

"Good. I've arranged a special dessert in hopes of tempting you to stay for pudding." Standing, he went to the Floo and called a command through. By the time he returned to the table, a covered platter had appeared, the silver gleaming so brightly that Harry almost lifted a hand to shade his eyes.

His mouth dropped open when Snape lifted the cover.

"What is that?" asked Draco, sounding puzzled and also a little bit revolted.

For his part, Harry felt like he might burst out laughing any second. He wondered what was wrong with him tonight. His emotions were see-sawing all over the place. But then, that had been true ever since he'd woken up without an entire year of memories. The sight of the dessert brought back memories much older than the ones he'd lost, of course. "Whipped cream and sugared violets," he gasped.

"Sugared violets?"

"It's a Muggle thing."

At that, Draco made a concerted effort to look intrigued. "Oh. Well, in that case--"

"What--" Harry sucked in a deep breath, feeling like he was on the thin edge of hysteria. "Where in the world did you get the idea that that would tempt me?"

Snape paused in the act of scooping some pudding onto a plate. "Dobby volunteered this as a favoured dessert when I inquired of the kitchens what you might enjoy."

"He saw one like it in the Dursley house," said Harry, feeling like he understood Snape less than ever. "Why are you asking the kitchen elves about my preferences when I lived here for months and you would have seen what I liked to eat?"

A dull flush came up to tinge Snape's sallow skin. "I asked specifically for something you hadn't ordered from my Floo. I didn't wish you to think, later on, that I had tried to manipulate you with echoes of . . . happier times."

"Well, no worries there," Harry shook his head, still feeling bemused. "That particular pudding . . . it's not exactly a fond memory. Maybe Dobby thinks that Aunt Petunia makes puddings like that all the time, though."

A moment later, he realised what he'd said. "Made, I meant."

Snape set down the small plate he'd been holding and drew his wand. "Evanesco?"

Harry nodded, and that was that. The dessert vanished in a slight puff of smoke, leaving behind an aroma of violets that was vaguely nauseating. Still, it was better than being drenched in the scent from head to toe.
"Something else, then?"

"Trifle," said Draco.

"I was asking Harry."

It seemed churlish to leave without dessert after Snape had tried so hard to arrange one Harry would appreciate. "Um . . . maybe some ice cream. Chocolate?"

"Peasant," said Draco under his breath. The sentiment didn't stop him from eating the ice cream, though.

The mood over dessert wasn't exactly relaxed, but it wasn't tense, either. Harry told himself later that he should have known it couldn't last. It was a casual remark of Snape's that changed everything.

"I saw Lupin earlier today, Harry. He asked me to pass on a 'hallo' from him."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Was there an Order meeting? I thought Draco and I were members."

"There was a meeting of the school's governors."

It took Harry a moment to understand what that had to do with Remus. But then he remembered. Remus was pretending to be Lucius Malfoy, and Malfoy was one of the school's governors. But Snape wasn't, so if he'd seen Remus, then it probably meant--

"Here? Remus was here?" Harry blew out a breath through his nostrils. "Remus was here and nobody bothered to tell me?"

"He was here in his guise as Lucius Malfoy."

"So?"

"So, I judged it best that you not see him until he could look like himself."

"You judged it best. You." A wave of anger swept through him without warning, so fast and fierce that he felt plunged completely beneath it. Without even realising it this time, Harry raised his voice. "What the hell gives you the right to decide what's best for me? You're not my father! You're not even a man to I'd even want for a father if I wanted one at all, which I don't!"

No, what he wanted was Sirius, but he couldn't have him unless he could remember enough to get the mirror working. And he wanted Remus and could have talked with him today, which might have cued some memory that would get the mirror working, and Snape had kept Remus from seeing him!

The anger inside him became a high wall of fury, with himself on one side and Snape on the other. He was never going to have anything in common with Snape. There was no point to dinners like these, or to Snape's efforts to forge some kind of connection with him. They had nothing to do with one another.

"Harry," Draco was saying, "Lucius kidnapped and tortured you. If Remus Lupin could look like himself maybe you could see him, but he's using an enhanced Polyjuice that lasts for hours. Dad's right -- it's not a good idea for you to be in a room with a man who looks and sounds and moves like Lucius--"
"Oh, because I'm delicate?" snarled Harry. "Or is it because I'm a stupid Gryffindor who won't remember who he's talking to? Or better yet, because Remus might tell me something worth knowing! Yeah, Snape can't have that, can he? He's decided that all my fucking friends have to keep their mouths zipped shut! And Remus might care more about me than about Snape's rules, so of course he's not going to be allowed anywhere near me--"

"For Merlin's sake, Harry!" said Draco. "You're getting hysterical. Calm down!"

"You try calming down when your life has been ripped to shreds and rebuilt wrong!" screamed Harry. It felt like his mind was a set of steel jaws snapping at everything in sight, but he was so angry that he couldn't stop it. "You try calming down when the man who claims to be your father keeps away from you the only person left who ever really cared!"

"Harry," said Snape in a low voice, like he was trying to soothe a wounded animal. "It was not feasible to bring you and Lupin together--"

Harry's temper snapped completely. He couldn't stand this, not for another second. Snape didn't get to make decisions like that no matter what sort of legal papers he had. Harry was of age, damn it! "I've had it," he yelled, jumping to his feet. "I am never, never going to come here for dinner again! If you want to give me detention for saying so, or for anything else, I'll report to Filch. I'm through with you, and if you don't like it, you can go straight to hell! And one more thing, one more thing I suggest you fucking listen to because I mean every word: make a decision like that for me, even one more time, and I'll withdraw from Hogwarts so I never have to see you again!"

"The Auror Programme," gasped Draco. "You need N.E.W.T.s; you need a Hogwarts education!"

Harry stalked to the door. "Yeah? Well as people have been telling me for years, I could probably get in just on my name. Which I don't want to do. But I may have to, if it comes to that."

"Harry--"

That was Snape, but whatever he said was drowned out by the roaring in Harry's ears, his anger reaching such a height that he felt like he would burn up with it, a pillar of fire feeding on itself. "Stay away from me! Stay the fuck away from me! I don't want anything to do with you, ever again, and if I have to leave Hogwarts to prove it, I will! Even though the Tower is my home. The Tower, not here! It will never be here!"

Harry slammed the door as hard as he could and took off down the hall at a flat-out run.

Draco, for once, didn't try to follow.

Harry took his time getting to the Tower, hoping that by the time he got there he'd have calmed down enough to appear normal. He knew he must have looked like a raving maniac a few minutes earlier. Not that he cared. Snape had deserved every word. How dare he keep Harry away from Remus!

At least an hour had passed by the time he ducked through the portrait hole, but he soon found out
that he didn't look as calm as he'd hoped.

"Tough evening, eh?" asked Ron as soon as Harry flopped down onto a chair in the common room.

"Detention with Snape. What do you think?"

"Did you have a fight?"

Harry snorted. "You might say that."


"I don't think the N.E.W.T.s are a happier thought," said Harry dryly. "Though with Snape being such a bastard, maybe they are."

"What did he do?" asked Ron.

"Happier thoughts," chided Hermione. Just as well. Harry didn't want to talk about how he'd been cheated out of a chat with Remus.

"I was thinking of Christmas," she went on. "Ron, you need to be sure to get a gift for Draco this year."

"Why, because he's Harry's brother?"

"No, because I happen to know that he's getting you a gift."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he likes your Mum, he said. He's getting a gift for Ginny, as well."

Draco liked Ron's mum? Harry turned that over in his head, but couldn't make sense of it.

"Oh, all right," grumbled Ron. "I'll get him something, even though all he'll do is sneer at it."

Hermione nodded, clearly satisfied that was settled, and turned to Harry. "What are you going to get Draco?"

The words emerged from absolutely nowhere. "He likes racing brooms. Oh, and diamonds. And emeralds."

Ron's mouth fell open. "Which of those were you planning to get him?"

Harry slouched down in his chair. "None of them. That just came to me. I think . . . I think it's something he said to me once. Maybe. I don't know."

"Oh, Harry, that's wonderful. You remembered something!"

"Maybe," Harry repeated. "I don't really know if he said that."

"He said it," said Ron. "It sounds just like him, the spoiled prat."

"Should I get him something?" asked Harry.

"He'll definitely get you something," said Hermione. "And . . . well, Draco's not very mature
sometimes. Even in the circumstances, I think he'd regard the lack of a gift from you as a message that you aren't friends again, after all."

That idea made Harry feel a little sick. He wanted to stay friends with Draco. Good friends, if Draco could manage to break his habit of badmouthing Gryffindor with every third breath. After all, Draco was the only one among all his friends who'd been willing to sit with him, hour after hour answering questions, telling Harry anything and everything about his missing year. "All right. I'll figure something out. Huh. I guess I'd better get it to him before Christmas break starts."

That had Ron's eyes snapping up from the chessboard he'd been fooling with. "Why not give it to him on Christmas morning?"

Harry blinked, a little startled. "Um, because I won't be with him?"

"Yeah, you will, mate."

Hermione closed her book and regarded Harry, her gaze steady. Harry ignored that. "No, I won't. I was going to ask your mum if I could come to the Burrow." He tried not to think of his last Christmas, that wonderful one with Sirius, when he said the next bit. "Or if that won't work, I'll just stay here in the castle as usual."

"You have a family of your own now, Harry," said Hermione. "And it's not that we wouldn't want you at the Burrow, Harry, but . . . well, it wouldn't be right. Not when you have a family--"

"Fine, then," said Harry tightly. "I'll stay at the castle. Dumbledore would probably have thrown a fit if I'd tried to go the Burrow, anyway. Too much risk I'd attract an attack."

"You're going to Devon," said Ron.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. My mum mentioned in a letter that Snape's already invited Ginny and me out to visit you."

Oh, that was just brilliant. "Snape's writing letters to organize my holiday and he never bothered to tell me a word about it!"

"Well, you haven't exactly been talking to him, have you?" asked Hermione.

"He's still got one hell of a nerve," said Harry, fuming more and more as he thought about it. In the first place, Snape had no business deciding where Harry ought to spend the holiday. In the second place, he should at least have discussed the matter with Harry before making any decisions. And in the third, telling other people what Harry was going to be doing, when he hadn't even bothered to tell Harry--

Harry suddenly felt like a volcano was erupting inside of him. Anger like hot lava poured forth from the bottom of his soul, spilling over to sear every part of him. He'd been furious with Snape earlier; he'd thought he'd been as angry as he could possibly get. Now he knew that it was possible to get even angrier. Now, he was positively incandescent with rage.
Snape had no right, *no right* to think he was in charge of Harry's holiday. Or in charge of Harry himself.

And it was time he learned that, once and for all.

Harry shot to his feet, his legs eating up the distance to the door.

"Harry!" called Hermione. "Where are you going?"

She knew perfectly well where he was going, Harry thought. She just wanted a reply so that she could talk Harry out of his anger.

Harry didn't reply.

He stood in the dungeon corridor for a good five minutes, fuming, but Snape either wasn't home or he wasn't willing to open the door when Harry was on the other side. Probably the latter. Snape would be furious about the things Harry had said earlier. He probably never wanted to see Harry again.

Well, that was fine by Harry, but first, they were going to clear up the issue of Christmas.

Harry rapidly tapped out the sequence Draco had once used to make the door appear. He didn't open it, though. Instead, he pounded and pounded and *pounded*, bloodying his fist in the process, not that he cared. Snape was going to acknowledge him, damn it. Snape was going to answer his damned door, even if Harry was the one knocking on it.

Just when he was starting to think that the man must not be at home, after all, the door swung inward and Snape stood there staring down at him.

But it was a Snape unlike any he'd seen before.

His robes had a huge rip in them, like he'd stepped on the fabric and tried to keep walking anyway. More than that, his clothes were spotted like he'd spilled something all over them. It didn't take a genius to figure out what, either.

He absolutely reeked of alcohol.

Even without the stench, Harry thought he would have figured out that Snape was roaring drunk. He was leaning heavily on the door jamb but still managing to sway on his feet. He looked like someone on a sailboat. In heavy seas. The sight made Harry's stomach lurch to one side.

"Sir?" he asked, so taken aback that he literally had no idea what to say. All the things he'd practiced in his head as he'd stomped down had fled. His long list of complaints, the things he was going to throw in Snape's face, the things he was going to *make* him understand . . . none of them seemed very important at the moment, not against the knowledge that was literally staring him in the face right now.
He'd driven Snape to drink.

Harry felt like he'd been knocked off his feet. He'd known that Snape cared about him, of course. He'd known that the man loved him. Or thought that he loved him, at least.

Yes, Harry had known.

But he hadn't *known*. It hadn't been real to him, hadn't seemed like it had anything to do with him or could ever truly form any part of his own life.

It had been the same as knowing that the capital of Japan was Tokyo. Yes, it was true. A fact without question.

But not one that he had any personal connection to.

Now, though . . . the sight of Snape like this . . . and because of the hurtful, *hateful* things that Harry had said . . .

Harry cleared his throat. Christmas didn't seem important any longer. What mattered now was that he'd been able to wound Snape. He hadn't realised he could do that. Annoy the man, yes. Disappoint him, yes. But deliver a blow that would cause the man to drink himself into the ground?

He'd hurt Snape, and Harry didn't like the feeling that gave him. He didn't want to hurt people. That wasn't who he was. It wasn't who he wanted to be.

He was ashamed that it had taken something like this for him to start to understand that he *was* hurting Snape. He'd known, but it hadn't been real.

But . . . he was starting to think he'd have to stop using that sort of reasoning. Some things were real even if they didn't feel that way to Harry. Maybe part of growing up was accepting that.

"Sir," he said again, a little more loudly since Snape hadn't responded to him yet. "Let's get you inside."

Snape didn't move, except to wince and raise a hand to his temple.

Well, he always had had that sensitive hearing. Maybe being drunk amplified noises for him.

Harry lowered his voice and tried again. "You don't want anyone wandering the corridor to see you like this, do you? Come on, Professor. Let's go inside and close the door."

Snape gave a slow nod and moved like someone in slow-motion as he turned away and wandered back into his quarters, taking a rather meandering path to reach a chair sitting facing the short end of a low table. Harry followed him in and closed the door.

Harry wasn't sure if Snape had expected him to, or if he'd completely forgotten that his door was wide open to the corridor. He had a feeling that the second part of that was closer to the truth.

That told Harry, more than anything else, just how drunk Snape must be. It wasn't like him *ever* to disregard the prospect of potential danger lurking in the corridor, or just outside his own door. Which was why he didn't even have a door! So nobody would know where to find him.

And now for him to leave it standing open and stagger away?

Harry shook his head and made sure the door was shut tight before he moved away. For a second he wasn't sure what to do, but then it came to him that he really *was* welcome here and he could sit
down without being invited. Snape certainly was in no shape to tell him to have a seat. The man was staring into space, his head lolling a little on his shoulders.

Harry sat down on the couch facing the long edge of the low table and wondered what he should say.

Maybe there wasn't any way to start except the most basic one of all.

"I'm sorry, sir. About the things I said earlier. I . . . I was just upset that you hadn't let me see Remus, but . . . well, I think it was more that I was upset about a hundred things and that was just, you know, the straw that broke the camel's back?"

Harry winced, feeling more ashamed than before when he remembered exactly what he'd said. What had made him think he had the right to talk to Snape that way? He wouldn't even think of yelling horrible things like that at a stranger, and whatever Snape was to Harry, he was more than a stranger.

An echoing voice seemed to resound from the back of his mind. *People will say things to their family that they would never dream of saying to a mere acquaintance. The closer the bond, the more willing people are to test it to its limit . . .*

Snape's voice . . . and yet when had Harry ever heard Snape say something like that, something so calm and wise?

But then again, when had he ever seen him drunk?

Harry decided in that instant that there was more to Snape than he knew. Probably, a lot more. Everybody had been trying to tell him that, and he hadn't been willing to listen. Or believe them.

Now, he couldn't miss it.

Snape had swivelled his gaze to stare at Harry, but he hadn't said a word in reply to the apology. Maybe he hadn't heard it? No, with his hearing that wasn't likely. Maybe he hadn't understood it, though. Not in his current state, especially considering what Harry had tacked onto the end.

"Uh, the straw that broke the camel's back is like . . . well, never mind about that. I would just like you to know that I really am very sorry for the things I said at dinner. And . . . uh, telling you to fuck off so many times, and uh . . . refusing to attend your class . . ."*

*Shite.* Hearing it summarized like that made Harry wish the floor would open up and swallow him. He was seventeen now. An adult in the wizarding world, and he'd been acting like he was twelve.

"Amnesia was . . . well, it was sort of an excuse, but it didn't seem like a very good one any longer."

"Anyway, I am sorry," said Harry again, then waited expectantly for Snape's response.

There wasn't one. The man just stared at him, looking dazed.

"Aren't you--" Harry swallowed, feeling the weight of his shame again. Because he'd done this exact thing to Snape, hadn't he? He hadn't known how cruel it was. Now that he did, he thought that the floor swallowing him was the least of what he deserved. "Aren't you going to talk to me?"

Snape's voice emerged sounding like it had been scrubbed raw from too much screaming. The implications of that made Harry wince a little.
“I thought you would prefer I not,” Snape croaked, every word hoarse. “You told me-- you told me-- to stay . . . away from you.”

“I'm sorry for that, too.” Harry cleared his throat again. "And for the silent treatment. That was really bad of me. And . . . well, if I say something like that again, which I might, because I still think I'm too angry around you, then I think you should remember what you told me in the hospital wing. You know, how the young often want things that aren't very good for them?"

Snape shook his head and then nodded, like he hadn't followed all that very well. Which made sense, in his condition, so Harry tried to make things simpler.

"Can we try for what you suggested, Professor? I mean, I do accept that you care about me. Care about me a lot. And . . . well, that doesn't help me to see myself as your son, but I do respect it now, so maybe . . . maybe . . ." Harry swallowed. Even knowing that this was the right thing to do, it was still hard to make the words emerge. This was Snape, after all.

But now he understood, really understood, that the Severus Snape sitting three feet from him wasn't the same man who had spent years tormenting and ridiculing him.

Harry reached hard for the question he was trying to ask, and found it with the barest tips of his fingers. "Maybe we can try to be friends?"

Snape had lowered his head like it was too heavy to hold up, but that had him slowly raising it to stare at Harry with eyes so incredulous that it was clear he'd understood.

And then, as Harry watched, a tiny bead of moisture formed in the corner of one eye. It wasn't enough to spill over as a tear, but it was enough to make Harry's sense of shame ten times worse. He'd never wanted to drive Snape to drink, but he'd wanted even less to make the man cry.

In fact, just the idea of that made Harry's heart beat too fast. He hadn't had many people who cared about him that much. His mum would have, and probably his dad, and maybe Sirius, but--

_Oh, God_, thought Harry, something like panic chasing through his veins. Ever since Sirius had died, Harry had hardened himself to the idea that he'd never have anybody like that again. Even if he could get that mirror working, he wouldn't really have Sirius back. He knew that.

And Remus . . . Remus had never had been the same as Sirius, anyway. Remus hadn't tried to help him with the Tournament; Remus hadn't offered to let Harry live with him.

Sirius was the one who had cared that much.

And now the thought that someone alive was in that small group of adults who cared deeply for him . . . Harry almost wanted to jump up and run for the door. He didn't know how to be anybody's son, and he couldn't be expected to figure it out now, not at his age--

But they were just going to be friends, he told himself, relief washing through him. _Friends_. He could do that.

Huh. Friends with a Slytherin.

But of course, he already was friends with one other Slytherin.

Yes, Harry decided. He could do this.

"Friends," said Snape slowly, his voice caught somewhere between sandpaper and gravel. "I-- I
'would like that.'

"Good." Harry swallowed back the confusing mix of emotions tangled in his throat. Maybe his mistake before had been in thinking that he had to have everything settled all at once. Pushing Snape away had seemed the simplest way to accomplish that.

Except, it hadn't been, because Snape had refused to let himself be pushed away.

Harry felt that same urge again, the one demanding that he run out of the room now, while he still could-- and then the feeling made a recent memory snap into place at the forefront of his mind. Draco's voice, this time, telling him that he could understand why Harry was feeling scared.

Harry knew that he wasn't afraid, but neither could he make sense of his longing to run away from Snape's obvious love for him.

Snape suddenly pushed to his feet. "A friend would offer you a drink," he said in a wavering tone as he lurched across the room to the Floo. He stepped on his robe again, tearing another long rent in the black fabric, but was clearly oblivious to it.

Harry rushed to his side and grabbed his arm to keep him from kneeling. Snape shouldn't be talking to the kitchen elves in this condition. They probably wouldn't gossip except among themselves, but still, Snape would feel humiliated later when he remembered.

If he remembered, thought Harry, frowning. Well, they'd cross that bridge when they came to it.

"I don't need anything to drink." Harry was about to say that Snape was the one who needed something, notably a sobriety potion, when he suddenly wondered if the elves might already know how much Snape had had to drink. If he'd ordered liquor through the Floo--

Harry's gaze swept the room and alighted on a small cabinet that had both doors open, one of them hanging at an odd angle like it had been wrenched open. The bottles inside were all askew, some of them laying on their sides. Well, at least Harry could be sure where Snape had got the bottles sitting on the dining table. Three bottles, all of them empty.

Harry almost sighed. Wasn't he the one who was supposed to get drunk off his socks and need help? That was seventeen year-old behavior, and Snape was-- Huh. Harry wasn't really sure how old he was. Double seventeen plus a few years, at least.

"Do you have some kind of potion, sir? One that will help you sober up?"

Snape shook off his hand and stood straighter, like he was trying to be dignified. Or formal. "But we must celebrate our new accord. Friends. We shall drink to it!"

He lifted up a hand as though making a toast and promptly swayed on his feet so violently that Harry had to push hard against him to keep him upright.

"Please, sir. No more drinking. I think you've had enough."

Snape leaned down a little and peered at him closely, his eyebrows drawing together in what looked like puzzlement. "Are we not now friends?"

Harry had only said that they would try to be, not that they were, but he supposed it would be petty to quibble. "Yeah, we are, all right? But let's not drink to it. No offense, sir, but you're already likely to wake up sick."
Snape stood tall again, lifting the fingers of one hand to his chin, where they began tapping out a frantic rhythm. "I meant the 'sir.'"

It took Harry a few seconds to follow that. Then he almost swore under his breath. Yeah, Snape didn't like being called 'sir,' which was frankly bizarre considering his views on titles in years past. But this was a new Snape, and he'd already said that he didn't like to hear that word coming from Harry. Not any longer.

Harry didn't want to call him something else, though. He knew why, too. "Sir" helped him feel the distance separating them. "Professor" did that too, to a lesser extent. Anything else would suggest connection instead of distance, and Harry didn't like that idea.

"If we are friends," said Snape in a rasping voice, but one still filled with dignity, "you should refer to me by name. And I do not mean my surname."

God, even drunk the man had a precise manner of speaking!

"Won't that be awkward in class? I do still have you for Ethics--"

Snape's sardonic expression said he hadn't forgotten for an instant that Harry had dropped Potions but not Ethics. "During class, 'Professor' would be acceptable."

Harry bit his lip. "But outside of it, uh, uh--"

"Severus."

"Yeah, I knew that was your name," murmured Harry. "Er--"

"No, that is the middle syllable." Snape started making exaggerated lip movements like he thought Harry might have some sort of speech impediment. "Sev--er--us."

"Severus," said Harry reluctantly.

"At all times when we are not in class."

"I don't know about that," said Harry desperately. "You're a lot older than I am, you know, and I'd hate to be disrespectful--"

Snape guffawed. Actually guffawed.

A sight which Harry would definitely never have believed if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

"You!" he said between laughs. "You, you would hate to be disrespectful! You would hate to be disrespectful!"

Harry flushed. "You're thinking of fuck you, sir, aren't you? Well . . . I did say 'sir,' you know."

"But now we are friends," insisted Snape. "So there is an end to that. If you call me sir again outside of class I shall regard it as a grave breach of decorum."

"Even drunk you talk like a Victorian," complained Harry.

Snape's remaining amusement seemed to fly away. "Even in class I would vastly prefer 'Professor,'" he admitted, looking away. "And when not in class, 'Severus.'"

Harry chewed his lip.
"Please."

Harry sighed, giving up. He probably deserved this for being so disrespectful in the last few weeks. It was his own fault if Snape now felt like he needed some reassurance that Harry really was his friend. Or would try to be, anyway, Harry quickly amended. That was all he had promised.

But calling the man by his first name would definitely qualify as trying, so Harry supposed he should do it from now on.

Except in class.

"Severus," he said again. "I'll remember."

"Good. As that's settled, I shall summon the drinks--"

"No, no drinks. You were going to tell me where you keep your sobriety potions--"

Snape shook his head. "I will be asleep in five minutes if I take one of those. I would rather talk to you." His voice dropped at least an octave. "Harry . . . you have no idea how good it is to talk to you."

Harry felt uncomfortable, but tried his best to push the feeling aside. "Well . . . friends do talk, you know. And it's late, and . . . and . . ."

"No drink?" Snape sounded rather mournful.

"You really have had enough, s-- um, Severus."

Snape rocked on his heels, looking satisfied.

"So . . . your sobriety potion?"

"I suppose you may summon it."

Harry blew out a breath. He should have thought of that himself. Or maybe not, since he didn't exactly feel at home here. "Accio sobriety potion."

The door next to Draco's bedroom door flew open and a small, dark bottle hurled out to land in Harry's palm. "How much?"

"A full inch."

"An inch of a shot glass or an inch of a wide-mouthed jar?"

"Harry," said Snape, looking highly amused, "It is magic. A full inch, full stop."

"Oh, fine then," said Harry, a little annoyed. Magic didn't have to make sense, but he thought he liked it more when it did. When he looked around for something to pour the potion into, his gaze was drawn to the mantle with its assortment of goblets. He reached for the nearest one. "Can I use this?"

"That one is Draco's. Use this," said Snape, gently grasping the one next to it.

He held it out to Harry, a stemmed bronze cup bearing a crest and the single word: SNAPE.

A shivering feeling ran up and down Harry's arm, even before he reached for it. He'd thought
before that there was something odd about the goblets. Something ugly, for all they were beautiful to look at.

The moment his hand connected with the stem of the goblet, it was like a lightning bolt shot up his arm and into his mind, bringing with it a sudden wave of memories.

A pile of presents, and Seamus shouting that Draco didn't take Muggle Studies. Harry laughing because somebody had given Draco a white ferret just like the one he'd been transfigured into once. A golden box and a silver one, and Snape's low voice: *This was my great-great-grandfather's wedding cup, which I received from my own father when I came of age.*

The lightning bolt split in two, one half carrying Harry into a brief, fierce hug he'd shared with Snape. The other one wrapped itself around Harry and took him to some place that was both further in the past, and also much less so. Into events that had happened just a few months ago, but that had also happened before he was ever born. And yet they had only happened once--

Snape's voice again, talking about his father ignoring him, not talking to him, not even on his birthday. And then Draco's voice, appalled: *No coming of age ceremony--*

Harry groaned, dropping both the goblet and the bottle of sobriety potion. *When I came of age . . . no coming of age ceremony, no coming of age ceremony . . . *

"Harry," exclaimed Snape. "Are you ill? What is the matter?"

Harry opened eyes he hadn't realised he'd closed, and shook out both his arms to dispel the lingering feel the lightning bolts had left behind. "I . . . uh, I remembered something. When I touched the cup. You lied to me."

Before Snape could say anything, Harry rushed the rest out. He hadn't meant it to sound like an accusation. "I mean, I've had this feeling all along that there was something you'd lied about. But with amnesia it's all a jumble, all confused, and . . . well . . . I didn't know it was just this thing with the cup . . ."

He laughed a little, more relieved than he knew how to explain. He'd known Snape had deceived him about something, but he hadn't known it was something so inconsequential. Not that the matter was inconsequential to Snape, Harry quickly reminded himself. Draco's reaction had shown that being denied a coming of age ceremony was a terrible blow to a pureblood child, but then, Harry had known for some time that Snape came from an abusive family. Harry couldn't blame him if he hadn't wanted to revisit ugly memories like those ones.

"What thing with the cup?" asked Snape blankly. "Harry . . . do sit down."

He tried to help Harry to the couch but staggered too much to be of much use. Harry sat down on his own, bemused. All his anger seemed so petty and childish, now. Had it really bothered him so much to find out that Snape had lied about the cup? It must have. Nothing else could explain the rage Harry had been battling, that formless rage that had flung itself about, looking for the reason it existed.

Well now, Harry had the reason. He'd been immature and thoughtless, thinking only of himself when he'd got so angry about Snape's "betrayal." It hadn't been betrayal at all. It had just been a desperate attempt to keep private pain private.

Harry could understand that.

Better than most people, maybe.
"Are you all right?" Snape asked again.

"Yeah. Better than all right." His relief emerged as a chuckle. "Better than I have been in a long time, s-- uh, Severus. I guess I mean that apology even more now. I-- Well, it's just that I had a feeling you'd deceived me somehow. Now I know where the feeling was coming from. You . . . you told me when I came of age that your father had given you that cup in your own coming of age ceremony, but the truth is, you never did have any ceremony of your own."

When Harry glanced at Snape, sitting next to him on the couch this time, he saw that the man's face had gone completely white. "What is it?"

"Mine was to be branded with the Dark Mark," said Snape, reaching one hand up to rub at his temple.

"Your father had you Marked?"

"No." Snape shook his head and then looked like he shouldn't have. He groaned slightly. "He ignored the date completely and refused to speak a word to me. I think you know already that we did not . . . get on."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. He should have realised sooner that he had things in common with Snape. It was pretty obvious. It was also obvious that refusing to speak to Snape had been a dreadful way to behave. "Um, can I ask you something personal?"

Snape laid his free hand over one of Harry's and for once, the contact didn't make Harry angry. "You may ask me anything at all. Of course you may."

"Does having that goblet here in your quarters . . . um, bother you?"

"No. It reminds me of my son, not my father."

"Oh." Harry wriggled his fingers and Snape let go of them at once. "Well . . . you should probably get some sleep now. Too bad I dropped the . . . huh. The bottle didn't break."

"Thick glass."

That made sense, thought Harry. Drunken wizards probably weren't known their coordination. "Just a minute," said Harry. He didn't want to touch the goblet again, so he levitated it back onto the mantle. Then he went into Draco's bedroom and looked around. He found a glass in the adjoining bathroom, poured out what looked like an inch to him, and brought it back to Snape.

By the, the man was sprawled on the couch, but he propped himself up on an elbow to drink from the glass Harry held out. Then he flopped right back down onto the cushions.

"You'd better get to bed, sir-- I mean, Severus," Harry quickly corrected himself. "And have a quick shower first, or you'll wake up icky."

"Cl- cleansing charm," mumbled Snape.

Harry didn't know if he was asking for one or saying he'd use one after Harry left, but Harry thought it was a bad idea for Snape to cast anything in his state. Lifting his wand, Harry cast the charm itself.

It seemed to momentarily jolt Snape from his stupor. He rose carefully to his feet, still swaying, and looked at Harry with bloodshot eyes. "Why did you come down?"
Harry wasn't going to give him the real reason. Not now. Knowing what Snape had lied to him about made all the difference. Sometimes it was all right to lie. When the truth would hurt someone for no reason, or when you'd changed your mind.

In certain situations, lying was even the best thing to do, thought Harry with a slight smile. There was a time and a place for consequentialist ethics.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said softly. "About Christmas. Can I--" Harry hesitated, but it wasn't as difficult to say the words as he had expected. "Can I come with you to Devon?"

______________________________________________________________

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Twenty-Seven: "The Yule Ball"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

Note: Snape's Ethics lecture is a magical version of one taught by Harvard professor Michael Sandel in his course entitled "Justice."

______________________________________________________________
"Harry," said Hermione, unfolding herself from a couch in the common room. "Are you-- Did Snape--"

Harry could understand why she was trying to be careful with her wording. He hadn't exactly been pleasant toward his friends lately, either. "Everything's fine," he said, coming forward so she could see his smile by the firelight. "Snape and I had a good talk. A really good talk, and, um . . . I'm going to Devon for Christmas, after all."

"That must have been some talk." Hermione stretched a little, then bent down to retrieve her book. "What changed your mind, exactly?"

Harry wasn't about to tell her that Snape had been drunk. "I remembered something."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, but it's not something I can talk about. Sorry."

She nodded. "Is everything all right? Truly?"

"Well . . . we did clear a few things up," said Harry. "Not everything, I'm sure. But I apologized for the silent treatment and the really foul things I'd said, and we agreed to try for being friends."

Harry chuckled. "I'm sort of wavering between feeling relieved and wondering if I've lost my mind. But then I have to tell myself that I have lost a part of my mind. And . . . well, tonight it finally dawned on me that I should at least try, you know? Snape has been."

"He has," said Hermione softly. "But good for you. I know it hasn't been easy."

"Yeah," said Harry. That was an understatement. "Um, I'm going to try to call him Severus. It's kind of funny, that he'd even want that. But it's true that he hasn't been calling me Mr Potter except in class, so . . ."

He headed toward the stairs.

"Good-night, Harry."

"Good-night, Hermione."
Snape wasn't at breakfast. That didn't surprise Harry much, when he thought about it. Even though he'd taken a sobriety potion, he probably still needed some extra sleep.

Snape wasn't at lunch, either.

That did surprise Harry. A little, at least.

Well, maybe he had some important brewing to do.

If so, it must not have gone well, because when Snape appeared at the head table half-way through dinner, his forehead was deeply creased, his scowl pronounced. He ate quickly, his motions abrupt, and never once did he seek out Harry's gaze. Actually, he didn't look at anyone, not even when Dumbledore said something to him and he replied.

Harry couldn't hear what he was saying, but he could just imagine his clipped tones.

When Snape stood up and exited through the door behind head table, Harry shoved his pudding away and dashed out of the Great Hall, catching up with him several corridors away.

"Wait," he said, catching the man by the sleeve. "What's wrong?"

Snape jerked his arm away, his robes flaring as he whirled on a heel to stare at Harry, his gaze a narrow band of black. "What's wrong?" he asked, the words hissing from between clenched teeth. "You dare to ask me what is wrong?"

Oh. Oh. Harry hadn't expected this, but it had crossed his mind as a possibility: Snape didn't remember much from the night before.

Harry knew what that meant -- he had a chance to change his mind about trying to be friends.

It amazed him a little that he wasn't even tempted. He didn't know how things would work out, but he wanted to give this a try. A real try. He owed Snape that much, after the way he'd been acting lately.

"I deserve that," he said, clearing his throat a couple of times as he figured out what to say next. "But, um, I came down to your quarters last night, and I apologised for all the terrible things I said."

Snape went perfectly still. "You apologised?"

Harry nodded, determined to see this through. After all, even the Gryffindors had been telling him that Snape had been a good father, so he ought to be all right as a friend. At the very least, the claims should have made him realise a lot sooner that Snape deserved a little consideration.

"I do not remember."

"Well, you were--" Harry looked away.

Snape sighed and crossed his arms, the rueful look on his face saying that he wished Harry hadn't found him in such a state. Harry was glad he had, though. Without that, who knows how long it would have taken him to see the real Snape instead of the one from his memories?

"I'm not surprised you don't remember," he said quietly. "But... uh, I really am sorry."
Snape inclined his head, the motion very careful, like he was wary of Harry's reaction to the smallest change.

Harry smiled a little, but not at the man's caution. Something else had occurred to him. "It's hard, isn't it? Having somebody tell you that things are different from the way you remember them."

Snape didn't smile back. "I have never suggested that your ordeal is an easy one."

Harry supposed he should have expected the prickliness. That was pure Snape. And besides, it was hard to wake up unable to remember part of your life. Even a small part. "I didn't mean that."

Snape unfolded his arms. "So then, 'things' are different, you say. Would you care to elaborate?"

"Um . . ." Harry shifted back a step and leaned against the wall. "Well, we talked a bit. Cleared the air. A little, at least."

"I see."

Except, he didn't. Harry was sure he didn't.

"We decided we could try to be friends."

Snape's head gave a distinct jerk, a muscle in his cheek beginning to tic. A strange reaction, but at least a reaction, Harry thought. He'd been wondering if Snape would ever give one. "Much as you detest the thought of it, I am your father, Harry."

Harry almost yelled something unfortunate. But then he remembered that he had promised to try this. Giving up at the first challenge wasn't making much of an effort. "I don't know you," he said, lifting his chin to meet the man's gaze full-on. "But I think now that I should start trying to. And friends is all I can manage just now."

Snape said nothing, which made Harry want to clench his fists. "What's the problem? It's more than you had yesterday, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"I am not friends with many teenagers." Snape's tone wasn't exactly contemptuous, but it wasn't very encouraging, either.

"I am," said Harry, determined to see this through. Snape being difficult was almost comforting, in a way. "I'll teach you how."


"You must have known that much about me when you adopted me--"

Snape made a halting movement like he'd wanted to step closer, but had checked himself. "You accept that now, do you?"

"I know it's true." Harry shrugged. "But I've known that much for a while."

"But you still feel it has nothing to do with you. Like the British Empire."

"Well . . ." Harry had to lock his knees because his legs had the strangest urge to run, run, run,
rather than admit this. Not that his legs could admit to anything-- Shite. Maybe there was something to Draco's "you're afraid" theory, after all. But Harry wasn't a Gryffindor in name only. He could do this. He _would_ do this.

"Well?"

"It might have something to do with me," Harry managed to say. He even managed to look Snape in the eye, which was no simple task when he felt so much like hiding. "If we could try being friends, maybe I could find out."

"Friends." Snape sighed. "Very well."

Harry couldn't believe it had taken so long to get that settled. Or maybe he could. _Severus does not care to show emotion_ . . .

He wondered why he'd needed to have Dumbledore tell him something so bloody obvious. He also wondered why he seemed to have forgot that himself throughout the last three weeks. Snape had been showing him all sorts of emotion. Harry had noticed -- how could he not? -- but he hadn't understood the implications.

Sometime during the last year, Snape had got _used_ to being more open around Harry.

But now he was back to being guarded. After the things Harry had yelled the night before, that only stood to reason. And it meant that it was up to Harry to try to set things right.

"You said to call you Severus," he said, looking Snape in the eye again. "That's all right, still?"

Snape blinked. "That would be . . . acceptable."

Harry had a feeling that Snape had stopped himself from using a more revealing world. "I really did apologise and mean it," he said, a little exasperated. "You can look in a Pensieve if you don't believe me."

"I would deduce from my lack of memories that I drank too much sobriety potion," said Snape, shaking his head. "In which case not even a Pensieve can call the memories back."

"My fault, then. You said a full inch, but I didn't have a ruler handy---"

"I presume you had a wand," drawled Snape. "_Medire Britannica_, perhaps? Or do you also estimate the length of every essay?"

Harry winced. "Um . . . yes?"

"Teenagers," muttered Snape.

Strangely enough, Harry felt reassured by the last couple of things Snape had said. Yes, the man had criticised him, but it wasn't at all the way he remembered criticism from Snape. There were no insults and no real scorn, either. Instead . . . it all felt friendly. It really did.

Perhaps that was what prompted Harry to offer, "You could watch my memory of last night, then---"

"I would rather trust your word on the matter," interrupted Snape. His dark eyes glimmered as if he was deciding something. After a moment, he added, "Moreover, I would not wish to do anything that might interfere with your healing. We were specifically cautioned against using Pensieves with you, if you recall."
"That was when I first woke up."

"If you could have seen the way you convulsed with pain when the healer tried to cue your memory . . ." Snape shuddered a little. "And that was only pain. The potential for true damage is a danger I cannot disregard. There will be no magical manipulation of your memories, either recent or otherwise."

Harry had to admit, that did sound reasonable.

"All right. Um . . . oh, one more thing I should mention, since you don't remember. I told you I'd come to Devon for Christmas."

Snape leaned over a little, his eyes intense. "Say that once more."

He did look like he couldn't believe his ears. "I'll come to Devon for Christmas. Willingly . . . though I'd rather you had talked to me about it before you wrote the Weasleys like it was all arranged."

"You were refusing to speak to me at all at that time."

"Yeah, but you could have spoken to me."

"The subject would only have created more conflict between us."

Harry knew that was true, but still . . . "Did you think it would cause less conflict to demand at the last second that I come on holiday with you?" His tone grew caustic. "Or were you planning to hand back an assignment that turned out to be a Portkey to Devon?"

"Not that," said Snape, pulling himself into a stance that screamed dignity. "I would have asked the headmaster to prevail upon you. It is, in fact, in the interest of the Order that you and I learn to get along."

Harry grimaced. He could see how that argument would probably have convinced him to go to Devon despite his objections. "Well, it's a moot point now," he said, shrugging. "I'm willing to spend Christmas with you. So then . . . I'll see you in a couple of days. In Ethics."

Again those dark eyes glimmered, like Snape was mentally debating the merits of two different courses of action. This time, he evidently decided to hold his tongue. "Until Tuesday, then," he said, nodding slightly as he turned abruptly away, his robes flaring dramatically and then fluttering as he stalked down the corridor.

Realising that he was staring, Harry shook his head to clear it, and then went back to the Great Hall to finish his dinner.

"Draco's here," said Neville as he poked his head into the room he shared with Harry and the other 7th year boys.
Harry could have guessed that for himself, since the next thing he heard was Draco's raised voice saying, "And I won't take 'no' for an answer!"

Harry closed his Charms Textbook and headed down to the common room.

"Nobody was telling you 'no,' you twit," said Ron in a scornful tone. "Stop talking like you own the place. This isn't your precious manor and we're not your elves. And as long as we're on the subject, stop chatting Hermione up every chance you get. She's not your girl; she's mine."

"I most certainly am not yours," snapped Hermione. As Harry stepped into the common room, she was leaping to her feet. "I'm not something that can be owned. And for the record, Draco hasn't been 'chatting me up'--"

"He'd better not have been feeling you up," muttered Ron, but not quietly enough.

"Ronald!"

"What am I supposed to think? You mention Draco and sexual fantasies in the same breath at least five times a day!"

"I do not!"

"Cut it out, you two," said Harry. "Draco came here to see me, not Hermione."

"Quite right," said Draco, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, his chin lifted high. "Come with me. I have something to discuss with you and I doubt this is the best venue."

The high-handedness would usually have rankled, but this time, Harry completely understood it. Besides, he had something to discuss with Draco, too. "Sure," he said mildly. "But if it's about Snape, I should tell you that he and I have already made up."

Draco's jaw dropped. "You've . . . what?"

"Made up. You know, reconciled?"

"But you said . . . you said . . . you were horrid to him."

"Yeah," admitted Harry. "And then I had second thoughts and I apologized and decided to see if he and I could get along. Ask anybody here. It's the talk of the Tower."

Draco glanced around. More than one nodding head greeted his questioning look. When Harry looked around he saw that Ron and Hermione had slipped out, though. Thank God. He wasn't sure how much more jealousy or bickering he could take.

"You might have told me," murmured Draco.

"I might have, but I haven't seen you today." Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Slytherin Quidditch clinic."

"All day?"

"We play Ravenclaw right after the holidays, and of course we can't practice during them, so--"

"You must be starving. Let's go down to the kitchens."
Draco pulled his hands out of his pockets and used one to vaguely gesture. "I forget sometimes that you don't remember. But when we have extended practices, Severus arranges for the elves to cater meals to us on the pitch."

"That's outrageous!" exclaimed Seamus. "That's-- that's blatant favoritism!"

"He's the Slytherin head of house," drawled Draco. "He's supposed to favour us, Fredrickson."

"Finnegan," corrected Harry, even as a memory swam forth in his mind. You learned growing up that names provide powerful weapons . . . Snape had said that, but he'd been talking to Draco . . . Harry pushed the memory aside. It didn't matter right now.

"Well, I'm hungry," he said, even though he wasn't. He needed to get Draco alone for this next bit, though. There was no way he was discussing it in front of the other Gryffindors. That headache, he didn't need. "Come with me to the kitchens."

Draco studied him for a moment, seeming to hear the request behind the request, then shrugged and followed him out the portrait hole.

"So I agreed to call him Severus, and he agreed to try being friends with a teenager," finished Harry, licking syrup off his fingers. Once he'd got to the kitchens, he'd been plied with such a large array of sweets that he couldn't resist a caramel apple crumble.

Draco frowned. "I still don't understand what changed your mind. You were adamant that you'd leave Hogwarts if Severus so much as looked at you wrong."

Harry grinned. It wasn't that he particularly enjoyed knowing something about Snape that Draco clearly didn't, but he couldn't very well blab about the man getting drunk, could he? Snape could tell Draco about it if he wanted to. "I just suddenly realised that he'd changed during that year I can't remember. Changed toward me, at least, or . . . well, changed a bit in general, I suppose," added Harry as he remembered his points chart. He'd dutifully added to it in every Ethics class he'd attended, even though it had begun to seem more and more useless. Yes, Snape was still biased toward Slytherin. But it wasn't as blatant as before, and he wasn't nearly as vicious to Gryffindor as he used to be.

At least, not in front of Harry.

"Oh," said Harry suddenly. "That reminds me. I'm spending Christmas with you. What do you want besides racing brooms and precious gems?"

Draco's smile was wry. "Now that bit you remembered on your own. I wouldn't dare repeat it. These days, you might misunderstand."

"Maybe not. I think I'm getting to know you a bit better than that."
"Merlin, I hope so."

"So, what do you want?"

"For you to treat Severus with at least a modicum of respect," said Draco promptly. "Which I gather is not asking too much, based on what you've said while you poured pure sugar down your throat." "How do I wrap that?"

"I'm serious."

"Yeah, I know you are." Harry chewed his lip. "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll try. I mean, I'm already trying. Are you sure that's all you want?"

"No, I want more," said Draco quietly. "I want for the three of us to be a family once again."

"But you'll settle for the three of us being friends."

"For now." Draco glanced up from his own pudding, which he hadn't touched. "This 'friends' idea has interesting implications. For example, it would be the height of bad manners to spend Christmas with a friend and not give him at least a token present. Have you considered what to get Severus?"

Of course Harry hadn't. "Uh... well, I'm not giving him my vault key again."

"You have it back now?"

"He made me read the letter I wrote to go with it," said Harry, suddenly feeling miserable. "I sounded so... I don't know. Stupid and needy, I guess."

"You'd been through a lot." Draco reached across the table and grasped Harry's forearm, squeezing once before letting go. "You also gave him liquorice, if that helps. And he likes Galliano a great deal."

"Galliano?"

"Anise-flavoured liqueur."

Oh, liquor. No, Harry didn't think that sounded like a good idea. He honestly didn't think that Snape got drunk off his socks very often, but just in case... Harry didn't want to encourage it.

Well, at least talk of presents had given him an idea of how to ease into the part of the conversation that he'd been dreading.

"So... speaking of Christmas, Hermione mentioned that you were going to get Ron a gift."

Draco inclined his head the merest fraction of an inch. "Yes. His mother was the only one in the Order besides you and Severus who was... kind to me."

Harry doubted that, but he assumed Draco meant that Molly had done something that he particularly appreciated. He searched the cobwebs in his mind, trying to find what it might be, but had to give it up. Too much concentration on memories that weren't there and he felt like he was swimming in water that was about to go over his head.

"I have a good idea what Ron would really want--"

"Forget it. I gave you spells to bring your broom up to XL level, but you're my brother. There's no..."
way I'm giving that sort of advantage to a second Gryffindor."

"Jesus," said Harry. "You really have Quidditch on the brain, sometimes."

"That's actually an offensive word to many non-magical people. Professor Burbage told us that--"

Harry thought they were drifting from the point he was trying to make. "Stop flirting with Hermione," he interrupted. "That's what you can get Ron for Christmas that he would most appreciate."

Draco leaned back in his chair so far that he tilted it back on two legs. "I don't flirt with Hermione."

"Of course not," said Harry scornfully. "You just get her to discuss her sexual fantasies with you."

"They weren't her sexual fantasies! At least, I hope they weren't." Draco shuddered. "And that was for class, as you very well know."

"What I know is that you keep needling Ron with the fact that she spends a lot of time with you," snapped Harry.

What I know, drawled Snape inside his mind, is that your sleeves are shredded. Pity you didn't come properly attired. Shouldn't you take that off that rag of a robe before we begin?

All right . . . Harry had no idea what to do with that memory. Remembering things completely out of context was a pain in the arse. Why on earth had he gone somewhere with his sleeves shredded?

"Maybe I'm just trying to show Weasley that I like spending time with her!"

"Aha!"

"Because she's a Muggleborn. Forgive me if I like to remind Weasley on a daily basis that I'm not such a prejudiced git any longer! I know how much influence your friends have over you!"

"I chose Snape over both of them when they were being prejudiced gits, and you know it!"

Draco's chair made a banging noise as he leaned forward, bringing the front two legs back into contact with the stone floor. "I didn't realise you knew it, though."

Harry rubbed the side of his head where a headache was trying to bloom. "I . . . I don't know where that came from. You mean it's true? I chose Snape over Ron and Hermione?"

"Yes. They were horrible prats over the adoption, both of them. But you . . . you were a good son from the start." Draco sniffed a little.

Ron and Hermione had been horrible prats over the adoption? Harry could hardly believe that. All he'd heard from them in the past few weeks had been praise of Snape!

And yet he didn't think that Draco was lying.

"Well . . . be a little more considerate of Ron, all right?"

"It's not my fault if he suffers from a massive insecurity complex--"

"No, but it's your fault that you try to get under his skin over it."

"Under a Weasley's skin." Draco made a face. "What a disgusting image."
"Look," said Harry, biting the words out, "I already told you to stop badmouthing Gryffindor all the time. This is a lot more important than that."

"I'm not trying to steal Hermione from him," said Draco, glaring. "That's not even a possibility. You know why."

"You're still--"

"We aren't completely warded here," interrupted Draco. "But yes, of course I am still."

"Well, it's just that I haven't heard you mention... er, you know, recently, even when we were completely warded."

"Not mentioning it is the only way I have to make myself stay here at Hogwarts where it's safe, where I won't end up endangering... other people with my presence." Draco looked away, but not before Harry saw a streak of wetness carve a trail down his cheek. "Use your brain, Harry. I'm surviving day to day by not thinking about it, and your bringing it up isn't exactly helping."

"All right, all right," said Harry, feeling terrible. "I just thought, you know, well... you are spending all that time with Hermione, so I thought that maybe..."

"How the hell am I supposed to catch up with years of Muggle Studies if I don't have a Muggleborn to consult? The books on the subject are close to useless, and it's not like I have a lot of life experience to fall back on! Ninety percent of the time I spend with Hermione, we're studying! Arithmancy, too!"

"What about the other ten percent?"

"For fuck's sake." Draco raked a hand through his hair, then immediately smoothed it back down. "We're friends, and that's all. Friends. Is that really too much for you to understand? You're friends with her yourself!"

"I'm just trying to show you how it must look to Ron."

"Oh, and we daren't upset Ron. Of course not," said Draco, sneering. "Fine, then, if it means so much to you. There's nothing going on between Hermione and myself, but since Ron has such a fucking problem with it, I'll ask Hermione if she'll join our own study sessions. We'll have to reschedule for evenings only. I do hope it won't destroy the Gryffindor practice schedule."

"We're done practicing until after the holidays," said Harry easily. "Our next match isn't until February."

"How very convenient!"

"Don't be that way."

"Fine," snapped Draco again. "What way shall I be?"

"Just be my friend. You've been great at that since I woke up in the hospital wing."

"I've been great at it for a hell of a lot longer than a month!"

"Draco," said Harry, and waited until the other boy looked at him. "Change your study period around for my sake." "Haven't I already said that I would?" Draco sighed. "Honestly, all I was trying to do was become better friends with Hermione, while at the same time improving both my
reputation and my chances that MLE will take me seriously. A N.E.W.T. in Muggle Studies is probably worth its weight in Galleons. For me, at least."

"Well, Hermione really does know how to be a good friend--"

"Are you saying I don't?"

"No, I just said that you were. Are you sure Ron is the only one with a complex? Anyway, I was going to say that Hermione does know how, even if she is a bit . . ." Harry's breath caught. He'd been going to say that Hermione was pushy, but how could he complain about that when if he'd just been intelligent enough to listen to her pushiness, Sirius would still be alive?

"What?"

Harry gave a tiny shake of his head. "Never mind. I just . . . I wish I could remember everything."

"I wish you could, too," said Draco.

Harry eyed the serving of crumble the elves had laid out for Draco. It probably wouldn't distract him from thoughts of Sirius, from wondering what it was going to take before he could remember enough to get the Mirror of All Souls working, but at least it would give him something to do with his hands. As it was, he felt like he might tear his own hair out from the guilt. "Not going to eat that? Hand it over."

"Just be sure to brush thoroughly and use a flossing charm."

Harry decided not to tell him that he sounded a bit like Hermione.

"Fifteen inches on the implications of Natural Rights theory in wartime," announced Snape at the end of Ethics class the next Tuesday. "And do be sure to use a measuring charm."

Harry thought that last bit was directed at him, but he didn't mind. Ethics was actually pretty interesting, and his friends had been right all those times they'd told him that Snape didn't teach it the way he taught Potions.

Because Harry was no longer in a hurry to rush off the instant class ended, he was still there to see that Neville went up to Snape to ask him a few questions. But not about Ethics. They were about Potions, which proved, Harry supposed, that the tutoring Ron had mentioned had really given Neville a great deal more confidence. In years past, he'd have preferred to blow up a cauldron than ask Snape a thing.

Harry and Draco were still packing up his quills and parchment when Snape sent Neville off with a wave and headed towards them.

"Hallo, Dad." Draco threw Harry a smile so bright that Harry almost felt like he'd been jostled by the elbow.
"Severus," Harry said. Draco wanted him to use the other word, he was sure, but he couldn't. Snape didn't look like the two different modes of address bothered him. "Is the class material clear to you? If you feel at any sort of disadvantage . . ."

"I'll let you know," said Harry. "Thanks."

Snape hesitated for a moment, and then offered in a what sounded like a deliberately offhand voice, "Perhaps the two of you would care to come to my quarters after dinner this evening. Wizard's Scrabble?"

"Oh." Harry cleared his throat. "Um, I'm afraid not. Not tonight--"

"We have a prior obligation," said Draco smoothly. "Hermione's been assisting me in my Muggle Studies class. I think I mentioned as much?"

Snape didn't look like he thought that was a very good excuse for Harry refusing his olive branch. But then, he didn't fully understand yet. Not that Harry was going to bring up Ron's jealousy problem. "Tonight both Hermione and I are going to help Draco with a paper. And we'd put it off to play Scrabble, honestly we would, but Draco's already missed the deadline once--"

"Harry!" hissed Draco.

Snape turned to Draco, one eyebrow raised. "Five points from Slytherin for failing to submit an essay on time."

"But-- but-- it wasn't even for your class!"

"Nevertheless." Snape looked implacable, but after a moment he unbent enough to explain. "I expect a high standard of academic behaviour from my seventh-year prefects, not to mention my sons."

Harry thought it would be a little ridiculous to object to the plural. Though maybe he should clear up this nonsense about him being a Slytherin prefect. Well, when he got the chance. Best not to interrupt Snape and Draco at the moment.

"But Professor Burbage was perfectly willing to give me more time, when I explained--"

"Did you also explain that you could likely have worked with your brother and Miss Granger on Sunday, had you not granted Quidditch a higher priority than work for her class?"

"But I couldn't have. I didn't know until Monday afternoon that that eleven inches on Muggle clothing would be so challenging, or that the Hogwarts library would be next to useless--"

Harry bit his lip. He wasn't sure he'd ever heard Draco whine quite so much before. Well, perhaps when he'd pretended to be mortally wounded by Buckbeak . . .

"When was this essay assigned?"

Draco gulped and lowered his eyes. "Two weeks ago. But I've been worried about Harry. And about you and Harry. Not to mention-- That is, sometimes all I can think about is . . . all I've lost."

He meant Rhiannon, Harry knew. The room was empty by then, but just in case, Draco used words that would protect her. Anybody overhearing him would probably think he meant his father. And maybe his mother. Draco hadn't heard from her since she'd left her "husband" and gone abroad. He
didn't talk about her much, but Harry knew that much.

As far as Harry was concerned, good riddance. He was sorry for Draco, of course, but he was probably better off without her. What sort of woman would abandon her child like that, without so much as a word? Not even a word of good-bye, let alone one of explanation!

It looked even worse when Harry tried to look at it from Narcissa Malfoy's point of view. She knew that her husband had not only disinherited their only son, but that he'd also put out a death contract on him! She knew that Lucius was dangerous and intended Draco harm. Any normal woman would defend her child, not leave the country and remain incommunicado for months!

But then, Narcissa Malfoy wasn't a normal woman. She was a bitch, through and through -- the sort of woman who didn't deserve to have a child.

Mothers were supposed to protect their children even at the cost of their own lives -- though God knew, Harry wished that his own mother hadn't been faced with a decision like that.

"Draco," Snape was saying in his deep voice. "Part of growing up is learning to concentrate on work or schoolwork even when our personal lives are . . . unsatisfactory."

Harry wondered what he was thinking about as he said that. Had Snape ever been in love?

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then." Snape's gaze swept over both of them. "Be good."

"A friend would probably just say, 'see you later,'" said Harry.

"That would be redundant, as I will obviously see you later." With that, Snape strode away.

Harry waited until he had left the classroom through a back door to whistle, low and long.

"What?" demanded Draco crossly.

"The way he talked to you, lecturing you, but without that sarcasm that cuts people to ribbons. It's just . . . it's like he really is your dad."

"He really is."

Harry waited for the rest, for the inevitable, And he's your dad, too, but Draco must have decided not to push him. Maybe seeing Harry being friendly toward Snape was enough for now.

It was more than enough for Harry.

"So . . . er, Muggle fashions change all the time," said Harry, checking his watch again. It wasn't like Hermione to be late at all, and they'd been waiting for her for almost half an hour. It seemed
like even longer, since Harry had passed the time trying and failing to explain Muggle clothing styles to Draco.

"But I don't understand why their fashions change," the other boy was saying now. "Do you suppose it's because they haven't hit on anything as practical and comfortable as robes, yet?"

Trust Draco to assume that wizarding clothing was inherently superior. "Actually, I think robes were kind of common hundreds of years ago. Many hundreds."

Draco sat poised with his quill hovering above parchment. "But why did they abandon them?"

"Er--"

"And these 'bell-bottoms' you mentioned . . . how did anyone sit down in those?"

Harry was saved from answering by the sight of the door to the Room of Requirement swinging open.

"Hermione," he said with relief.

"Sorry I'm late," she announced, slamming the door with more force than necessary. She sat down the same way, and stared at the merrily burning fire instead of looking at them. "So . . . what did you say your paper was about, Draco?"

Draco gave Harry a quizzical glance. It wasn't like Hermione to forget anything. "Fashion patterns in history."

"Whose history?" She almost barked the question.

"Ours, I suppose."

"Muggle fashion patterns in wizarding history? Is your teacher usually that haphazard?"

Harry scooted his chair closer to Hermione's. "What's wrong?"

Her voice was a little too shrill. "Wrong? Why should something be wrong? It's not my fault if Muggle Studies at this school is such a joke that Draco gets more lost every week--"

"I do not," said Draco stiffly. "I meant British history."

Hermione sighed, her ankles uncrossing as she slumped in her chair. "Sorry. Can I see what you've written so far?"

Draco handed her a small scroll of parchment. In less than ten seconds, she had read every word. "This is absolute rubbish."

"Here, have a piece of fudge," said Draco, fishing a red tin out of his school bag. "Didn't you eat at dinner?"

Hermione scowled. "Low blood sugar is not the problem. And what are you doing carrying fudge around?"

"Professor Burbage asked me to give to Severus, but with the way he was treating me today, I decided to not to."

"She's still throwing herself at him?"
"She can't take a hint," said Draco, biting the edge off a pure white square. "Mmm."

Harry wanted to swat it out of Draco's hand. "You had the gall to complain about my crumble, when you're stealing sweets from Snape?"

"Oh, be a little Slytherin for a change. Dad would just wave his wand to banish it, and that's a waste of Honeyduke's finest."

"Hermione, tell him that it's wrong to--" A sniffling noise made him stop talking. "Hermione?"

She wiped furiously at her cheeks to conceal all trace of moisture.

When a handkerchief appeared in mid-air, Draco silently handed it to her.

Hermione blew her nose, making a loud snarfling noise that might have embarrassed her in other circumstances. She was beyond noticing it at the moment, though.

"What's the matter?" asked Harry.

Draco rose to his feet in one fluid motion. "I'll leave."

"Don't," said Hermione, folding the handkerchief into quarters and then sixteenths. After that it began to resemble a ball which she she kept refolding and twisting. "You're not exactly an uninvolved party. It's just--" Her voice wavered like a wind charm was tossing it to and fro. "It's just, that's what he said. That . . . that I can't take a hint."

"Ron?" asked Harry as Draco sat back down.

"Well, of course, Ron! Do I have so many jealous boyfriends that you can't keep track?"

"Fudge," said Draco more firmly, pressing a piece into her hand.

Hermione swallowed it in one gulp. Harry supposed she must have chewed it a little, but it didn't look like she had.

"He's ridiculous!" Hermione exclaimed the moment her mouth was empty. Once she'd started talking, it seemed she couldn't stop. "Tried to tell me that I couldn't come here tonight to meet you. I shouldn't have done it, but I said that Harry would be here too. I thought that might mollify him, but do you know what he said next? Well, do you?"

Draco, Harry saw, had the good sense to stay completely quiet. Better than make a sticky situation worse.

"Well, do you?"

"No, of course we don't. We weren't there," said Harry quietly.

"Oh. Right. Well, listen to this. He said, and I quote, 'Well, that's all right, then.' That's all right, then!"

"But wasn't that what you wanted?" asked Harry, confused. "For him to decide it was all right?"

"I shouldn't need to make it all right!" cried Hermione. "He should jolly well trust me!"

"Well, yeah, but then why did you tell him that I'd be here, too?"
"To make him feel better, more fool me," said Hermione bitterly. "Because it didn't make any difference. When he said it was all right as long as you were here, I said that it ought to be all right regardless, because Draco and I are just friends. And then he said that he didn't want me alone with Draco again, and I told him that he had no right to boss me about, and he-- he-- he--" Hermione suddenly flung the tortured handkerchief into the fire. "He said that was it, and he didn't want a girlfriend who didn't give a whit about his feelings, and he-- he-- he--"

Harry braced himself.

"He threw me over!" wailed Hermione. "He said he'd rather take a porcupine to the Yule Ball, because it would stick him less!"

"Oh, I do hope you didn't let him get away with that," said Draco, his grey eyes glowing.

"Draco!"

Hermione ignored Harry. "Oh, I didn't," she said smugly, though her sniffling ruined the effect somewhat. "I couldn't think of a porcupine spell on the fly, so I used *Avis* and *Oppugno* in quick succession."

"Good for you."

Harry felt lost. "What . . . birds?"

"They swarmed all over him, pecking and clawing and biting," said Hermione. "That's why I was so late. His face was such a mess that his cheeks swelled up over his eyes. I had to take him to the hospital wing."

"Hermione--"

"What, Harry? He did deserve it, you know. When Lavender stepped through the portrait hole, he swept her into his arms and kissed her, right in front of me. And then he asked her to the ball, also right in front of me! And *then* he made the porcupine remark!"

It certainly sounded like Ron had behaved very badly. On the other hand, Harry could see why he'd been so annoyed. Even Harry had noticed how touchy Ron had been getting about all the time Hermione spent with Draco. "You'll make it up."

"I don't think I care to kiss anyone who's had Lavender Brown's tongue inside his mouth, thank you," said Hermione primly. "I might catch something nasty."

Harry frowned. It was true that Lavender tended to come on strong, but still . . . that seemed harsh.

"You're catty enough to hold your own with Slytherin girls," said Draco in tones of admiration.

Hermione flashed a him a vicious smile. "Ronald Weasley had better not forget it."

"How much detention did you get?" asked Harry, sighing.

"Oh, none." Hermione plucked another square of fudge from the tin Draco held out. "When we got to the hospital wing, Ron was shouting some rather . . . ungentlemanly things about my physique. That predisposed Madam Pomfrey against him, and then, all I had to say was that he'd kissed another girl not ten feet from me while we were still dating, and she understood completely."

"Nicely managed."
"It was not!" erupted Harry, turning to glare at Draco. "Could you please stop making things worse?"

"What?" Draco lifted his free hand in a gesture of innocence.

"He can't make it worse, Harry," said Hermione, grabbing a handful of fudge that time. "Ron and I . . . it's over."

"You could at least stop enjoying it so much!" Harry told Draco.

"Do I look as though I'm enjoying it?"

"You look as though you're brimming with glee!"

Draco set the tin aside on a table and leaned back in his chair, crossing one leg over the other. "Well . . . that is ill-done of me, I suppose. Hermione is hurting and as her friends we ought to be as supportive as possible."

"I am not hurting," said Hermione staunchly, but the way she was stuffing fudge in her mouth said otherwise. "And you were doing fine, Draco. Harry just feels caught in the middle. Thank God one of my friends won't be."

"He really kissed Lavender like that? You're not exaggerating?"

"He more than kissed her. In full view of everyone, he pawed her." Hermione sniffed. "Well, at least I won't have to put up with his clumsy manhandling any longer. Or his ridiculous jealous rages. You know, I think the real problem was that he wanted to control me and I wouldn't let him. Of course not. This is 1997, for pity's sake. But then I don't think that Molly's ever had a job outside the house, so Ron ended up with very warped ideas about men and women."

"My aunt never worked either," said Harry, glaring. "So does that go for me, as well?"

"No, because you're not an inbred pureblood--" Hermione suddenly raised a hand to cover her mouth. "Oh! I'm sorry, Draco. I didn't mean . . ."

"It's all right. You're upset." Draco gave Harry a wry glance. "We all say some insulting things when we're upset."

"True. So let's get back to your essay. The first thing that occurs to me is that it needs a more specific focus. How about the way emerging political and social rights for women influenced the development of British fashion?"

Harry was impressed with the way she rattled that off. "Did those rights change the way women dressed?"

"Oh, of course they did." Hermione smiled like she was trying to forget all about Ron, but the expression was brittle enough that Harry knew she wasn't succeeding. "There's a reason we don't wear corsets any longer."

To Harry's astonishment, Draco had gone a bit pink. "Perhaps you could explain something I've wondered about ever since last summer. Swimming costumes for non-magical girls . . . they seem like they're designed to . . . er, fall off in the water."

"You haven't heard of Lycra or Spandex, I take it."
"Wait," said Harry. "When were you ever at a Muggle pool?"

"Harry," said Hermione in a chiding voice. "You have to remember these things on your own."

"Yes, Harry," echoed Draco, giving him a meaningful glance. "You have to remember these things on your own."

A moment later, Harry did remember what Draco had said about their summer in Devon. Draco had met Rhiannon at a pool in . . . well, not Devon. Somewhere near there, though. He was a little unclear as to why Draco had been at a Muggle pool to begin with, though.

And for some reason, he hadn't wanted to ask.

He still didn't want to ask . . . and not only because Hermione was there.

Harry didn't care much about Draco's essay topic, so he dragged out his Ethics book to read while Draco and Hermione discussed fashion trends. He wasn't going to ask Snape for extra help unless it was absolutely necessary.

Which . . . it might be.

Harry had expected that Snape would issue another invitation, of course. He would probably have invited Draco and Harry down for dessert after D.A. on Wednesday, but D.A. had been cancelled because it was the last week before the Christmas holiday.

And because too many girls had been planning to skip D.A., anyway. They needed the time to help each other with fitting charms on their ball gowns. Fitting charms weren't going to do much when it came time to fight Voldemort, but Harry hadn't got anywhere with that argument.

Since there wasn't any D.A. for Snape to supervise, Harry didn't expect to talk to him at all on Wednesday. He supposed that there'd be some sort of invitation issued the next day, when Harry saw him again for Ethics.

Instead, he got an invitation on Wednesday, anyway.

An invitation by owl. It arrived during dinner and momentarily blocked out the sight of Ron blowing kisses across the table. Nothing could block out Lavender's giggling, though.

*Harry*, the scroll read. *Come to my quarters immediately after you have finished your meal.*

It was signed simply, S.S.

That was pretty high-handed. Harry decided that Snape had better have a damned good reason, one that didn't involve Wizard's Scrabble. If this was just his way of *getting* his way, Harry was going to have to make Snape understand a thing or two about how friends behaved.
"Oooh, Harry's got a letter," crooned Lavender from three seats away. She leaned over trying to see it, uncaring that she was crowding everyone in between us. "Who's it from? Luna-woona?"

"None of your business," said Harry.

"Now, don't be like that." Lavender beamed. "I'm just so happy with my Ronnie-wonnie that I want to see everybody in love. I can't wait for the ball this Saturday!" She suddenly began pouting "But then after, not to see my Ronnie-wonnie for three whole weeks! I can't live without my Ronnie-wonnie's kissie-wissies for so long!"

Harry immediately revised his opinion of Hermione's cattiness the night before. Lavender deserved every word, going on like this when Hermione was sitting right across from him!

Well, at least she was taking the high road this evening. She was sipping at her tea, apparently oblivious to every word, her attention directed at the book she was reading. As Harry watched, she calmly turned a page and resumed reading.

Lavender tossed her hair over her shoulder, then stopped leaning over three people and started making little kissie-noises toward Ron, who immediately turned pink but blew her another kiss from across the table.

"Positively disgusting," murmured Hermione as she turned another page. "She's so desperate that she'd chase anything in trousers, and Ron's more than a little thick not to realise what that says about him."

All right, so perhaps Hermione wasn't ready to set foot on the high road, yet, thought Harry.

"I take it the letter's not from Luna-woona?" asked Hermione, rolling her eyes.

Harry shook his head. "Snape wants to see me."

"Ah. Well, be sure to keep your new resolve. It was lovely to see the two of you bantering in Ethics yesterday."

Bantering? They'd been debating Rousseau, who, as far as Harry could tell, was as barmy a philosopher as ever they came.

From down the table came the sound of more kissie-noises, these ones somehow wetter.

Harry threw Hermione a sympathetic glance, but she was back to reading her book.

Harry only had to wait in the dungeon corridor for a few seconds before the door opened to reveal Draco, who gestured him inside. Snape was standing by the fire, deep in conversation with the headmaster.

That was when Harry knew he'd been silly to think, even for a moment, that Snape would issue a
summons like that over something as trivial as wanting a game of Scrabble.

"What's wrong?" he asked, taking a seat beside Draco as Snape and Dumbledore settled themselves into the two chairs in the living room.

"We have received information from Remus Lupin late this afternoon," said Dumbledore, settling his hands into his lap. He was wearing several gaudy rings which caught the light from the flames and cast it up toward the stone ceiling. "Disturbing information."

Draco shot to his feet. "Is my mother all right?"

"Lupin has had no word from her," said Snape gently. "Sit down, Draco."

"Is Remus all right?" asked Harry.

"Yes," said Snape. He'd looked tense from the first, but now, he held himself as stiffly as a mannequin. So stiffly, in fact, that--

A shivery feeling swept up Harry's spine, leaving nausea in its wake. "I don't believe you," he gasped. "Something's wrong, isn't it? There's something you're afraid to tell me--"

"He's afraid to mention the werewolf around you, after the way you reacted to his name on Saturday," said Draco, glaring. "And no wonder. Even now, it makes you call Severus a liar, straight away--"

"Just tell me what happened to Remus!"

"Nothing," said Snape, shaking his head. Well, at least that made him look a little less tense. "Lupin is doing well at his assignment and is in good health."

"Oh." Harry cleared his throat. "All right. Um . . . sorry."

Snape inclined his head.

"Perhaps we were hasty to induct the two of you into the Order," said Dumbledore with a stern glance over the top of his half-moon glances. "You must be able to listen to reports without panicking and interrupting, and if you are going to doubt the word of a fellow Order member, you must have excellent reason. Now, if I may continue?"

He waited until Harry and Draco had both nodded.

"Lupin's report this afternoon concerned new instructions he has received from Voldemort. He has been ordered to use his status as a school governor to attend the Yule Ball."

"Oh," said Harry slowly. Remus was going to be in the castle? Harry was going to have a chance to see him? That was probably the last thing he'd expected to hear.

"His mission is to examine the wards for Voldemort, and if possible, abduct you or Draco, preferably both," said Snape. "We cannot forbid his presence in the castle, not so long as he is a member of the governing board. We could probably extinguish that status by accusing him of crimes against you from last year--"

"You can't do that," exclaimed Harry. "Remus didn't do anything! He doesn't deserve to go to Azkaban!"

"--but," continued Snape as if Harry hadn't spoken, "given current circumstances, that is out of the
question. We need Lupin to remain free if he is to continue providing us with information about Voldemort and the Death Eaters."

"Plus it would be wrong!" insisted Harry. "To send him to prison when he's just trying to help us--"

"Yes," said Snape, his eyes hooded as he turned his head toward Dumbledore. "That would be wrong."

"I got you out of Azkaban the moment it was possible, Severus." The headmaster sighed. "I regret that it took longer than I would have wished."

Snape hesitated before finally gave a curt nod. "To return to today's situation, then. Either one of you at the Yule Ball with an apparent Lucius Malfoy is not advisable. Therefore we will commence our holiday in Devon early."

"No."

Snape continued as though Harry hadn't spoken. "As Harry's amnesia is well-known by now, the story will be that I have taken him abroad to see a renowned mind healer--"

"No."

"It is not a request. You are a member of the Order and as such, you will do as you are instructed."

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "If I'm a member then I get to contribute more than blind obedience. Don't I?"

Dumbledore looked from Harry to Snape and back. "I think so, yes."

"Thank you." Harry blew out a breath. "It's just . . . I don't think that that two of you have considered everything. I have to be at the ball, because if I'm not, Voldemort will suspect that somebody warned us about Lucius coming. He'll suspect Remus, and I think we all know what that means. This plan could get Remus killed."

Harry looked back at Snape. "And if that's not enough to convince you, try to remember that dead men don't make very good spies!"

"Harry--"

Harry blew out a breath. "Look. I know you don't want me seeing Remus, but this is taking things too far."

"You are overreacting because of our disagreement last Saturday--"

"No, you're overreacting because you despise him and always will. You got him fired from the best job he'd ever had, for God's sake!"

"I do not despise him." Snape's eyes lit up with something frightening. "If you must have the brutal truth, I respect him now, werewolf or no."

Snape respected Remus? Harry blinked, wondering if he was only saying that because Dumbledore was here. After all, Snape had shaken Sirius' hand on the headmaster's say-so, hadn't he?

"Think about his mission, Harry," said Draco. "Lupin is supposed to abduct us. That means he has to try, and it has to look credible. If we're not there, he's off the hook. We have to go to Devon early. If the Dark Lord thinks that Lupin has disobeyed him, he'll definitely have him killed."
"Have him killed?" asked Snape in a hard voice. "Voldemort will do it himself. He will torture your precious Remus Lupin to death."

Harry felt his heartbeat start racing. He couldn't get Remus killed. He could hardly stand knowing that his idiocy had led to that for Sirius. But now it seemed that both being at the ball and skipping it would be bad news for Remus.

"Well then, we have to make sure that everything looks right to students who might be reporting to Death Eater parents." He nodded as the plan took clearer form in his mind. "You and Dumbledore can stick to Remus like glue. Sort of steer him away from Draco and me. Stand right beside us, wands at the ready, if he ever gets close. The story will have to be that he never had a chance to snatch one of us."

Draco shifted on the couch. "That might work--"

"Of course it won't work!"

"But wouldn't that sort of open suspicion would actually be good for Lupin's cover?" asked Draco. "If the-- if Voldemort thinks that Dumbledore is getting more suspicious of Lupin, he'll seem all the more like a loyal Death Eater to him."

"Portkeys," said Snape in a low, furious tone, "can be thrown. And once you are in Voldemort's presence, what hope will Lupin have to save you? This is not like last year when you could access dark powers to save yourself!"

"Anti-Portkey wards," suggested Harry.

Snape stared. "If those were possible, wouldn't we have warded the castle with them last year? Particularly after Lucius Malfoy sent an operative here with a Portkey?"

Harry blinked. Oh . . . Durswhite or something. Draco had mentioned the incident, but honestly, it had made the Slytherin boy sound so heroic that Harry didn't believe much of the tale. He'd often toyed with the idea of making Draco repeat it under Veritaserum. But there was something else, something he could remember if he could just catch it, dancing at the edge of the fog that filled much of his memory. It was something Snape or Dumbledore had said early on, when he'd first woken up in the hospital wing . . .

"Didn't Voldemort have them? I mean, you said I broke through something and then the Portkey finally worked. So those were Anti-Portkey wards, right?"

Snape's nostrils flared. "Yes, Voldemort had Anti-Portkey wards in place that night. They are a favourite of his, and for good reason. Their construction affords him the opportunity to immerse himself in any number of foul, evil rituals, many of which I had the misfortune to witness while I was a spy amongst the Death Eaters. Does that tell you enough, or would you like the details?"

Draco made an abrupt motion. "Anti-Portkey wards aren't an option. Even if they were, what good would they be? We found out last year that a governor in close proximity to the nexus of a ward can take it down on his own authority if he sees fit."

"An ancient provision of the Hogwarts charter," murmured Dumbledore. "Woven into the structure of the castle itself so that no headmaster could become an utter despot."

"So we go back to the plan where Remus can't get close enough to me to use a Portkey--"

"Leaving dear Remus no option but to hurl it at you, or risk any spies among us telling his master
"But Remus could explain that," said Harry. "Think about it from Voldemort's point of view. He'd know that a tossed Portkey might miss, and then Remus would be facing Azkaban for attempted kidnapping, and Voldemort would lose his services. His services which include taking down the wards when Voldemort is ready! Remus will be under orders not to use a Portkey unless he can get close enough to be sure it'll succeed!"

"Young Harry does have a point, Severus," murmured the headmaster.

Draco nodded. "I think he does, but just to be safe, you could get a message to Lupin telling him to drop a few hints before the ball. If he's still in Voldemort's good graces, it shouldn't be hard to--"

"No," said Snape, his hands clenched on the arms of his chair. "He must not be allowed in the same room as Harry."

"I know you don't want me to see him!" erupted Harry. In that moment, it seemed like a dam broke inside him and anger started pouring forth. Strange . . . he hadn't been angry at Snape in days. "I know, all right? But your 'cry amnesia' plan is just plain stupid and it'll put Remus in danger! And I don't care what you think! I want to see him, even if it's just from across a dance floor!"

"Do you still want to see him if it means that you could endanger him yourself?"

"I . . . what?"

Snape leaned forward, his eyes an intense black. "You have dark powers that may erupt at any moment, a consideration that is clearly beyond you!"

"No wonder, since I don't fucking remember them!" shouted Harry.

"You will show your father respect in my presence," said Dumbledore sternly.

"He claims that I can say whatever I like to him down here. And look, I'd never hurt Remus! I'm not going to break out into blasting curses gone berserk or something!"

"He will look like Lucius Malfoy! It was bone-deep rage and fear that loosed your dark powers last time. What if the sight of him makes it happen again?"

"A minute ago you were convinced it wouldn't happen even if I got Portkeyed straight to Voldemort! Now it's going to happen just because I see Lucius Malfoy when I'll know he's Remus inside?"

"Nobody can say what might happen! Lucius Malfoy tortured you beyond all human endurance! What if your memory suddenly floods back?"

"Not past all endurance," said Harry. "I'm still here."

Snape threw up his hands in frustration. "He is impossible, Albus. You must persuade him."

Dumbledore, however, was stroking his long beard, his blue eyes half-closed as he contemplated something. "Severus," he said after a long moment. "I believe that something weighs heavily on your mind. Something that you must disclose to Harry -- for you are correct. The sight of Lucius Malfoy may well bring a rush of memories back. Memories of Samhain."

Snape made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. "You can't mean--"
"Oh, yes. I can." Dumbledore rose slowly to his feet, his robes falling around him in a shimmer of sunshine pink. "Our best option here is to be seen shielding Harry during the ball. Lupin will no doubt come armed with a Portkey, but I doubt he will risk throwing it. Even if he does--" His eyes gleamed in the firelight. "I will take measures to be sure that no harm can possibly come to either of your sons. But your last concern? Only you can alleviate that."

"It is too soon," rasped Snape. "The boy is hardly ready to trust my word on anything, and his therapist was most specific--"

"Yes, yes, Harry's therapist," said Dumbledore in a less patient voice. "This is undoubtedly an exception to her rule. Quality of life, Severus. Harry needs to be prepared in advance. You know what conclusions he might draw if he were to remember certain things about that terrible night."

"Could the two of you please say what you mean?" asked Harry.

"Albus--"

"I am not asking you, Severus. As head of the Order, I am telling you that this must be done. Suppose Harry's dark powers do flow back in the shock of seeing Lucius Malfoy's form? Full knowledge in advance may enable him to keep them a secret, rather than loose them in front of hundreds of witnesses."

Snape began rubbing the bridge of his nose. "And you will no doubt tell me next that I must set an example for my sons. A loyal Order member deferring to authority, as I will expect from them in future."

"As you say."

"It is as you say, Headmaster." Snape sighed and released the arms of his chair. "Some privacy then, as you insist."

"Thank you, Severus." Dumbledore crooked his fingers. "Draco, my boy. Come up to my office for a spot of that Oolong you once enjoyed so much."

"Actually," said Draco slowly, "I think I'd rather stay here and--"

"No, no. Your father has asked for privacy and he shall have it."

"He didn't mean me--"

"Draco," said Snape in a gruff tone. "Go with the headmaster."

"Are you--" Draco paused and then unfolded his body from the couch. "Yes, all right."

Snape nodded, his mouth set in a straight line but his dark eyes reflecting an emotion far less grim. It wasn't quite gratitude, but it was something similar, Harry thought.

The fire bathed the room in emerald light as Draco and the headmaster flooed away together, leaving Harry alone with Snape, who had turned to stare at the hearth. As the roaring flames subsided to a soft glow, he flicked his wand to extinguish the lights along the walls.

"Sir?" Harry drew in a breath. "Sorry. I meant Severus. The other . . . well, I don't mean anything bad by it. Not any longer, that is. It's just a habit you've drilled into me for five long years."

"I regret they seem long," said Snape heavily, turning to face him.
He didn't say anything else, though. Harry decided that if they were ever going to get to the point, he'd have to take the Snitch by the wings.

"So. I guess I know why you don't want me to see Remus, then. It's got less to do with how much you always hated him, and more to do with something I might remember. Something awful, from the sounds of it." Harry cocked his head to one side as he slid over on the couch a couple of feet. That didn't put him right next to Snape, but it got him close enough to see the small details that made up the man's expression. "If the subject is this sensitive . . . well, why did you mention Remus at all the other night? You had to know that I'd be annoyed that you hadn't given me any choice about seeing him."

Snape's lips twisted. "Oh, yes, I knew. Though I will say, your reaction was rather more dramatic than I had expected."

Harry shrugged. "I'm sure it was. But you could have avoided it completely."

"Not forever," whispered Snape in the near-darkness. "Lupin had asked me to tell you 'hallo.' I knew that you would likely see him at some point, even if it was delayed until the war had ended. I knew that you would never forgive me if you learned that I had deliberately failed to pass along a message from Remus Lupin."

Never forgive him? Harry frowned. Either their relationship last year hadn't been as good as people said, or Harry's recent behaviour had been more hurtful than he'd realised.

Harry didn't like to think of himself as someone who could never forgive, and he didn't like the idea that he'd seemed that way to Snape.

"I appreciate your passing along the message and I'm sorry I reacted the way I did," he said firmly. "Now, what are you worried I'll remember? Something to do with Lucius Malfoy?"

"Something to do with a night wizards call Samhain." Snape sighed. "It is a long story, but I will try to be succinct. On the night that Malfoy tortured and blinded you, on that night, I-- I--"

Harry folded his hands together and waited.

"I was still playing the part of the loyal Death Eater then," the man suddenly burst out, his own hands twisting together in his lap. "I-- I-- Harry. You must believe me: I already loved you, even then. Even though you were not yet my son, even though adoption had never so much as crossed my mind, I did love you. I-- I may not have known, but I can see more clearly now that-- And yet, circumstances turned against me that night. I-- I--"

Harry had a flash of memory, but not a new one. This one, he'd had before, during D.A. Cold wind on his bare skin, and masked faces all around. A needle being brought closer and closer as a smooth, aristocratic voice taunted him. The needle wriggling, trying to get to him--

In D.A., the memory had cut out then, and switched to something later, to Malfoy going on about how Snape had healed Harry's eyes.

It didn't cut out this time, though. As Harry watched inside his mind, that needle plunged downward into his cheek.

He flinched wildly, unprepared for the bolt of pain that shot through him. Christ, that hurt--

"Harry," said Snape, lurching forward in his chair to get closer. "What happened? Are you all right?"
Harry rubbed at his cheek and was a little surprised to find no injury there. "Yeah," he said roughly, though he could still feel traces of that phantom surge of pain. The needle had been left embedded, hadn't it? And another one was going to follow fast upon the first, and another one after that, until even his eyes were speared and mutilated--

Harry shook his head to keep the memories from playing out like a mental movie. He didn't want to feel that sort of pain again. If he was sure of anything, it was that having his cheek stabbed was nothing compared to what it would feel like when Malfoy started in on his eyeballs--

The truth suddenly flashed through him like a bolt of lightning. Snape had healed his eyes! Harry understood that better, now. Of course Snape had taken it on himself to heal Harry's eyes. He'd felt guilty about what he'd done. Besides, he'd said himself that he already loved Harry at this point, though he hadn't known that at the time.

Maybe being forced "by circumstances" to plunge needles into Harry had helped him figure it out!

Harry recoiled further, his mind racing in about a hundred directions at once. Yes, Snape had been a Death Eater. He'd probably done things so horrible that Harry couldn't even imagine them. But this, Harry didn't have to imagine. He could remember it, remember the pain and the fear and the bone-deep horror--

And yet, circumstances had forced Snape's hand. Harry knew enough of the story to be certain of it. There had been wards up to prevent his escape, and until those wards fell, Snape was outnumbered dozens to one. He'd had to play along, because refusing to torture Harry would only have meant blowing his cover before it could do any good. He'd had to wait until there was at least a chance--

But . . . should that matter? He'd tortured a student, and not just with that cutting tongue of his, this time.

He'd tortured a boy he claimed to love.

Harry couldn't say how he felt, not exactly. He knew that he was supposed to be grown up enough to handle this revelation. The headmaster had trusted him with it. And he knew, intellectually at least, that Snape hadn't had any choice that night.

That didn't make the knowledge rest easy in his head, though.

Harry cleared his throat. "I-- I--"

Jesus. He sounded about like Snape had a few moments earlier.

"I understand," he said, although he didn't. The words sound distant, like someone far away was saying them. "You didn't have many options that night. You had to make them all think you were one of them. I-- I-- if we don't talk about this, I can probably stay civil towards you. And . . . and . . ."

Harry struggled to breathe, because it seemed like his world was collapsing. He'd finally accepted that yes, Snape did love him, and now to find out that the man had done this? Harry couldn't bear it, but he had to. He couldn't avoid Snape completely, not when they were both in the Order!

Harry could only see one way through this thicket, and it was to find a way to make the whole thing seem less horrible.

He did his best to smile, though judging from Snape's expression it came across more as a rictus.
"Consequentialist ethics, I guess. With magic, even injuries like that aren't so bad... I guess while you were stabbing me all over you were telling yourself you'd heal me later--"

Snape drew in a sharp breath. "No, no. That wasn't what happened. I didn't stab you."

"You didn't?"

Snape shook his head, his dark hair swaying.

"But I remember--" Harry frowned, shifting in his seat. It had all seemed so clear a minute ago, but now... "Huh. I can bring some images to mind, and Malfoy is clear enough, but you? I can't actually remember you there at all."

"I was there." Snape looked down at his hands. "Albus had provided me with a Portkey. My sole aim was to remain as close as possible to you, so that the instant that Albus snapped the wards, I could whisk you to safety. I-- I--"

Another shard of memory snapped into place, the knowledge seeming to come from nowhere. This memory, Harry couldn't see. But he could feel it. Firm hands vised on either side of his head, their pressure relentless, but not cruel or punishing. Not hurting him for the sake of it--

"You held me down for Malfoy," said Harry quietly. "Didn't you?"

"Yes."

The single word sounded like it was being dragged from the bottom of Snape's soul.

Harry drew in a deep breath. He could see the scene now, though he wasn't sure if it was memory or imagination painting it inside his mind. Even looking at it, though, he was calm, not angry as Snape obviously expected. But what else could the man expect? Harry had been nothing but anger throughout most of the last few weeks.

Now, though, his primary reaction was more like the night he'd found Snape drunk. The night when he'd realised that the man was human, after all.

He felt compassion. And more than that, pity.

"All right," he finally said.

Snape's head jerked to one side. "It is most definitely not all right--"

Harry wasn't sure how to explain, since Severus Snape wasn't the type to want pity. "Well, I'd already braced myself for something a lot worse."

Snape rubbed the bump along the ridge of his nose. "Perhaps so, but the fact that I held you down to be tortured hardly renders me an innocent party!"

"I thought you held me down to be rescued."

"I-- yes, but-- well--"

Seeing Snape at a loss for words probably got to Harry more than anything the man could have said, and transformed the pity he'd felt a moment earlier into something far more profound.

Respect.
"Severus," he said gently, waiting until the man looked at him again. "I think I wasn't the only one tortured that night."

Snape's mouth dropped open and stayed that way for the space of three seconds. Then he closed it with a clicking of teeth and merely nodded, his dark eyes reflecting at least a little of the agony he'd endured that night when he'd had to hold Harry down for the needles.

"It would have been easier to play your role if you hadn't loved me," Harry went on. "But you did it anyway, because there wasn't any other choice."

Snape's hand shook, though his voice was steady with what sounded like great effort. "I expected you to be . . . very angry."

"My recent behaviour must have been more unreasonable than I thought," murmured Harry. "Or . . . did you expect that because I was angry about it when it first happened?"

Snape sighed. "No, not at all."

"Thank God," said Harry. "I'd hate to think that I'd been a bastard to someone who'd suffered like that in a bid to help me."

"You were good about it from the very first."

His tone said that he hadn't expected a good reaction then, either. And that told Harry a lot.

"Severus," he said again. "You were good that night. No matter how your actions might look to someone else, what you did was good. And . . . well, I think you need to accept that finally. And forgive yourself."

"You can say whatever you wish to me here."

Harry nodded.

"As you amply demonstrated earlier," added Snape, arching an eyebrow.

Relieved by the shift in mood, Harry chuckled. "I'll try to be more considerate when the headmaster's here." He smiled, feeling a little impish. "So that's it, then? That was your deep, dark secret? I mean, that and the goblets?"

"The goblets?"

Oh. Snape didn't remember anything of their conversation about that. Not that Harry had explained well at the time.

"I get bits and flashes of memory sometimes. On Saturday night when you, er, weren't yourself, I remembered that you'd misled me about the Snape goblet on the mantle. You didn't get it on your coming-of-age like you told me, did you?"

"No. My relationship with my father was not such that . . ." Snape's voice drifted off.

"So you lied about a goblet, and you held me down on Samhain," said Harry. "Which you're going to stop regarding as a capital crime, Severus. You did the best you could. Now, as long as we're clearing the air, is there anything else I should know?"

Snape stared at him for a long moment, and then slowly shook his head.
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other:*
Chapter Twenty-Eight: "The Yule Ball"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
"Er . . . that's high enough for now," said Harry as he hovered above the pitch.

Ron nodded. "I decided last time that half your trouble is that you're thinking about it too much. So I brought something to distract you. Here, catch!"

He lobbed a ball of soft yarn in Harry's direction.

Harry caught it with one hand while he held onto his broomstick with the other. Huh. It wasn't the sort of yarn ball you might find in an old lady's knitting pouch, but neither was it knitted. Harry had never seen anything like it; the ball seemed to be made up of hundreds of cut segments of yarn, held together by . . . he had no idea.

"Toss it back," called Ron, who had backed up a few more feet.

They fell into an easy rhythm of catch and throw, catch and throw, with Ron's aim gradually getting worse. Of course, it wasn't truly getting worse. Ron was making Harry move on his broom to reach the ball. Move higher in most cases.

Harry was aware of that, but Ron had been right. The height he was flying did bother him less when he had something else to concentrate on. Though why that hadn't worked with a Snitch was a good question.

Maybe the answer to that was that playing catch with a friend was so relaxed and low-key. A practice with the full Gryffindor team was anything but, and it reminded him of . . . Harry wasn't sure. Quidditch matches always tended to be intense. He couldn't imagine why that should bother him.

"Enough for now?" called Ron when it was getting hard to see in the dying light.

"Yeah, good." Harry pulled up alongside Ron and looked down. A wave of anxiety sort of rolled though his stomach when he saw how high he was, but at least it wasn't pure panic. Harry could weather it, especially if he used the "distraction" method. "So where'd you get such a weird ball of yarn?"

"Lavender made it."

"Oh." Harry didn't know what to say, and all the things that came to mind seemed like a betrayal of Hermione. She wouldn't want Ron to know she'd been upset enough to eat a half pound of fudge all by herself.

Ron sighed. "You don't have to like her."

That was good, since Harry didn't.

"But I do, so--" Ron sighed again. "I don't like Draco, you know. But he's your brother so I try not to get into that with you."

Ron had done more than not badmouth Draco to Harry, though. A lot more. When Harry had first woken up unable to remember things, Ron had actually praised Draco and called him a good brother, even though he didn't like him.
That made Ron a true friend.

It also made Draco even more of an ungrateful, ill-mannered prat. He had no call to belittle Ron, or monopolise Hermione the way he'd done, not when he knew how much that would bother Ron.

And the fact that it had bothered Ron meant something, didn't it? Ron had never been jealous when Lavender had thrown herself at half the boys in Gryffindor. When it came to Hermione, Ron had got jealous enough to behave like an arse!

"Thanks," said Harry. "Um--"

Damn. Ron was probably right, and it was best not to get into any of this. Even though Harry didn't like the way Ron had treated Hermione. But then, he didn't like the way Hermione had treated Ron, and he hadn't said anything about that to her.

Of course not. He didn't want to offend any of his friends, or risk driving them away if he put things badly or seemed to be taking sides.

And anyway, if he managed to get them together again, it would probably be up to him to keep them together. If they couldn't maintain their romance without him interfering, it wasn't much of a romance to start with.

It wasn't as though either of them had amnesia and needed his help.

"Um?"

"Nothing," said Harry. He had to think quickly to come up with something that made sense. "I mean, I'd barely got used to the idea of you and Hermione together, and now it's all gone and changed again. I wish my life would settle down." When had his life ever been calm and settled, though? There was no point in wishing for things he couldn't have.

I don't ask for what I can't get . . .

Harry gulped. Unlike some memories, that one came with a little bit of context. He could see Snape sitting across a table from him as he said it, the remains of a pizza between them. But he couldn't see Snape's table. The scene was set at Number Four -- Harry could see his aunt's hideous floral wallpaper and her blue phone, hanging on the wall. And then Snape was saying . . . Snape was saying . . .

Harry struggled, reaching for the memory with all his might.

Your father, Mr Potter . . .

Harry sucked in a huge breath and held it as he tried to force his mind down a pathway it hadn't travelled before. His face scrunched up as he struggled and pushed, finally breaking through some sort of barrier that made the memory snap free.

Snape leaning back in one of Aunt Petunia's chairs, his fingers steepled together, his dark eyes steady on Harry and not at all mocking. "Your father, Mr Potter. Contrary to what you've been told, he was not unemployed . . .

Harry gasped.

Not because James Potter hadn't been unemployed, of course. But that Snape, who hated James so much, could say that to him. And say it in tones of . . . almost reassurance--
The world around him seemed to dim, which Harry thought was just him being lost in thought, but then he realised that he was dizzy.

"Mate?"

Harry felt himself sliding sideways on his broom, and then the ground seemed to be at the wrong angle and approaching fast.

His hands tightened on the handle, remembering on their own how to pull him back so that he sat properly astride. He remembered, too, how to bank and veer so that he'd skim above the ground until he could slow down enough for a proper landing.

Ron was at his side no more than five seconds after Harry dismounted. "What happened? Are you all right?"

"Oh yeah, fine." Harry ran a hand through his hair. "I got a little distracted for a second. I think I was thinking too hard. But it's all right. I just righted myself on the broom and got the fall under control--"

A brilliant beam of white light suddenly lit up inside his mind.

"That's it!" he exclaimed. "If I fall again, I just have to right myself on the broom and get the fall under control. I know how to do that!"

"Well, yeah, uh--"

Harry bounced on his heels. "No, you don't understand. It's gone! It's gone!"

Ron might be a few steps behind, but he did catch up. "Oh! You're not afraid of heights any longer?"

Harry hadn't been afraid of heights, exactly, but he was too excited to quibble. "No. It's gone!"

Ron scratched his head. "Just because you fell?"

"No, because you were right. I was thinking about it too much. But when I was thinking about something else instead, it all just came naturally. And now that it has . . ." Harry shrugged. "I don't know how to explain. But I can tell that my flying is back to normal. Thanks, Ron."

"I didn't do anything--"

"Yeah, you did." Harry mounted his broom again. "Oh. Um, I think I dropped that yarn ball somewhere."

Ron shrugged. "I'll swing back out over the pitch and summon it."

Harry nodded and headed off the pitch and up the rise of small hill.

He was more than a little surprised when he reached the top to find Snape standing just a few feet from the crest. "Sir?" he asked, landing and hopping off his broom. "I meant Severus. What are you doing out here?"

"I don't suppose you would believe that I am taking a constitutional," said Snape in a dry voice.

"No, I don't suppose I would," retorted Harry. "And that's without knowing what a constitutional is."
A tiny hint of a smile lifted the edges of Snape's lips. "Taking the night air for my health."

"But you aren't." Harry made it sound like a question.

"No." Snape hesitated. "I saw you and Mr Weasley leaving dinner early together, and surmised that you would go flying together."

Harry wasn't sure how he felt about the implication there. "You wanted to watch?" He scowled when Snape nodded. "You were that sure I'd fall?"

"Not at all." Another hesitation. "You haven't fallen the other times you and Mr Weasley have practiced together."

"You watched then, too?"

Instead of ridiculing Harry for stating the obvious, Snape merely nodded again. "I was careful to remain unseen, but I wanted to be near at hand in case you needed . . . anything."

"You wanted to be here to cast a cushioning charm in case I fell, you mean."

"That, too."

Harry blew out a breath. "Look, you obviously meant well, but it's creepy having you lurk around unseen, all right? It's like you're spying on me."

"Which is why I didn't conceal my presence tonight," said Snape smoothly.

"It's still creepy," muttered Harry.

"It is not 'creepy' for a father to wish for time with his son."

"We agreed to just try being friends!"

"Neither is it creepy for a friend to watch you on the pitch."

"It is if he Disillusions himself and never tells me he was there!"

"But I have told you."

Harry gripped his broomstick more tightly. "Yeah, you have. Fine. But it was creepy of you to wait so long."

Snape inclined his head. "I felt I had no alternative at the time." His voice softened marginally as he went on. "Harry. I sought only to take care of you. You had admitted fear of flying and a determination to overcome that fear. What if something unfortunate had happened during one of your sessions?"

All right. Harry could see how it had been for him, so he decided to forgive the creepiness. "Something fortunate happened today," he said brightly. "Did you see? I lost control but I recovered, and now I feel like--" He grinned and started to walk towards the castle, Snape falling into step beside him. "I feel like Gryffindor is going to wipe the floor with Slytherin the next time we're matched up. You lot can forget about the Quidditch Cup."

"I imagine Draco will have something to say about that."

"I thought you'd have something to say," retorted Harry. "Or no, maybe I didn't. I keep thinking
that you're going to revert to your usual self, no offense. But I suppose I didn't really think that you'd want Slytherin to win a match if the cost was me not being a competent flyer." He shook his head as he walked along. "Sorry. I'm not making much sense."

"I learned to follow your circumlocutions during the past year," said Snape calmly. "You meant that some part of you now believes that you mean more to me than house rivalries, but that belief contradicts accepted assumptions about me."

"Something like that." Harry kept his gaze trained on the grass ahead. He couldn't look at Snape when he said the next bit. "Er... how will you feel, really, if Gryffindor beats Slytherin because I catch the Snitch before Draco?"

Harry sensed rather than saw a slight shrug in his peripheral vision. "I am in an unenviable position when it comes to Quidditch. Your victory is Draco's loss, and vice-versa. And you are both my sons."

Harry didn't argue with the word that time. He knew that Snape felt that way.

By that time, they were nearly at the steps of the castle. Harry paused, and this time, made sure to look Snape in the face. "I remember eating pizza with you. In Surrey. You said--" He paused to gulp in some air. "You said that my father wasn't unemployed. Which I knew, but you said it like you wanted to make sure I knew."

"I don't hate him any longer, if that's what has you looking so puzzled."

Harry tried to clear his expression. "I don't see why not."

Snape leaned down a little, his dark eyes glimmering. "Because I can't love his son and still hate him. There's too much of him in you for that to be possible."

"But--"

Snape sighed. "I know that my behaviour about the Pensieve can only make you doubt this next claim, but Harry... I did grow to respect James before he died. We were in the Order together by then, working toward the same goals, though through... vastly different means."

"But then why did you hate me so much on that first day of class?" asked Harry, pain in his voice. The sound of it surprised even him. He'd got over that years ago. That it could matter to him again could only mean that Snape meant something to him.

Meant something to the parts of him that didn't remember.

"If it wasn't because I reminded you of him and you couldn't stand the thought of him?" pressed Harry, since Snape had yet to answer.

"I couldn't stand the thought of him," said Snape bleakly. "That much is true. My relationship with James was never easy, even after we were both grown. In some ways, neither one of us was very grown-up. Twenty may seem adult and responsible to you, but looking at it from the other side, I can tell you that it is no great age of wisdom. You were a reminder of all of it."

"A reminder of bad times," murmured Harry. He supposed he could understand that.

"Seeing you week after week in class made it easier to dwell on the bad times," added Snape. "And that... suited me."
Harry cleared his throat and said it, finally. The thing he'd tried to say at the time, but Snape hadn't been able to listen, not then. Maybe he could, now. "I felt really bad about what he did that day, sir. Severus. That was-- well, I couldn't blame you for hating him, not after that."

"It was none of it your fault." Snape had been studying the horizon for a while, but he turned to Harry, then. "I should never have encouraged you to think ill of him, any more than your relatives should have done such a thing. You have my apologies."

"I-- I--" Harry shifted on his feet. "I don't know what to say, sir. Severus."

"There is no need to say anything." Snape reached out as though to take him by the arm, but drew his hand back at the last moment. "I had another reason for coming out to the pitch. The headmaster wishes to speak with us in his office."

"Oh. Problem?"

"Quite the contrary."

Harry stared, but it didn't seem like Snape was going to say anything else until they were behind proper wards, so Harry slung his broom under his arm and followed him into the castle.

"Harry, my boy. And Severus, of course. Cadbury Rose? Quality Street? Toffifay?"

"Try a Malteser," advised Draco from a plush chair off to one side. "They're unbelievable. Mmm. You know, I really should have taken an interest in Muggle culture long before now. I had no idea they had such a wealth of sweets."

"Happy to indulge you, my boy," said Dumbledore in a jolly tone. "Happy indeed."

"And the Jelly Bellies!" Draco beamed Harry a bright smile. "Have you had those? They're like Every Flavour Beans, except there are no disgusting flavours. It's amazing. You can eat them all day long and never, ever have to choke on the taste of vomit or earthworm or dung-beetle dung--"

"Headmaster," interrupted Snape with a slight glare in Draco's direction. "I do believe you have some information of importance to communicate?"

"He's just annoyed there's no liquorice," said Draco in a mock-whisper.

Snape sat down, his robes billowing for a moment as if animated by his anger.

Harry took a seat next to Draco and reached for a wrapped caramel.

"Now, now, your father is quite correct," said Dumbledore. With a wave of his wand he vanished the various sweets lying about. He left the one in Harry's hand alone, but Harry didn't waste any time before popping it into his mouth.
"Draco and I have formulated a plan," announced Dumbledore. "He has quite rightly pointed out to me that allowing Lucius Malfoy to retain governor's rights is simply unacceptable. As long as he has those, Voldemort will seek to use them, which will put Remus in an increasingly untenable position. Therefore, we will use the Yule Ball as a pretext to eliminate his status as a school governor."

"The only drawback," said Draco with a vicious smile, "is that it's not the real Lucius Malfoy losing his position."

Harry would be sorry if Remus couldn't come to the castle whenever he liked, but he knew that the others was right. That was a dangerous situation for him. There was no telling what Voldemort might demand, but it was predictable what he'd do to Remus if his demands weren't met. "So what's the plan?"

"We have to get 'Lucius' to do something unacceptable for a school governor," said Draco. "And yet it can't be anything that would get him in trouble with the Dark Lord. Er, Voldemort. So I'm going to provoke him into making some nasty threats toward Muggleborns. Public threats . . . that ought to be enough for the other governors to sack him."

Harry frowned. "But your father's always been nasty that way. It took threatening the other governors before for them to sack him. And even that didn't last very long--"

"Don't call him my father," snapped Draco. "I was disowned and glad of it."

"Sorry. Force of habit."

Snape held up a hand. "The specifics of the plan, Draco."

"Oh, that part's easy." Draco sat back in his chair, his hands relaxing on the armrests. "Hermione Granger is conveniently without an escort to the ball. I'll ask her to go with me."

Oh, God. Maybe Draco always had been a little bit attracted to Hermione, if he was coming up with plans like this.

Draco went on as if he didn't see Harry's glower at all. "I'll ignore Lucius at first, as if I can't abide his presence, but when she and I dance close enough, I'll decide to make a point and introduce her as my date. Lucius will become enraged that I'm involved with a Muggleborn, though no doubt he'll use a much coarser word. We'll brief Remus Lupin in advance, of course, to be sure he reacts appallingly enough to convince the other governors to sack him."

Harry's mouth dropped open, all thoughts of Draco's schemes forgotten. "What makes you think Voldemort won't punish him for that?"

"Because he can understand the outrage Lucius will feel at the thought of his only son sullying his pure wizarding blood."

"Maybe," said Harry doubtfully. "Your plan depends on Voldemort being somewhat rational, when in fact he's completely insane."

"Well, tell us your brilliant plan, then!"

"I didn't say I had one, I just said I was worried about Remus!"

"Harry," interrupted Snape. "If Remus Lupin did not know how to manage Voldemort, he would not still be alive."
"I was more worried about Crucio."

"There is no doubt that Voldemort punishes his followers when he should not. However, he has never yet gone beyond the point of no return. He is arguably more sane than Bellatrix Lestrange."

"That's just a bucketload of comfort," said Harry, and then flinched, because he was pretty sure he'd said something like that to Snape before, but in totally different circumstances.

"This plan is the lesser of two evils," said Dumbledore calmly. "Remus has been ordered to study the wards during the Yule Ball. Later, he will no doubt be asked to dismantle them in preparation for some sort of final attack. His failure in that case will spell his death. We must protect him from that eventuality, Harry."

"So to protect him we have to put him in danger," said Harry, his lips twisting.

"It's like choosing between the five Quidditch fans or the overweight man next to you," said Draco. "You can't do anything good. All you can do is the thing that's least bad."

Harry could see that. He still didn't like it. But what else was there to do? They couldn't leave Remus in the position of being asked to take down the wards someday.

"There is something else," said Dumbledore. "I would probably not discuss it with you, Harry, but your father insists that you do better with more information rather than less."

Harry swivelled his head to stare at Snape, who returned a bland expression.

"I will be prepared on Saturday night to switch Portkeys with Remus so that in case his activates for any reason, you will not be placed in any danger. The interesting wrinkle here is that now the challenge will be to allow him to Portkey with you, while still making it appear that we have done all in our power to protect you. Voldemort, of course, will not know that I have switched the Portkeys. Remus will report to him that I have developed powerful new spells that can influence the behaviour of another wizard's Portkey."

Harry took a moment to think that through. "So why does Draco need to provoke him at all, then?" His voice grew sarcastic. "Or is Portkeying me out of the Great Hall not enough reason for the other governors to sack him?"

"It is best in times of war to have more than one strategy in play," said Snape. "Consider your brother's ploy to be a contingency plan."

"All right." Harry brightened a bit. "So where are Remus and I Portkeying to?"

"Separate locations," said Snape in a tight voice. "Albus is constructing a complex Portkey. You will arrive in my quarters. Lupin will find himself in the Forbidden Forest and will Apparate out."

"Can't I have a few minutes alone with Remus before he has to report to Voldemort?"

"No."

"But--"

"No."

"Think about it, Harry," said Draco, no longer looking so relaxed. "Lupin will have to report in as soon as he Portkeys out. Otherwise, the timing will be suspicious. You know there are students
who will tell their parents what time he vanishes from the Great Hall."

"And too," added Dumbledore, "we must not forget that Voldemort is an expert Legilmens. It is best to allow Remus to stay in character. The less he has to hide, the better for all concerned."

"That's right," said Draco. "It's not like before, when you and he had a little chat in the castle. Then, he wasn't going to see the Dark Lord directly afterwards."

"Draco!" snapped Snape. "How many times have I told you to be careful what you reveal around Harry?"

Draco pursed his lips and looked in every way chagrined, but Harry wasn't buying it. He'd said that deliberately. To test Snape's reaction?

And speaking of Snape . . . Harry turned his full glare on the man. "You could have just told me that we don't want him to have memories of speaking to me, you know!"

"Perhaps I would like to think that you will respect my authority without needing an explanation at every turn of events."

"Oh, yeah. You care a lot about authority," snapped Harry. "Good to know that some things, at least, haven't changed. And as long as I need an explanation all the time, maybe you should explain what the fuck you thought you were doing ever letting Remus speak to me if it would put him in danger! What's wrong with you?"

"Harry, your language, really," said Dumbledore in a mildly scandalised tone. "This is not Severus' quarters where you apparently have leave to speak as you please."

"If you would be so good as to allow me to manage my own son, Albus?" Snape turned to Harry. "He is right, you know. Your language is disgraceful. You revert to foul words at the least provocation, these days."

Harry almost said, 'Fuck my language' like he had before, but he managed to hold the words in. Not because Snape said to, though. It was just that other things were a lot more important. "Let's not change the subject. Why would you have Remus speak to me when it means one more memory to hide?"

"Lupin has withstood Voldemort's Legilmency many times by now. His greatest weakness, however, is his ability to hide the immediate past. If he were to speak with you after the ball and not be summoned for several days hence, he would be able to Occlude adequately. When he spoke to you before, Voldemort was on the Continent and not likely to be in contact with Lupin for some time."

"It is not as though Remus must always stay in character in our presence," added Dumbledore. "How can he? He must report to the Order from time to time, as he has done in telling us about Voldemort's demands regarding the Yule Ball. He must periodically meet with Severus to have minute adjustments made to his Polyjuice potion or to renew his Mark."

Draco had explained the process a bit. Now, however, in front of Snape, Harry had to pretend that he didn't understand at all. "Renew his Mark?"

Dumbledore waved a hand, ignoring the way Snape tensed. "Of course. Lupin is wearing a Dark Mark magically camouflaged to resonate with Lucius Malfoy's magical signature. Nothing less could possibly fool Voldemort."
Harry found himself wondering how they'd got a fake Dark Mark to put on Remus in the first place. Had they cut it off Malfoy's arm before turning him into a statue?

Or . . . or . . . weird. Harry had a feeling that it had been cut off of Snape's arm. But that didn't make any sense. Snape still had his, didn't he? Harry hadn't seen it lately, but he could almost remember seeing it.

A vision flashed into his mind, this one so ridiculous that he immediately discounted it. There was not a frothing vat of spare Dark Marks lying about somewhere! And the Marks didn't scream at you when you took the lid off!

"I understand why it's not a good idea to talk to Remus," said Harry dully. Of course he understood. He'd never want to put Remus in any sort of danger. Sighing, he turned to Snape. "But I still think you wouldn't want to let me no matter what."

"He did let you talk to him, just a couple of months ago," said Draco.

That time, Snape actually growled.

"What?" asked Draco. "He already knows about it. I just mentioned it. Personally, I think you should tell him why you thought it was so important he speak with Lupin. The exact reason, Severus--"

"Stop talking, now," said Snape.

But it was too late, of course. Probably that was exactly what Draco had intended. "What's Draco talking about?"

"The better question would be, how many lines should he have to write?"

"Not ten thousand," said Harry without thinking.

Snape gave him a quick, assessing glance.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore chuckled. "Oh now, you mustn't blame Draco too much, Severus. I suspect he's merely reacting to my wishes, expressed that night when I left you alone with Harry with instructions to discuss Samhain." The headmaster suddenly peered over the top of his spectacles, his gaze pressing into Harry's. "Your father did tell you about it, I hope?"

"Albus," said Snape, sighing. "I told you I did."

"Ah, but you have been known to fib at times." Dumbledore's jolly tone said more clearly than words that all had been forgiven. "On your attendance reports, to cite but one example of many. Why, I could go on and on. Life among the Slytherins is never dull!"

"He told me," said Harry baldly. Just in case there was more to know than Snape had said, though, Harry added, "He said that he held me down while Lucius Malfoy poked me with needles. But that was necessary for the Portkey. He obviously feels bad about it, but he was just trying to rescue me, so there's really no need. Was that it?"

"Oh yes, that was it. I'm proud of Severus for telling you. I hope you realise by now, he does not care to show much emotion, but--"

"Could the two of you stop discussing me as if I'm not here in the room?" asked Snape, a few stray tendrils of hair blowing upwards with the force of the question.
Harry glanced once at Snape, then gave Dumbledore his full attention. "What did you tell Draco to do, exactly?"

"It was hardly a case of exactly, my boy. Draco and I had a lovely discussion that night, indeed we did. Concerning all manner of things both magical and mundane. And I might have mentioned over my third glass of Ogden's that I was relieved to know that Severus would at long last tell you the truth about Samhain, and that if there were, perchance, any other little tidbits of the past that would help you get to know him better, why, I would hope that Draco, being his son as well as your brother, could find it in his heart to encourage poor Severus to overcome his reluctance and speak freely, in the hopes that--"

"That your sentence will someday find an end?"

"Now, Severus. No need to be snide--"

"You know why I do not speak freely!" said Snape through gritted teeth. "It is for his benefit!"

"And not your own?" Dumbledore reached up to adjust his floppy hat, which was nearly falling off.

"Of course his own," said Draco. "Severus would rather Harry think he's perfect, but--"

"No risk of that," muttered Harry.

"Draco!"

"Oh, you know you're just embarrassed. You don't want Harry to know how dim-witted you can be sometimes--"

"Silencio mutus!"

Harry gaped at the wide bandage that suddenly appeared to cover Draco's lips. Draco began tugging at it, but that was no use. It looked stuck for good.

Dumbledore sighed. "Severus, really."

"Will you hold your tongue?" asked Snape in a deep, dark voice. A voice that promised that for all he might remove the gag, he wasn't done with Draco.

Draco frantically nodded, making abortive little noises that made Harry think that behind the gag, his lips were also glued together.

"Finite."

Draco snatched up a cloth napkin from the table next to him and spat into it, making an awful noise, glaring at Snape the entire time.

"I decline to be further embroiled in this familial spat," said Dumbledore in a severe tone, though with twinkling eyes. "Severus, you might consider granting the concept of 'quality of life' a trifle more importance. I do think it would be good for Harry to know you better, foibles and all."

Draco looked like he might say something about those "foibles," but he decided to hold his tongue.

Good thinking, Harry decided. Snape's next spell might remove that tongue if Draco wasn't more careful.
"I will leave you three gentlemen to it." Dumbledore waved his wand, causing all the vanished sweets to reappear. That made Harry wonder if they'd been there all along, only concealed. "Oh yes, and one more." An assortment of squat, striped chunks of liquorice appeared just alongside Snape's left elbow. "In case any of you has need of sustenance."

There was one last twinkle of blue eyes, and then the door was gently closing after Dumbledore.

"Meddlesome old--" Snape cut himself off, glared once at the pile of liquorice, and with a long-suffering sigh, finally popped one in his mouth.

"So, what was this dim-witted thing you did?" asked Harry brightly.

Snape pressed his lips together so tightly that it reminded Harry of a photo he'd seen in a Muggle textbook once. Some American president used to do that . . . Harry had no idea which one.

"Quality of life," prompted Harry. "Look, knowing you better is making a lot of difference to that. It was seeing you . . . uh, unguarded that night when I came back to talk to you that . . . Look," he said again. "After I saw you like that, I knew you were human. Which sounds stupid, but trust me, I only knew it in the abstract before then. This'll be more of the same. I'd love to hear about something stupid you did."

Draco suddenly made a choking noise and tried to pretend it was a sneeze.

"Don't you think a boy should know his own-- uh-- uh--" There was no way that Harry could finish that question. He wished he hadn't even started it, even though he had a feeling that he'd said something like that at least once before.

"Friend?" asked Snape after a long moment of silence. His voice was dark, but not nearly as dark as it could have been.

"Yeah, that." Harry cleared his throat. "I'm sure it's one of those exceptions Dr Goode would approve, sir. Severus."

"Ah, the good doctor." Snape steepled his fingers together. "Perhaps a trade is in order. I will disclose my dim-wittedness, as Draco so elegantly put it, and you . . . you will agree to visit with Dr Goode at least once during the coming holiday. It's not lost on me that you haven't had an appointment with her in some time."

"I thought she didn't tell you about my sessions," said Harry hotly. "She swore she wouldn't say a word, and look here she is blabbing that she left it up to me to decide the schedule, and I've been busy!"

"There was very little blabbing involved. Or do you think that in the interests of patient confidentiality, she should bill me for sessions that never transpired?"

Oh. Oh. A hot wash of shame spread upwards from his collar, making Harry wish for a cooling charm. And no wonder. He felt horribly embarrassed. So much so that he had to look down at the floor. Snape was paying for his therapy! Snape was paying for his therapy!

Even though the answer was obvious by then, Harry just had to ask. "You're paying for my therapy?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I should have . . . damn it! I should have thought of that on my own!"

"I don't see why," said Snape in a bemused voice. "You aren't used to having a parent."
That was putting it mildly.

"Can I . . ." Harry gulped. "I don't like that idea, sir. No offense. Do you think you could just owl me the bills so I could take care of them?"

"No, I don't think I could do that."

"But--"

"Would you like to fund your own Christmas present, as well?"

Harry blinked. "Huh. Have we had this conversation before, or something? Because that sounded . . . almost spooky, it was so familiar."

"We have had similar conversations before." Snape gave him a thin, tight smile.

"Well, it's just embarrassing, you paying for something so completely, er, personal, and--"

"Harry," interrupted Draco. "Shut up."

"But--"

"He's our father! Now, shut up!"

Harry did, mostly because Draco had an angry gleam in his eye that said he wasn't too far from casting *Silencio mudus*, himself.

"Perhaps an amusing anecdote is in order," said Snape after a moment. "Though I will still ask you, Harry, to consider speaking with Dr Goode during the holiday. Now, as to your comment from before, that you will know me better for knowing about my mistakes. It so happened that you said a number of things over the course of the summer, and earlier this year, which caused me to believe . . . that is, I was certain you had indicated that you were . . . romantically inclined toward your own gender."

Harry was glad he hadn't reached for a sweet, because he'd probably have choked on it. "Excuse me?"

"I believe you understand me." Snape's voice was stiff, like he was wary of Harry's reaction.

"Yeah, I believe I do. You thought I was gay?"

Snape inclined his head.

Now Harry had a new reason to be glad he hadn't reached for a sweet. He felt like he might sick up. And Snape called this an amusing anecdote, did he? "Did I spend sixth year radiating gayness, or something?"

"Not at all. You made a few offhand remarks about romance in general, and I misinterpreted them."

"I'm taking Luna, not Luther, to the ball, you know!"

"Yes, I do know. The fault for the misunderstanding was mine entirely, and when you tried to correct my misapprehension--" Snape coloured. "I mistook *that* for defensiveness."

Harry peered closely at the man. "Do you still think I'm gay? Or suspect it, or--"
Snape shook his head.

Harry turned to Draco. "What about you?"

Draco laughed. "If Severus had mentioned the matter to me, I could have told him that we stayed up late talking about girls. But he didn't mention it to me, so he ended up making an absolutely massive fool of himself--"

"That will be quite enough, Draco." Snape laid his hands in his lap. "So, do you feel you know me better, Harry?"

"I suppose." The truth was, Harry wasn't sure. That story was so strange that it would take him a while to wrap his mind around it. And there was something about the whole thing that didn't make sense. Something besides the fact that he couldn't imagine how Snape had got such a weird idea into his head. "Um . . . what did any of that have to do with Remus? You said I got to speak to him because of this, but . . ."

"Ah. Of course." Snape ate another piece of liquorice. "I thought you were in denial about your sexuality and that speaking to a gay man would help you come to terms with your preferences."

It took a second for the penny to drop. "Remus is gay?"

"Yes."

"I find that a great comfort, really," said Draco in a contemplative voice. "As beautiful as my mother is, Lupin wouldn't find her attractive."

"We had better hope that's not why she went abroad," retorted Snape. "Because 'attracted' or not, Lupin had a role to play. If Narcissa suspects that the man living in your manor is not her husband, the results will not be pleasant."

"I know that, all right?" Draco shuddered and set aside the sweet in his hand. "But I was relieved when she left. Though a word now and again would be nice. But I can't stand the thought of her doing that."

"All part of growing up," said Snape, leaning over so that his long arm could reach to Draco's hand. He gave it a short squeeze and then withdrew.

Harry blinked, and then blinked again, because he was not jealous of that affectionate little gesture. He just . . . wasn't.

But neither did he understand why his eyes suddenly felt dry and a little achy.

"Shall we Floo down to my quarters?" asked Severus in a voice that was so casual, it had to be deliberately so. "I do believe that the two of you still owe me a game of Wizard's Scrabble. Or does Draco have another essay he's neglected to turn in on time?"

"Harry should be the one you use that gagging spell on," muttered Draco. "You're never going to let me live that one down."

"Well, you are a seventh-year, not to mention a prefect, and your father is a professor and your head of house, so what did you expect?"

"A little consideration? A little understanding that I'm dealing with a great deal of stress!" Draco shot to his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets. "I miss Rhiannon! I miss her like you wouldn't
believe, and I want to take *her* to the ball, and-- and--"

He turned his face away, but not before Harry had seen it crumpling.

So then, maybe Draco really *was* just friends with Hermione, and he *had* decided to take her to the ball only because it would serve as a way to make Lucius cause a scene.

"Wizard's Scrabble and a nice bottle of wine, I think," murmured Snape. "You do need to relax."

"Uh--" Harry had been careful not to tell anybody about Snape getting drunk, but this was different. "Do you think you ought to be teaching us to drown our troubles in alcohol, sir? Severus?"

"I think that alcohol in moderation presents no problem. Now, shall we?"

It was then that Harry realised he'd never yet given Snape an answer. Probably Snape thought he'd find a way to say 'no.'

Harry wondered if it was wrong to take some kind of perverse joy in proving the man wrong.

"Sure," he said, stepping over the Floo and helping himself to the powder on the mantle. "Severus Snape's quarters!"

As the emerald flames began to spin him away, he saw Draco grabbing a handful of Jelly Bellies from a floating crystal bowl.

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"It's still too short," said Hermione as she waved her wand at the hem of Harry's dress robes. "Boys, honestly. No girl would simply assume she could wear a ball gown from three years ago."

"It doesn't seem like three years ago to me."

"True." Hermione finished the lengthening charm and stood back to survey her work. "That should do. But be careful when you put them back on later tonight. The fabric's stretched a little thin. Charms can only do so much."

Harry craned his neck to look at the cloth covering his arse. "It won't split while I'm dancing or something, will it?"

"No, I was careful not to thin it out there." Hermione tucked her wand away and smiled. "Now you can relax for a few hours, I suppose. Some of us have a date with Sleakeasy's."

"Some of us have a date with *Malfoy*," muttered Ron from behind the Quidditch magazine he was reading.

"His surname is Snape, as you well know," retorted Hermione. "And I don't see why you should care who I go the ball with, Ron Weasley. You and *Lav-Lav* will have a wonderful time, and so will Draco and I!"
She flounced out of the room, her robes rivalling Snape's, they billowed so much.

Harry was quick to follow her, pulling her down a side corridor and casting a privacy spell. "I thought you and Draco were going as friends."

"Oh, we are." Hermione smile was razor-sharp. "But Ronnie-wonnie with the teeny weenie doesn't need to know that."

"Hermione!"

"Sorry."

She didn't look it. "I can't believe you said that!"

"It's no worse than what he says about me!"

"Yeah, it is!"

"You just think that because you're a boy. Penis-obsessed, every last one of you."

Harry wished that didn't make him blush. He wasn't, was he? Not too much, anyway. Trying to cover his embarrassment, he leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "That's pretty cynical."

"Maybe." Sighing, Hermione looked left and right despite the privacy ward. "Draco's in love with Rhiannon, Harry. He's almost sick with it sometimes, but he tries not to let it show. And I'm not in love with anybody, and not likely to be for a long, long time. But at least one good thing has come out of the whole mess. We're friends now. Good friends, even."

"All right."

"Remember it when you see me dancing with Draco. I don't want to have the conversation fifty times." Hermione smiled that razor expression again. "But as I said, no need to clarify anything with Ron. It's none of his sodding business, anyway. Now, I have to go make myself beautiful. Or try, at least."

"You're beautiful!"

"As beautiful as Luna?"

Harry felt himself colouring again.

"Are you going with her as just friends?" teased Hermione.

"She's beautiful on the inside," said Harry, trying for some dignity.

Hermione shook her head. "Don't ever tell a young lady that, Harry."

"That came out wrong. I think she's beautiful on the outside too," said Harry desperately. "I just meant-- you said all boys were, you know, and I didn't want you to think I was thinking with my . . . er."

"I should stop teasing you. You clearly can't keep up."

Harry stuck his tongue out and cancelled the privacy ward. "Go and do your hair."
The floor of the Great Hall was covered with snow that whisked itself away from your feet as you danced. Small round tables dotted the area surrounding the dance floor, each one boasting an ice sculpture of a famous witch or wizard.

Luna beamed as she grasped his arm and gazed about, her eyes wide.

Harry felt his heart give a little skip and a hop. "Beautiful" didn't even come close. Luna seemed to shine with the kind of radiance that came from an inner peace that nothing could disturb, not even the sidelong glances her ball gown was getting.

Harry didn't care. She'd given him a boutonnière when he came to pick her up at Ravenclaw. True, it was made from the end of a cucumber which she'd artfully carved to look like a rose in full bloom, but that was fine with Harry. In fact, he thought he liked it a lot better than any run-of-the-mill flower some other girl might give him, and if Luna wanted to wear a dress that looked sort of like an upside down ice cream cone -- two scoops -- then that was just fine with Harry.

"Prenglies helped to decorate," she said after a moment. "See there, the way the branches on the spell-trees are almost dancing? It's the Prenglies, sitting on them to enjoy watching the ball after all their work."

Harry wondered if she could actually see the creatures she was always describing. Then he decided that it didn't matter. "The Prenglies did a good job."

"Oh, they always do." Luna stroked a few fingers over the corsage Harry had given her. "I wish I'd worn my radish earrings to go with this."

It was news to Harry that radishes and artichoke blossoms went together. He'd been nervous about the corsage. Average flowers wouldn't really suit a girl like Luna, but neither did he have the nerve to give her something made of vegetables. Luna was the one with that sort of courage, the kind that didn't care what anybody thought. Hell, the kind that didn't notice what anybody thought.

He'd gone looking in Greenhouse Three for something Luna might appreciate, and that was when he found out that if you didn't pick an artichoke, it produced an enormous, spiky-looking flower like nothing Harry had seen before. Harry wasn't sure if there was some magic involved, or if all artichokes bloomed like that, or even if finding an artichoke blossom in December had something to do with charms.

He just knew that the gigantic purple flower would be perfect for Luna, no matter what colour gown she decided to wear.

As it turned out, her dress was lime green trimmed with silver.

"It matches my gown!" she'd exclaimed when he pinned the corsage to the bodice, his hand shaking because he was being so careful not to brush it against anything he shouldn't.

It hadn't helped when Luna leaned over funny to get a better look at how the flower looked against her dress, and she'd pressed something soft and round against the side of his palm. He didn't think
she'd noticed.

But he had.

"Dance?" he asked now, relieved that this was nothing like the last Yule Ball at Hogwarts. He wasn't a Champion this time, expected to take the floor first while everybody watched him trip over his own feet. And the music playing wasn't a waltz. Not that Harry recognised it. But there was no reason why he should. Professor Burbage had a pile of record albums sitting next to an old wind-up gramophone, and was renewing spells every few minutes to make sure the magical amplification was at the right level.

All Harry could think was that she had strange tastes in music, but even the screeching, out-of-tune, electric guitars playing some kind of free-form composition were loads better than a waltz.

"Oh yes," said Luna, taking his hand and trailing after him until they reached the middle of the dance floor. Harry felt better there, lost in the crowd.

He started to swing his arms and hips, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet like everybody else was doing, but that didn't last long. With a little sigh of happiness, Luna stepped forward and folded herself into his arms, beginning something like a waltz only much, much more cozy.

With her pressed up against him like that, Harry suddenly didn't mind the waltz at all.

He did mind the stares, but then he started thinking about how soft and curvy she was, and how her hair was sparkling with some kind of glitter that reminded him of the glowing person she was inside... and that was the end of that. He didn't think about anybody else until the clanging rock music came to a sudden stop.

"You dance beautifully, Harry," said Luna as she executed a little curtsy, the bottom scoop of her upside-down ice cream cone dress compressing with the motion.

"Thanks--"

"Nice waltz, Potter," sneered Zabini as he strolled past with a girl Harry didn't recognise on his arm. A fifth-year, maybe.

"Oh, he's just jealous of your cucumber," said Luna once he had passed.

"Are you ever going to tell me what the cucumber means?"

Luna giggled and hid her face. "You shouldn't tease like that, Harry!"

Draco was suddenly at his side, Hermione on his arm, his whole stance radiating tension.

That wasn't too hard to understand. When Harry followed his gaze to the huge double doors draped in icicles for the ball, he saw Lucius Malfoy framed in the entryway, his chin lifted high, a sneer on his lips as he strode forward, tapping his snake-headed cane against the floor.

"Ouch!" said Luna, and that was when Harry realised that he was gripping her too hard. It was a wonder he hadn't burned her, because his hands felt like flames were lighting them up from within, like he wanted to release something through his fingers, something hot and sudden and vicious.

And Lucius would deserve it, too--

*Draco, sitting on a bed, but not the one in the Snape's quarters or his own. He was prodding at a*
Harry tried to take the box away. It wasn't Draco's to open, but Draco opened it anyway and inside . . . inside . . .

"Harry!" said Draco sharply. "Not here. Not now."

A white light seemed to blind him for a second while the memory snapped away from him like a rubber band. The burning behind his eyes faded. His hands itched, but weren't on fire like before.

"Yeah." His voice sounded like he'd been screaming for hours, so Harry tried again. "Yeah. Uh, sight of him, you know."

Luna's hand on his arm was warm and comforting as she rubbed his sleeve in slow figure-eights. "Oh, I know. His hair is such a bright white. It hurts my eyes, too."

Harry stared for a second. But then he put it together: his blinding had been public knowledge, but not the precise details. The newspapers had reported him abducted by Death Eaters on the orders of You-Know-Who. The fact that Lucius Malfoy had personally wielded the needles, though? Luna probably didn't know.

"Draco's hair is the same colour," he said, trying to get his bearings. Damn it, Snape had been right. That wasn't Lucius striding forward, but what had Harry done but forgotten that, straight away.

Not Lucius, he told himself. Not Lucius, not Lucius, not Lucius.

Strange how the litany reminded him of thinking Not Remus at some point. No telling when, though.

"Draco's hair isn't the same colour at all," said Luna, cocking her head to one side. "It has a different quiddity."

"Harry," said Hermione in a low voice. "All right now?"

"Right as rain."

Dobby will sick up and be right as rain, Harry Potter, sir!

Harry shook his head to get rid of the voices inside it. It was getting confusing having impressions flood in that might or might not be actual memories. Though he didn't doubt that his reaction to the sight of Lucius Malfoy had been telling him something. He didn't just know about Samhain because he'd been told. He knew it inside, too.

"Another dance, I think," said Draco, his voice turning vicious. Harry wasn't sure if that was because he was beginning to play his part, or if he just felt that way when he thought of his father. Probably both. "He's pretending not to see me, but trust me, he sees me."

Hermione fluttered a hand to her throat like an old-fashioned heroine-in-distress. "But . . . but he won't approve, Draco! Not of you dancing with a Muggleborn. Should we antagonise him, do you think?"

God, her acting was horrible.

"I don't care if he chokes." Draco's acting was a lot better, but then, he wasn't acting. "Perfect," he added when the slow strains of a ballad began to echo around them. He flashed Hermione a smile that was positively sinful. "A slow dance."
Hermione moved into his arms without hesitation. Good thing, too. Harry wasn't sure he could take another "but what about Lucius" routine.

"So what's quiddity, anyway?" he asked as he began to sway with Luna pulled close against him.

"Hmm? Oh, essence, spirit . . . but not quite. It's more like . . . whatness."

"It's a real word?"
Luna wriggled against him. "I only use real words. I thought you knew that."

That wriggle . . . suddenly her lips looked closer than before, and definitely pinker.

Realising that he was about to kiss her, right there on the dance floor where anybody could see, Harry cast about for something to distract him from wondering if her lips were as soft and plump as they looked. The sight of Snape standing on the edge of the dance floor, his eyes tracking both Harry and Draco, gave him an idea.

"Quiddity's a good Scrabble word. Do you play?"

What was he thinking? She was a Ravenclaw. Of course she played.

"A bit."

"Would you like to come down for a match, sometime?"

"Come down?"

"To Snape's quarters. You and I could team up against Snape and Draco."

Luna's voice took on a wavering, confused quality. "But Harry . . . I already know them."

"Know who?"

"Your family.".

"What's that got to do with Scrabble?"

She went pink, which should have looked terrible with her lime green dress, but somehow didn't. "Well, when a boy invites a girl home, it's either to introduce her to his family or to hunt dinglewhoppers together, and I didn't think that dinglewhoppers could live underground . . ."

Oh. Oh. Harry pulled her closer and dropped a kiss on top of her hair. "No, no dinglewhoppers. But yeah, I wouldn't mind introducing you properly. As my . . . er, girlfriend. But I don't really think of Snape's rooms as home, you know. Even if I used to, I just--" He moved back and gave a little shrug. "I'm working on being friends with him."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Harry bristled. "Are you going to be another person who tells me that I ought to just accept him as my father?"

Confusion, again. "I was just sorry that being friends with him was work."

"It's not too bad, so far." Harry twirled her around a couple of times and wondered why asking her to the ball had been so easy compared to this. "Um . . . you never did say anything about being my
girlfriend."

"I'd have to stop giving you cucumbers." She said that like it was a significant problem.

"I can live without cucumbers."

"Well . . . I think I'm allergic to dinglewhoppers, but other than that . . ." She smiled up at him. 
"Yes."

"Brilliant." It was all Harry could do not to look for mistletoe so he could have an excuse to kiss her. "Um, well--"

Her smile turned into a sunbeam. "If you're at a loss for words, you could always ask me to dance."

"But we are dancing."

"You can still ask me."

Harry smiled, pulled her close, and did just that.

"Could I have some moral support from my brother?" asked Draco, stopping at his side. "Because I think it's time I gave a certain ex-father of mine a piece of my mind."

Harry almost gulped. Part of him didn't want to get any nearer to Lucius Malfoy, even if it was really Remus wearing his skin. But Remus wasn't the only one here with a role to play. Anything Harry could do to make his subterfuge more successful . . . well, Harry would do it.

Then it struck him that Draco didn't look his usual impeccable self. His eyes were shot through with fine, red lines and the skin around them was a little puffy. Like he'd been holding back tears. 
"You don't want Lucius to see you looking . . . er, upset," he murmured. "Um, Hermione, do you know a charm that will--"

She flicked her wand, whispering an incantation.

"I'm not upset to see him," said Draco, lifting his chin. "It's time I gave him a piece of my mind. I was entirely too passive during the expulsion hearing and then that time in France, I didn't get get ten seconds to say what I really thought, and--"

"Draco," interrupted Hermione. "You're not supposed to tell Harry that sort of thing." She turned to Harry. "He's upset--"

"Not about Lucius!"

"Then what?"

"It's stupid." Draco's nostrils flared. "Forget about it."
Hermione laid a hand on his arm. "Oh, Draco. It's not stupid at all. It's very, very human."

"I wish I wasn't, sometimes." He took a deep breath and arranged his robes into elegant folds. "I'm ready to see him."

Snape had made his way through the dancers by then. He came to a halt beside Draco, and began to play his role. To perfection, Harry had to admit. If he hadn't been in on the plot, he'd have believed every word.

"You have that look in your eye, Draco."

"Hallo, Severus. Enjoying the ball? You must be; I saw you dancing with Professor Burbage and--"

Snape stepped closer, his dark gaze boring into Draco's. "The issue at hand is what you're planning to do."

"If you must know, I thought I'd have a word with Lucius."

Snape looked briefly at Hermione. "You thought you'd throw your choice of companion in his face. Are you sure that's wise?"

Hermione put on her wavering voice again, but at least she wasn't fluttering her hand this time. "Maybe this is a bad idea, Draco. I don't care what he thinks, and you shouldn't either."

"I don't care what he thinks. I just want him to know that he lost," said Draco in a low, intense tone. "He lost me, and not just because I'm Severus' son instead of his. This isn't a matter of practicality, that I'm safer with the Light than the Dark. He's lost me beyond that, because I don't share his most important value any longer. In fact, it makes me sick. He has to know that!"

Without waiting for Snape's permission, Draco began to stride forward, Hermione's hand clasped in his. He wasn't exactly dragging her along, but she didn't look certain that this was the best idea she'd ever heard.

"Wand at the ready," murmured Snape as he moved forward with Harry.

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "Um . . . uh, you were right. About-- it's not easy to be in the same room with him, with, even knowing--"

He was going to say too much if he wasn't careful, but of course Snape was a lot more used to keeping to character even during times of great distress. He'd proven that on Samhain, hadn't he?

All of a sudden, Harry had ten times more respect than before for the way Snape had played his part that night.

Even if he couldn't really remember it.

"The headmaster and I will let nothing happen to you," said Snape without missing a beat. "But stay close all the same, Harry. Lucius Malfoy is nothing if not a tricky devil. Miss Lovegood, I would advise you to stay here."

In case Remus managed to use the swapped Portkey . . .

Harry nodded when it looked like Luna would come along anyway. She stopped walking and gave him an encouraging smile.

"She's my girlfriend," said Harry without meaning to. It was just that he felt like he was on his way
to meet his doom, which was stupid, stupid. That was Remus standing on the far side of the hall! Remus wouldn't hurt him!

But his fractured memory was mixing him up with the horror stories he'd been told.

There was no more time to think. They'd reached him, the headmaster appearing from nowhere to stand on Harry's other side.

"Good evening, Governor Malfoy," said Draco, executing a formal bow. "May I present--"

The sneer on Lucius' face turned ugly. "Don't you dare."

"My date, Hermione Granger," continued Draco, his voice smug with challenge. "I'm sure you remember the times I've told you about her. Most brilliant student in our year. Why, some have called her the cleverest witch of her age. And her parents are Muggles. Both of them. There's not a trace of magic anywhere in her family history."

Lucius' hand clenched on his snake-headed cane, his arm trembling a little like he was having a hard time not hexing Draco, or possibly Hermione. "To think that my son would have no care for the purest wizarding heritage in all Britain and France, and dally with the a girl who grew up not knowing the difference between a wand and a stick--"

"Oh, but I'm not your son, am I? Your decision, Lucius."

"Your blood is still mine, boy, and I'll not see it mixed with that of a filthy Mudblood! Her kind should be strangled at birth--"

"That will be quite enough," said Dumbledore.

"You don't know a thing about my kind!" cried Hermione at the same time. That was more like it, thought Harry. Hermione was no shrinking violet. "And you don't know a thing about Draco! He's a good person able to see a girl for who she is instead of who her ancestors were!"

"Why, you--" Lucius yanked his wand out of the top of his cane and began to swing it in an arc that promised pain and misery.

"That will be quite enough!" roared Dumbledore. "This is a school, by Merlin, and you are a school governor! If you cast against a student right in front of me, I will hex you myself! And then, I will see you rot in Azkaban!"

Lucius rammed his wand back into his cane, his whole manner screaming offended dignity.

Harry was convinced it really was Lucius even though he knew it couldn't, couldn't be. It was a relief, really, that if the Portkey plan worked, he wouldn't be going anywhere with this Lucius facsimile. Snape had known what he was talking about.

"I am not accustomed to Mudbloods speaking to me that way. She should be disciplined for disrespect toward a school governor."

The gleam in his eye said that he was thinking of the kind of discipline Filch was always muttering about. The chains-and-whips kind.

"You should be removed from your post for using that word at a school function." Dumbledore nodded as if he'd just had the idea. "I will be calling a special meeting of the Board of Governors, Malfoy. And this time, your money and your influence will be of no use. When the board sees you
draw your wand on a student, they will want to exclude you from Hogwarts grounds at once. Now, please go."

Lucius flicked his long hair back over his shoulders, his features twisting with contempt. "I am still a governor, Dumbledore. I have a perfect right to stay for the duration of the ball."

"Then stay," said Draco. "But stay away from me. Come on, Hermione. Let's find some mistletoe!"

Lucius' eyes glittered with outrage, but the rest of his face settled into a cold, uncaring mask. "Well. I did the right thing in disowning him, it seems. He is in no way worthy of the Malfoy name." His voice dropped an octave to become almost a purr. "And how are you this evening, Mr Potter? No glasses, I see. My, my, Severus has done well. The way I hear it, your eyes were shredded beyond all hope of repair."

Harry felt absolutely sick. Even though this was Remus saying these things. Even though Remus wasn't doing it to be cruel, but to save lives in the end, so that he could continue to bring vital information to the Order--

Harry knew all that. And still, he felt sick inside.

"Stay away from my son, Lucius," hissed Snape. "Stay away from both of my sons, or you will rue the day. Come, Harry. I do believe we need some air not fouled by the stench of evil."

Harry stumbled as Snape pulled him away, but he didn't care. He just wanted to be as far away from Remus as possible. When they were halfway across the Great Hall, he yanked his arm out of Snape's grasp, panting a little. "That was--"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I-- I just need a little air," gasped Harry. "And some time to think, I think."

"It is shocking indeed how vicious some people can be to their own flesh and blood," said Snape with a warning glance at him.

Right. Harry had to be careful what he said. What he really needed, he supposed, was a distraction. "I should get back to Luna. Do you see her?"

Snape glanced about. "She appears to be conversing with the lower branches of one of the spell-trees."

"She's talking to the Prenglies who helped decorate."

Snape rolled his eyes. "Indeed. Return to her, then." As Ron and Lavender walked past, Snape raised his voice a fraction. "I will keep watch."

Harry nodded, but hesitated a moment. "Sir. Severus, I mean. Um . . . thank you."

"There is no need to thank me." Snape reached out a hand, then drew it back.

"Well, thank you anyway. For, uh--" Harry wasn't at a loss for words because he had to keep Remus' secret. This time, the problem was that he didn't know how to talk to Snape. "Um, for knowing this would be hard, tonight." Embarrassed all of a sudden, Harry turned away before Snape could reply, and headed over to the tree Snape had indicated. He tried to give Ron friendly wave when he passed, but that was a wasted effort. Unlike Draco, Ron had found the mistletoe. He was snogging Lavender under it, his mouth latched onto hers like he was drowning and she was an
oxygen tank.

Except, Harry doubted that Ron would make those slurping noises with actual scuba equipment.

Harry craned his neck because he couldn't see Luna near the trees any longer. Where had she got to?

He started to take a zig-zag path around the massive room as he looked for her. Part of him kept track of Lucius Malfoy, too, but Harry tried not to give into his urge to give the man a wide berth. It was Remus, after all, and if possible, he was supposed to use the Portkey. That was important. It would make it seem to Voldemort that Lucius was loyal and had done his very best to bring him the head of Harry Potter on a platter--

*Or the eyes...*

And it would guarantee that Lucius couldn't stay on as a governor, which would free Remus from demands that he dismantle the wards. That was important, too, and Harry knew it.

So when he saw a table laden with shimmering fairy cakes, and Lucius just a few yards away from it, he gritted his teeth and marched on.

Snape, he noticed, was taking a diagonal course, cutting across the dance floor to reach him. That made Harry hurry more. Remus needed a chance to use the Portkey, and he wouldn't get one if Snape reached them first and had to put on a show of defending Harry.

Dumbledore might have been a problem, but he was busy talking sternly to Draco, from the looks of things.

Harry parked himself in front of a platter of cheese swirls and waited, his body so stiff it felt like it belonged to someone else. He didn't look to the right, where Remus would be. He just wanted this to be over.

*Come on, Remus. Come on, Remus--*

"*Reducto!*" shouted Snape.

But wait, that was wrong, wasn't it? How could he be attacking Malfoy? It was Remus!

Snape's spell arched through the air, striking Remus in the back, propelling him forward through the empty space separating him from Harry.

In the instant before Remus-as-Malfoy collided with him, Harry understood. Snape had seen his chance and taken it: a way to make sure that everybody, *everybody* saw it when Harry Potter was Portkeyed out.

There was no way that Malfoy could avoid being sacked after this. It would show up in every paper in wizarding Britain.

Remus crashed into him, his hand reaching out to grab hold of Harry's elbow. "This time, death," he whispered, and the world around Harry seemed to flash as the Portkey activated. He was sucked upwards into a great whirlwind, Remus beside him, the hall below them vanishing in a muddy mix of colours.

Harry screamed and struggled, and not just because it would help the whole thing look real if Voldemort saw this in Remus' mind. He also felt like screaming and struggling. He *hated* the way
Lucius' long hair was flung against his face, hated the man's grip on his elbow, hated Portkeys--

But at least this one wasn't going to deposit him in a filthy cemetery. He was going to arrive in Snape's quarters, safe behind the wards he'd heard about.

When he landed with a thump, though, he wasn't in Snape's rooms at all. Harry yanked himself to his feet and looked left, right, up, down for Remus. But no, he'd been sucked away at the last moment, and Harry was alone.

Alone in a stone room shaped like a pie slice, nothing in it except a narrow bed and a fireplace.

Literally, nothing else. There wasn't even a door.

Or a window.

Harry swallowed and told himself not to panic. He was a wizard, after all, and wherever he was, the Floo would provide a way out. There was even powder on the mantle.

He snatched some up, stepped into the fireplace, and tried to go to Snape's quarters, since that had been the plan.

The powder drifted to the grate like it was nothing but ash.

"Dumbledore's office!" Harry tried. "Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry! Hospital wing at Hogwarts!"

Nothing, nothing, nothing.

Apparating didn't work, either, and when he tried a blasting curse to get out, it bounced off the wall and began ricocheting around the room, nearly hitting him several times until he could call out a spell to cancel it.

Finally, when he'd tried everything else he could think of, most of which had made him dodge his own spells, Harry sat down on the edge of the narrow bed and looked at the stone walls imprisoning him.

There was no way out.

Wherever he was, he was well and truly trapped.

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:
"Interlude: Scenes from a Ball"

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Notes: See the flower in Luna's corsage here: [http://www.google.com/images?hl=en&source=imghp&q=artichoke+flower](http://www.google.com/images?hl=en&source=imghp&q=artichoke+flower)

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
"Severus," murmured Albus as he came to stand close by. "Your watchfulness is to be commended, but you know what Moody says. Constant vigilance. Yours would be improved by moving nearer to your sons."

"And how am I supposed to accomplish that?" Severus made a curt gesture toward the dance floor, where Harry and Draco were both occupied with their respective dates. Harry, surprisingly so. He wouldn't have predicted Miss Lovegood as the type to attract his son. But then, his ability to predict Harry's type had proven faulty in the extreme. "Plant myself in the middle of the dancers?"

Albus clucked his tongue. "For such a brilliant man, you do sometimes miss the obvious."

No, he didn't. "I do not care to dance."

Albus said nothing. He didn't need to; it was all there in his gaze. Rebuke, and behind that, disappointment.

The worst part was that Severus knew the headmaster was correct. Refusing to keep as close as possible to his sons, even if it meant dancing, was reprehensible behaviour. Severus had told himself that he would be distracted if he took to the floor, but he knew that wasn't really true. If he could brew potions of his own while he supervised detentions, or while he monitored dunderheads who were more interested in class rivalries than the contents of their cauldrons, he could certainly dance and keep his attention on Lupin.

Lupin, he had to admit, was doing a creditable job of pretending to be Lucius Malfoy. He prowled the edges of the dance floor, using the cane exactly as pretentiously as Lucius had. But never did it truly strike one as an affectation . . . no, Lucius had been more subtle.

And now, so was Lupin.

Once, Severus would have scowled at that. Now, he regarded him with grudging respect. And gratitude. How could he not be grateful when Lupin's acting talents -- and Severus' improved Polyjuice, of course -- could be instrumental in obtaining information in advance, information that might someday mean the difference between life and death for his sons?

Severus would do anything for his sons, including changing his opinion of Remus Lupin.

Including, even . . . dancing.

"Very well," he said with a slight nod toward Albus. He scanned the dance floor again, mentally measuring the distance separating Lupin from Harry. He didn't have as much concern about Draco at the moment, because Draco was keeping to the far edge of the dancing in any case, constantly adjusting his position to stay well away from Lupin.

Harry, on the other hand, was near the middle of the dance floor and looked oblivious to everything except his partner, who was wearing a gown so distinctive, so bizarre that it stood out like a convenient target.

A convenient, slow-moving target, since Harry and Miss Lovegood were clasped together and swaying while everyone else danced rather raucously.

Severus shuddered, dreading joining the throng, but Albus was right. It would behoove him to take
up a position far closer to Harry, so that any spies present could report to their Death Eater parents that Severus had taken the threat posed by "Lucius Malfoy" very seriously indeed.

Unfortunately, the first female professor he encountered when he turned to look for a partner was the last one he'd care to ask to dance. Charity Burbage. He'd known her for years and supposed she was pleasant enough in her own way, but he wasn't lost to the fact that she'd spent the last six months making sickeningly obvious overtures to him. Even now, she was gazing up at him with puppy-dog eyes. If she had a tail, she'd be wagging it.

He wondered if she realised that Severus saw animals primarily as things to be chopped up for potions.

Severus repressed his shudder this time. He did know how to behave at a formal function. Voldemort had seen to that during his first rise, teaching Severus all manner of things that would normally have been the province of a father. But Voldemort had known, hadn't he, how Severus had longed for a semblance of normality in his life, how Severus regretted how he'd allowed himself to be goaded . . . how his terrible action toward his own father somehow seemed less when he could regard the Dark Lord in a fatherly light.

He'd played Severus like a lute.

And now Severus was playing him, adding layer upon layer to the illusion that was Lucius Malfoy.

"Miss Burbage," he said in his deep, smooth voice, the one that could send shivers wafting across a classroom if he chose. "May I have this dance?"

"Mr Weasley," admonished Minerva. "This may be a Yule Ball, but we still expect Hogwarts students to uphold a certain standard of conduct!"

She might as well not have wasted her breath.

No matter, though. She hadn't taught several generations of hormonal youth without learning a few tricks of the trade.

Stepping close to the snogging couple, she stamped her foot several times in quick succession.

Weasley was the one to break away first. "Per-- Pro-- Professor?"

Minerva adopted her chilliest tone. "Mr Weasley. There are others wishing to stand beneath the mistletoe, and I'm quite certain that few of your classmates care to see you attached to your date for ten minutes at a stretch. Kindly do my eyes a favour and be more circumspect."

"Yes, Professor."

The boy grabbed Miss Brown's hand and tugged.
To Minerva's dismay, the young lady fell all over herself following after him. Did she have no self-respect? No sense of decorum or concern for her reputation? No understanding of the old adage that "a boy chases a girl until she catches him?"

Alas, it seemed not. But then, Lavender Brown wasn't the first silly girl she'd seen walk these corridors, and she wouldn't be the last.

She would, however, be receiving a stern talking-to on the subject of contraceptive charms. And she'd have to enlist one of the male teachers to do the same with Weasley.

Honestly, saving teenagers from themselves was a full-time job.

Minerva checked the time, and then reminded herself that it wouldn't do to count the minutes that remained before the holiday officially began.

Draco smoothed down his robes as the song came to an end. Exuberant dancing or no, he had to look presentable at all times during an official Hogwarts function. As Severus kept reminding him, he was a seventh-year prefect. "Strange how the song can have such disturbing lyrics and yet retain a musical feel that's almost . . . lighthearted, isn't it? If I didn't know better, I'd say that John Lennon was a wizard."

"I thought you were past that," said Hermione, frowning. "Muggles can be just as talented as wizards, Draco, in everything except magic."

"Oh, yes, I know that." And he did. The message had taken a long while to sink in, even after he'd begun to date Rhiannon, but he did understand it now. The Muggle Studies lessons had helped a great deal. Professor Burbage might not know what to do about her soft spot for Severus, but she did know how to amaze her students with impressive achievements of the non-magical world. "But he's singing about a girl who knows what it's like to be dead, which to my mind must mean he's been speaking to a ghost, and it was my understanding that non-magical ghosts are such flighty things that people without magic barely realise they exist."

"The song's about using psychedelic drugs, I think."

Oh. Draco hurriedly adopted a blank expression, because he hardly wanted anyone to guess that a couple of years back, he'd gone slumming--

Then his thoughts came to a screeching halt. Slumming? Perhaps, deep down, he wasn't as reformed as he'd thought. And that wouldn't do. Rhiannon would sense it, if he could ever get her away from her new boyfriend. Or-- oh, no. A terrible thought occurred to him. Had she already sensed it? Was that why she'd left him, because she'd known what he didn't, that he still harboured some terrible prejudices against her kind?

No, no, no. She didn't have a kind, she didn't. He had to get rid of these habits of thought. Damn Lucius for ever teaching him to think this way, for weaving it into his whole understanding of how
the world worked. It wasn't how the world worked! He was a human with magic, and Rhiannon
was a human without magic, that was all. He knew that, but sometimes it was a struggle to make
himself remember it.

"I tried some non-magical drugs a few years ago," he said casually as the next song started up.

Hermione looked perplexed, which, he had to admit, wasn't a very good look for her. Perhaps
because it was so unusual. "Oh . . . a few years ago? Where did you even get such a thing?"

"One of the older half-bloods in Slytherin set me up." Draco shrugged. "They were . . . well, after I
tried a couple of different ones, I still wasn't sure what the attraction was, but now I think I
understand."

Hermione stiffened in his arms. "Draco, drugs are very dangerous, very addictive substances, and
they are no sort of cure for . . ." She lowered her voice and stood on tip-toe to whisper in his ear.
"A broken heart."

"I didn't mean that they had any attraction for me, even considering that," said Draco, happy that
there was at least one person besides Severus who understood about Rhiannon. Harry didn't even
count for that, as he couldn't remember and had no idea what this was like for Draco, and Severus .
. . well, he did understand, but he wasn't the most emotionally available person in the world, was
he? But Hermione . . . she was someone that Draco could really talk to about Rhiannon.

Although, not in a public venue like this.

"I meant that non-magical drugs seemed sort of vapid to me, because even at the age of fourteen I
already knew how to get better effects with magic. But now I understand their appeal for the non-
wizard population. It's an attempt to find something magical in their world, too. Sad, really, that
that's all they have . . ."

Hermione smiled. "It is all right to say 'Muggle,' Draco."

"It's derogatory."

"My parents don't think so. Not all Muggles think alike."

"I prefer 'non-magical.'"

"But you say 'Muggle Studies' without a qualm."

Draco twirled her as the song came to an end. "I say that without thinking, I'm so accustomed to it."
He checked where Remus Lupin was, and then automatically looked for Severus and Harry, and
almost did a double-take. "Oh, Merlin. Severus is--"

He couldn't say it.

Hermione followed his gaze and jolted forward in shock, stepping on his foot. "Is that really him?"

"Yes," said Draco, almost choking.

If he'd ever sat down and listed Yule Ball situations in order of improbability, Severus Snape
dancing with Charity Burbage would have been in the top ten.

To tell the truth, Severus Snape dancing would have made the list all by itself.

"He's rather good," said Hermione in wondering tones.
"I can't watch." Draco saw that Lupin was prowling on the opposite side of the dance floor, and that Severus had placed himself between Lupin and Harry. That all looked in order. "Shall we get some punch?"

As Hermione nodded, he led her off the dance floor.

"So sweet of dear, darling Filius to flip the record for me, and keep the winding charm even," said Charity as she swayed to the beat of "Good Day Sunshine." She hadn't expected Severus to be such a fine dancer, though she supposed she should have. The way he could make his robes flare when he walked was proof he had coordination, control, and rhythm. "Do you recognise the music I chose?"

"Vaguely," he replied, frowning. "The Scarabs?"

Oh, how she loved his wry sense of humour. Though in many cases, like now, she wasn't quite sure whether Severus spoke in jest. That was just part of his dark, mysterious aura.

"Something like that." She tapped his shoulder when he seemed to be gazing off into the distance. "Severus?"

He seemed faintly irritated when he answered. "Yes?"

Well, she always had known that he was the brooding, melancholy type. She'd been daunted at first; he seemed to be a man that would never allow another human being to get close, except in the purely physical sense. Now, she knew that she'd allowed herself to be taken in by his harsh façade. He'd adopted those two boys and clearly doted on them. It had opened her eyes to the softer side of Severus Snape.

She only wished that Harry Potter were taking Muggle Studies so that she would have twice as many points of contact with him. When Draco had come to her during the summer and asked what he could do to get ready for the N.E.W.T. course, she'd been delighted. She'd hoped to build on that a little, to get to know Severus better.

That hadn't worked.

Or at least, she'd thought it hadn't. Now that Severus had chosen her out of all the available witches here . . . well, she always had known that it would take time. A great deal of time, to forge a closer relationship with a man like Severus.

"Draco is doing very well in Muggle Studies," she said now. "I've seldom had such an avid, eager student."

"It was my understanding that he recently missed an essay deadline."

"Yes, but that's only to be expected. He came to me with a great deal of misconceptions and must
do more work than the others just to stay afloat." She couldn't help but smile at the memory of the many, many times Draco had stayed after class to ask her questions. "He's very dedicated to learning the subject. He's a wonderful boy."

"He's intent on passing his N.E.W.T.," said Severus gruffly. "He wants to become an Auror."

"I got the impression that his interest was more personal."

"It is indeed." Was that her imagination, or did Severus' voice suddenly sound a little too smooth? But that made sense as soon as the man continued speaking. He was understandably defensive about his son's blood connections. "Draco is determined that others will not confuse him with Lucius Malfoy or the blood purist camp."

Charity glanced to the side. Yes, the resemblance was uncanny.

"Poor boy," she said softly. "Raised to hold such dreadful beliefs. You were very good to give him a home, Severus."

"Truthfully, it is he and Harry who have given one to me."

Charity nodded. "You know, Draco keeps asking for more Muggle cooking lessons, but there's simply no more time for that, not if I follow the N.E.W.T. curriculum. I'm sure you know how that is. Too much to teach and not enough days in the term--"

"I follow my own curriculum, not the Ministry's bastardised idea of a brewing sequence."

That was not the subject she was trying to drive the conversation toward.

"Yes, I heard you were at loggerheads with them--"

"They actually eliminated the Potions N.E.W.T. from most requirements and declared an O.W.L. from me to be sufficient," interrupted Severus. "Proving that dunderheads exist outside the classroom, I suppose."

"That's beneficial in a way, though. Aren't you only left with N.E.W.T. students who truly wish to study the subject?"

Her attempt to mollify the man did anything but. Severus actually scowled. "If not for Ministry idiocy, Harry would not have been able to change his timetable."

Oh. Charity had heard a little bit about that. For a day or two it had been the talk of the staff lounge. Harry Potter, unable to remember his adoption, had dropped Potions against the advice of both his father and the headmaster. "But things are better between you now, I think?"

Severus was staring over her shoulder again, keeping an eye on Harry, it seemed. He truly was a devoted father. "Yes, things are better."

Charity could have done with more detail, but cautioned herself that Severus was reserved at the best of times. Moreover, speaking of a relationship with an estranged son would be daunting for anyone. At least he'd given her a decent opening.

"Why don't I have all three of you over to dinner in my rooms after Yule?" she asked brightly. "It would give me a chance to share more about Muggle food with Draco."

"I don't think--"
"Oh, but do," she urged. "Think about it, Severus. You can let me know after the holiday."

At that exact moment, the song ended. Severus gave her an odd little formal bow, and turned away like he had twenty things to do in the next ten minutes.

Charity sighed, but told herself not to lose heart. She never had expected Severus to be easy.

"Mr Weasley," said Minerva in the strictest voice she could muster. "This is entirely inappropriate! Get out from under that table!"

Predictably enough, he emerged red-faced, and not just because he'd been in the throes of-- well. She didn't need to finish that thought. Suffice it to say that he was also red-faced because there were liberal smears of lipstick across his cheeks and forehead.

"We got a little carried away," he said, rising to stand.

"Miss Brown, you will come out from under there too!"

When they were both standing before her she crossed her arms and fixed them with her gaze. "This is a ball, not a bordello. Did I not make myself clear a few moments ago?"

"You said not to monopolise the mistletoe," said Weasley.

The nerve. The absolute cheek of teenagers, sometimes! "I should not have to spell this out," she said in a frosty tone, "but the two of you are behaving disgracefully enough that I will. The floor is not an appropriate venue for snogging. Tablecloth or not, you were putting on a shameful display and I will not have it. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor," mumbled Weasley.

The girl just looked at him with cow-eyes like he had the answer to all life's riddles.

"Now, that will be three detentions each, to be served with Mr Filch. Served separately, and if I have to speak to you again, I will do it in the presence of your parents."

That got through to him; he gulped.

Minerva gave them both one last baleful glare and stepped past them, almost colliding with Severus.

"Minerva," he said, far more quickly than he usually spoke. "Would you care to dance?"

She raised one eyebrow and stared. "I beg your pardon?"

"Dance. I believe you're familiar with the concept," he grated. "Rumour has it that every time Albus arranges one of these little fêtes, you tutor the Gryffindors until they've grasped the basics."
So . . . *dance* with me."

Her other eyebrow joined the first. "Perhaps you need some tutoring in how to approach a lady."
When she noticed Charity approaching him from behind, though, she understood. "Ah. You need tutoring in how to flee a lady."

Severus lowered his voice. "She wants to cook me *dinner.*"

He said it in the same voice others might use to complain about poison.

Minerva laughed. She couldn't help it. To be young enough to have problems of that sort . . . it did take her back. Taking Severus by the arm, she steered him a few feet around the edge of the dance floor to a beautiful witch of a more appropriate age than herself.

A witch who had, remarkably enough, proven tonight that she did indeed own a dress.

"Maura," she said pleasantly. "Severus needs a dance partner."

Shoving them together, she turned her back and dusted off her hands, considering that a task well-done.

"My apologies," said Severus, looking past her and toward the left. "I did not mean to impose."

She held out a hand, shaking her head slightly. "Don't be absurd. I understand why you need to dance." A quick glance to the side, where Lucius hovered, a malevolent light in his eyes, said the rest.

"Yes," said Severus, taking her hand.

She was as light on her feet as Severus remembered, he thought as he guided them deeper into the throng, toward both his sons. Draco and Miss Granger had taken a short break from dancing, but they were back on the floor now.

Maura, unlike Charity, didn't feel the need to fill every spare moment with chatter. She only spoke when she had something useful to say. Severus heartily approved of her restraint.

"Draco seems quite taken with his ferret," she said as a jangling sound about a bird ended, and a smoother, more crooning one began. "I do apologise, Severus, for my behaviour towards him. I should have at least admitted the possibility that he had grown beyond the hateful boy who tried to slaughter Buckbeak."

"You should be making your apologies to him, not me."

"I have."

"And for the record, he did not try to slaughter the hippogriff. He merely complained to his father,
who took matters too far."

"And he lingered outside on the fateful night, hoping for a chance to see Buckbeak beheaded."

Ah. Severus hadn't known that part. Remembering Draco as a spoiled thirteen-year old, however, he could well believe it. "My son's faults are legion and I am no stranger to them. I do not need you to point them out."

"I was pointing out how much he'd changed," said Maura lightly as she took his lead and changed direction on the dance floor. "As have you."

"Being thrown headlong into parenthood would change anyone."

"I wouldn't know. I thought once that I would, but . . . no."

Her tone sounded not just offhand, but deliberately so. As though someone had hurt her so deeply that she would never recover, but she was too proud to show it. A sudden suspicion gripped him. "Did some wizard in the States break your heart?"

*What little you had to break . . .*

"You might say that."

Severus suddenly wanted to smash something. Or someone. "His name?" he demanded, vocal cords taut.

"No name," said Maura in a distant voice. "We should speak of something more pleasant if we speak at all."

"Very well," said Severus, just as tautly.

After that, they danced in total silence.

"Draco?" asked Hermione. "Are you all right?"

No, he wasn't all right. He'd forgotten which song came next. He shouldn't have, not after all the times he'd listened to *Revolver.* It was Professor Burbage's favorite album, apparently voted third best album ever by some important non-wizarding publication named after rocks, and every time he'd gone to her for tutoring, she'd had it playing.

But he'd forgotten which song came next.

*The day breaks, your mind aches, you find that all her words of kindness linger on*

*When she no longer needs you . . .*

"Yes, fine, of course," he said to answer her. He needed to think about something else. Anything
else, no matter how insipid. Of course, his reaction to Hermione's gown for the ball was anything but. The colours alone were startling, let alone the cut. "I had no idea you cared for green and silver."

You want her, you need her, and yet you don't believe her when she says her love is dead
You think she needs you . . .

"My inspiration was a Christmas tree with icicles," said Hermione. "Not Slytherin."

"But icicles are white."

"Muggles put tiny strips of silver plastic on their trees to simulate icicles. I was thinking of those."

She says that long ago she knew someone but now he's gone, she doesn't need him . . .
Your day breaks, your mind aches, there will be times when all the things she said will fill your head
You won't forget her . . .

It was getting harder and harder to follow the conversation when all he could think about was Rhiannon. That song could have been written about the two of them. She didn't need him . . . but he wasn't ever, ever going to forget her.

"I learned last Christmas that non-magical people actually cut down trees to decorate," he said, desperately grasping after anything that could distract him, by then.

And in her eyes you see nothing, no sign of love behind her tears, cried for no one
A love that should have lasted years . . .

"Draco, what is it?" asked Hermione, squeezing his arm as they swayed together to the sad, sad song.

That was when he realised that his eyes ached, that all of him ached, that he was probably ten seconds from disgracing himself with real tears, and in front of Lucius!

Not the real Lucius . . . but it felt like it was.

For the first time then, Draco thought he had an inkling of what life these days must be like for Harry. The reality he lived in didn't seem quite real -- and Draco had the opposite problem.

He couldn't explain that to Hermione, not in public like this, but she wasn't asking about that, anyway.

"The song," he said quietly. "The lyrics."

"Ah."

"I can't . . ." He took a moment to think about what he wanted to say. "Hermione . . . it's time."

She understood at once and began acting her part. One fluttering hand on her breast, she gasped, "Are you sure that's quite wise?"

"Yes," said Draco fiercely. This was his chance to make a stand for what was right. He'd throw Hermione in Lucius Malfoy's face and wish it could be Rhiannon he was championing. And the fact that it wasn't Lucius inside that face didn't matter. Draco would feel like it was . . . and this was the closest he would ever come, wasn't it, to telling the man exactly what he thought of his
values, his ethics. "Harry's just over there. Let's tell him that it's time."

The scene with Lucius had been horrible, thought Severus as he steadied Harry afterwards. He'd rather have Draco at his side as well, but at least his other son wasn't alone; he was with Miss Granger.

All-in-all, a level-headed young lady, and better yet, one who was in on the plan -- for all he'd have to speak with her about her lamentable acting.

Halfway across the Great Hall, Harry began tugging his arm away. Severus let go at once, though he would much rather keep hold of Harry, who was breathing heavily and looked slightly ill besides.

"That was--"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I-- I just need a little air." He proved that by gasping several times, his mouth yawning widely. It was all Severus could do not to pull him home and administer an oxygen potion. "And some time to think, I think."

Before Harry could say that he could hardly believe that "Remus" would speak so savagely, Severus glanced at him sidelong and reminded him of the pretense they must maintain."It is shocking indeed how vicious some people can be to their own flesh and blood."

As if he couldn't bear to think on that, Harry began looking left and right, arching himself up in an attempt to see over the sea of heads and robes. "I should get back to Luna. Do you see her?"

Luna. Harry had called the young witch his "girlfriend" earlier, Severus remembered. He knew he should be flattered to have been included in such a confidence, but that feeling was overshadowed by two others. First, he knew that Harry had only let that slip because the appearance in the flesh of "Lucius Malfoy" had rattled him, and second . . . Miss Lovegood was so erratic that she would give any responsible father grave misgivings. She was no level-headed Hermione Granger. Witness her current behavior! "She appears to be conversing with the lower branches of one of the spell-trees."

"She's talking to the Prenglies who helped decorate."

Harry said that as if he believed it utterly.

Severus hoped he'd misunderstood, and Harry was merely humoring the young lady. He did his best not to roll his eyes, but suspected he'd failed. "Indeed. Return to her, then."

Ronald Weasley and some Gryffindor chit strolled past just then, linked arm in arm, the girl giggling and running her hands over Weasley's chest in a way that was, to say the least, indecorous. Ah, Lavender Brown, that was the chit's name. Lowest O.W.L. score he'd seen in the past six
years, but not surprising, coming from a girl who insisted on discussing love potions in every
essay. Since she was so very dense, Severus raised his voice and leaned toward stating the obvious
to Harry, but for ears all around. "I will keep watch.

Instead of leaving to find his date -- or girlfriend, as Severus supposed he would have to regard her,
Harry gave a brief, hesitant nod. "Sir. Severus, I mean. Um . . . thank you."

He was weary of being unintentionally knighted by his son, but the rest of Harry's comment was
even more disturbing. He didn't want thanks, of course he didn't -- and his Harry knew that. This
new one, this semi-stranger who was less familiar to him but no less loved . . . Severus reached out
a hand, wanting to feel connected to him physically, since any other way was so unlikely at the
moment.

But then he pulled his hand back . . . before Harry had any chance to reject it. "There is no need to
thank me."

"Well, thank you anyway. For, uh--"

Severus knew for what, and he didn't want to listen to this. It was painful, seeing this Harry who
believed he wasn't worthy of a parent's love and care, this Harry who was grateful for the slightest
consideration, the kind of consideration that any normal parent would provide without thinking
twice. He didn't interrupt, though. After weeks of the silent treatment, he knew better. A Harry
who was willing to talk, on any subject, was a gift to be treasured and protected.

"Um, for knowing this would be hard, tonight."

*Of course I knew. I know you . . .*

There was no danger that he would say that, though. Harry turned away before he could, his
footsteps taking him toward the area where Miss Lovegood had been talking to a tree.

Talking to a tree, honestly. Harry could do better.

Severus just hoped that the tree -- or the "Prenglies," Merlin forbid -- weren't talking back.

Minerva firmed her jaw when she spied the mistletoe from across the Great Hall. Weasley and
Brown, at it again, after she'd specifically warned them to desist!

She began to make her way toward them, weaving a zig-zag path through the dancers, giving the
snogging pair plenty of time to see her coming and break apart.

No use, that, though. They had eyes only for each other.

She was almost at the mistletoe when it happened.

"*Reducto!*" shouted Severus' voice from somewhere behind her.
Minerva whirled in time to follow the flash of the powerful spell as it flew through the air toward Remus Lupin, who had come to the ball as part of his deep-cover assignment. There was more to it than that, she knew. Albus had had that look in his eye, the one that meant there was a scheme afoot.

What that scheme might be, precisely, Minerva had no idea. If Albus had wanted her to play any part in it, he'd have enlisted her aid. The fact that he had left her out could only mean that Order was best served in this case if she behaved as her usual self.

Which she proceeded to do, hurrying forward.

Before she'd taken a full step, the situation got worse. Far worse.

"Lucius Malfoy" careened forward into Harry Potter, who was standing at the same refreshment table. There was a pause of half a second, and then, the unthinkable. They both vanished in a blast of magic that swept the Great Hall, melting all the snow underfoot.

But what scheme could call for Lupin to pretend to kidnap Harry? What scheme could call for Severus to attack Lupin?

Unless . . . all wasn't as it seemed, and the person who had paraded about as "Lucius Malfoy" wasn't Remus Lupin at all!

She held her wand to her throat and cast Sonorus.

"Albus!" she called out, "Harry Potter! He's vanished!"

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Notes: *Laskin's Bluff* is an original historical romance I've written, now available online. To read a summary, see what other readers have said, and preview the prologue and first chapter, go here: [http://tinyurl.com/aspenoriginals](http://tinyurl.com/aspenoriginals)

The song lyrics to "For No One" were written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Doors

For a long moment as Harry sat on the bed, trying to figure out what else he could do to free himself, it felt like the walls were closing in on him, pressing nearer and nearer until he couldn't breathe, until they would crush the air and the life from his body. No, even worse, it felt like only the stone walls all around stood between him and a fate too horrible to contemplate, a fate he couldn't even imagine, because he didn't know what was waiting for him out there. He just knew that it was going to be bad, very bad, beyond bad--

Harry gasped, raising both hands to his throat--

And then the sensation utterly vanished.

It was gone like it had never been, and at the same moment, it felt like a heavy iron door slammed shut inside his mind.

Harry breathed again, through his mouth and then through his nose. He didn't realise he was trembling until the quaking in his limbs abruptly stopped.

He decided then and there that he was being ridiculous. So he was trapped in a stone room with only a bed and a non-functioning Floo for company, and it didn't seem like magic would be the way out of here. There must be another way, then.

Harry jumped up from the bed and went to the far edge of the small room, where two walls met to form a sharp angle like the point of a slice of pie. He started there, crouching down on the floor and pounding his palm into the lowermost stone, and then the one above it, and the one above it, all the way up as far as he could reach. The last few stones were too high unless he levitated himself, but his Wingardium had never been powerful enough to lift himself.

Pity he didn't have those dark powers he'd heard described -- but then, if he still had them, he'd use them to blast his way out instead of pounding stones hoping for some sort of secret passage to open up. But it was the best plan he had, so Harry started over at the floor and began working his way up the second column of stones.

He'd made it one-third the way along one wall when a crackling noise interrupted him.

Harry whirled, wand at the ready and pointed at the Floo. A fire burned there where none had before, which could only mean--

In the next instant, the flames reared six feet into the air and a man appeared in their midst, the dancing flames obscuring everything but the sweep of his black robes.

Harry widened his stance, ready. Or as ready as he could be, in the circumstances. He didn't know who was coming through or what he'd have to survive to get through this in one piece.

The flames whooshed back down to the grate like some kind of magical vacuum-cleaner had sucked them away, and Harry saw that it was Snape stepping out of the fireplace.

He sagged with relief. "Professor! Oh, thank God. Can you get us out of here, can you--"

Anything else he might have said was cut off completely by what Snape did next. Taking two long strides to reach Harry, he stretched out his arms and gathered him into a close, firm, embrace.
Harry was so shocked that he almost yelped. Only Sirius had ever hugged him like this, unless Snape had done it before . . . but no phantom memory or impression swam up to answer the almost-question.

"Um--, um--"

He wanted to shove the man away.

He wanted to stay right where he was.

He wanted that hand stroking the back of his head to stop moving.

He wanted to lean into the touch so he could soak it up.

He wanted--

Before he could figure out what it was that he really wanted, another crackling noise broke the silence and the flames roared up again, Dumbledore stepping forth from them.

Snape didn't react the way Harry would have expected; he didn't jump away from Harry as if burned. He did unfold the embrace, though.

Harry was the one who leapt away, his wand drawn. He should have thought of this sooner, damn it. Snape must be an imposter. Someone who knew about the adoption, who thought that Snape was a lot more affectionate than he really was--

"Who the hell are you and why did you bring me here?" he asked, his narrowed gaze including "Snape" as well as the "headmaster." What was the plan, to make him think he was being rescued, to trick him into talking, revealing the Order's secrets before he was tortured or killed, or most likely, both?

"Ah. Very good thinking," said the wizard posing as Dumbledore. "You must be on guard for such things, my boy. Of course, of course."

The "my boy" just made Harry all the more wary. It was too Dumbledorish. The imposter would probably pop a lemon sherbet into his mouth next!

"Shut up," snarled Harry. "And answer me! Who are you?"

"It is rather difficult to both shut up and answer you," said the other imposter, proving that he'd studied Snape's wit, if not his mannerisms around Harry. "To assuage your concerns, perhaps I should mention that you called me 'Professor' when I entered. But we have an agreement that you will call me Severus, do we not?"

Harry gave that three seconds' thought. "Anybody who's seen us together lately could have deduced that."

The imposter, or maybe Snape, sighed. "Then I will humiliate myself in front of my employer by admitting that you once viewed a Pensieve memory of mine in which I was wearing . . . less than spotless undergarments."

Oh. Harry swallowed. He'd never breathed that story to a single soul, and he couldn't imagine that Snape had, either. Only the two of them knew. "I guess you are you, then. Sorry, sir. Um, Severus."
"And I will tell you that during your second year you were still concerned enough about your house placement to discuss it with the Sorting Hat," said Dumbledore, smiling a little. The smile died when he turned his attention to Snape. "Need I ask why you were showing Harry Pensieve memories involving any state of undress? It hardly seems appropriate."

Snape scowled, first at Harry and then more-or-less at the ceiling. "I was not showing it to him. I had taken it from my mind so that he would not see it."

Dumbledore's eyes weren't twinkling at all when he stepped toward Harry. "Harry. I thought you had outgrown such behaviour."

Harry couldn't believe they would waste time like this. "Can we just get on with the rescue? I couldn't floo out, but you both got in-- Oh, God. I hope we aren't all trapped here now--"

"Nobody is trapped. We are all still at Hogwarts," interrupted the headmaster. "I am very sorry that I didn't anticipate that the Portkey would take you to this particular room. It was never my wish to alarm you."

Harry blinked. "Your spell failed, sir? Yours?"

"It can happen," began Snape, but Dumbledore cut him off with a small shake of his head.

"Not this time, my boy. The Portkey was spelled to take you to Severus' quarters, and indeed . . . here we are."

"But these aren't--"

"Severus?"

Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest. For a moment it seemed he wouldn't answer. When he did speak, the words sounded like they were being dragged from him. "These are a portion of my quarters, Harry, separate from the rest."

Harry blinked again and looked around. "Why isn't there a door?"

"So I cannot be disturbed. Even the Floo is warded to that end, as you found out."

"Can't you ward your normal bedroom so you won't be disturbed?"

"My quarters are full of distractions."

Well, this room certainly wasn't. There was nothing to do here but sleep. There wasn't even a book to read as you drifted off. "So you come here to . . . meditate, something like that?"

Snape shrugged, a stiff motion that said more clearly than words how uncomfortable he was with the conversation. "Something like that, yes."

Somehow Snape had never much seemed like the type of person who would meditate, though there was all that "clear your mind" rubbish he'd tried to teach Harry.

Or maybe it wasn't rubbish since during the year he couldn't remember, he'd apparently learned it well enough to Occlude without even knowing he was doing it. Talk about a cleared mind! "We should return to the Great Hall," said Snape as he drew his wand and pointed it at the Floo. Green sparks emerged from the wand and drifted over to the hearth where they melted into the stone floor of the fireplace.
Harry should have thought of that. "My friends must be going mad, and Luna . . ." Actually, there was no telling if Luna was alarmed by his apparent kidnapping. She might have concluded that he'd merely gone off to an astral conference or something.

"Oh, no, indeed," said the headmaster. "I've already taken the liberty of popping back to the Great Hall to speak with Minerva. By now your friends have been informed that all is well."

"But how did you know I was here?"

Dumbledore's habitual smile grew more tender, somehow. "Simple, my boy. I sent Severus through first, and had you not been here, he would have returned instantly to berate my carelessness with his beloved son."

Beloved son? Harry had concluded by then that Snape did love him --in a Snapelike way, of course-- but that was laying it on a bit thick. Wasn't it? Harry cleared his throat. "Oh. Um . . . well, I should still be getting back--"

"But haven't you more questions for your father?"

"Albus," said Snape in a voice tinged with warning. "Stop meddling."

That was odd -- it wasn't like Snape to rebuke anyone for using that word. But maybe he was trying to keep to the "friends" compromise Harry had proposed. That would be good.

And anyway, Harry did have questions, now that he thought about it. "Can you let Luna know that I haven't abandoned her?" he asked the headmaster.

"Ah yes, we must pay heed to the young ladies, indeed we must." Dumbledore chortled a little. "Too-da-loo, then. I shall see you both at the ball in a few moments!"

He flooed away in a flash of green fire.

"So, questions," said Harry. "Hmm. You never mentioned you had other quarters."

"That is a declarative statement, not an interrogative."

"Are you always so stiff-necked?" asked Harry. "See, that's a question. And here's another. Can I sit on your bed again? Because I was sitting there before, sorry. I didn't know then that it was yours."

"Do not apologise."

Harry took Snape's curt gesture to mean that he could go ahead and sit, so he did. "I don't suppose you know if Remus got out all right. And if you complain again that that's not a question -- well, it's not how friends act, sir. Um, Severus."

"I do not yet know for certain." Snape hesitated, then pulled a button from his formal robes and transfigured it into a chair. Which was kind of sad, actually. He could have sat on the bed with Harry. "But I would urge you not to worry about it. Lupin would not have survived long in his current role were he not very skilled at it."

*Very skilled.* Harry shivered. "Yeah. The things he said . . . it's hard for me to believe that Remus could have--"

"He had to stay in character." Snape's gaze was grim. "No doubt he also kicks house elves. It comes
with the territory when one plays such a role."

"But to say things like that to me!"

"It is, in fact, a compliment. Lupin was aware from the first how it frustrated you to adhere the strategy of appearing weak when in fact you were anything but. I would say that tonight he was paying tribute to your strength, in the only way he could."

That made some sense. After all, it wasn't as though Remus-as-Lucius could compliment him in public. So he'd made his actions speak for themselves, actions which would seem in-character for someone like Lucius. Still, Harry shuddered. "That Portkey trigger phrase, though . . ."

"I did not hear it."

Harry felt sick just saying it. "'This time, death,' he whispered."

"Ah." Snape moved to the edge of his chair and leaned forward, his hands clasped as he regarded Harry. "I would surmise either that Voldemort coined the phrase or Lupin did so in his presence. Either way, he would have had to adhere to it in case it was overheard by any interested parties."

"But he whispered it!"

"Yes, but your brother is not the only student here well-acquainted with eavesdropping charms, and Lupin knows it. As does the headmaster. Neither one of them would have risked changing the Portkey phrase, not when such a change could have marked Lupin as . . . less than enthusiastic about his antagonism toward you."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly, and tried to get his thoughts onto something more cheerful. Not much came to mind. "Why did you cast the blasting curse, anyway? That only makes sense if it really was Lucius, which believe me, I thought about for a minute when Remus was being so . . . unRemusy."

Snape moved restlessly, finally gripping the arms of his chair with both hands. "You must believe me when I tell you that Lucius Malfoy is indeed dead, Harry."

"I do believe you. I just--" Harry swallowed. "Well, what if you're wrong? I mean, you've been wrong before. About-- about lots of things."

"You, I think you mean."

"Yeah, me." Harry had hesitated to say it like that for some reason, but that was what he'd meant. "I wasn't a celebrity, or not the way you meant, anyway."

"You weren't primped and pampered and spoiled, no," said Snape quietly. "I misjudged your situation, and you, entirely. That does not, however, mean that I have misjudged the issue at hand. Lucius Malfoy is dead. Albus and I both examined his dead body, and before you say that such things can be feigned, I should tell you that his portrait came to life and his elf who was privy to the death submitted himself to Draco's authority as the senior Malfoy present. Neither of those things would have happened had Lucius still been living."

Harry still hesitated. "You're sure?"

"Yes." Now Snape was the one who was clearly hesitating. "Will you not trust me?"

"I--" Damn. "I don't think I know how." Harry managed a wan smile. "It's not you. Or not
completely, anyway. I'm just more used to . . . managing on my own."

"A trait of yours with which I am intimately familiar." Snape sighed. "I thought we were getting past that, in some small measure. However, it is not quite true that you are used to managing on your own. It would be more accurate to say that you are used to managing without adults. You far prefer the counsel and assistance of your friends."

Harry wasn't sure if there was an insult in there somewhere. "They're good friends!"

"They are," agreed Snape in a level voice.

For some reason, that acknowledgment cheered Harry up a bit. But just a bit. "So tell me why you blasted Remus. I couldn't figure out why you'd want to hurt him, not considering how he's so important to the Order at the moment."

"Meaning that I would want to hurt him otherwise?"

Harry flushed, but didn't back down. "Yes, meaning that. You did get him sacked. Or made sure he had to resign, same difference."

"That was in reaction to his reprehensible failure to take his condition seriously and it was before I had any cause to respect him. I have that now, as I have told you."

He had, right. "And Reducto?"

Snape settled back in his chair. "That is not terribly difficult to explain. Tell me, Harry . . . what would have happened to Lupin had he openly Portkeyed you away in full view of five hundred witnesses?"

"He'd seem completely loyal to Voldemort. He'd get sacked from the board." Harry didn't know why Snape would ask that. They all knew the plan . . .

"Anything else?" asked Snape in a mild tone. "Kidnapping is, in fact, a highly illegal act."

"Oh. Azkaban."

"Of course. It would hardly suit the Order to have our chief spy shut up on an island in the North Sea. Particularly considering that it would prove impossible to keep him supplied with Polyjuice for the duration."

"Voldemort would find him out," said Harry, horrified. "And have him killed!"

"Indeed. But there would be no threat of Azkaban if 'Lucius Malfoy' could claim that he had Portkeyed away because he had been attacked, and that it was merely an accident, the fact that he was touching you at the time. He could tell his Dark Lord one thing, and the Wizengamot another, and appear to his master to be the consummate Slytherin, except for his failure to anticipate that Dumbledore would be able to interfere in the Portkey spell. Lupin will be punished for that, but not unduly. In truth, Voldemort would not expect that any of his minions could triumph against a wizard like Dumbledore."

Harry swallowed, following all that once he thought about it for a minute. "If he's got such a good defense, will he still be sacked?"

"Oh, yes." Snape's eyes gleamed like he was the cat who'd got the cream. "Albus will be using the Board's own logic against them: perhaps Lucius Malfoy meant no harm, but in case he did, can we
risk letting him stay on?"

That must have been their logic when they'd expelled Draco, thought Harry.

"It is more likely, however," added Snape in tones of regret, "that Albus will not have the opportunity to throw the Board's past actions in their face. Lupin's behaviour toward Miss Granger alone will probably ensure his dismissal from the Board."

Harry nodded. "And the reason I wasn't let in on the Reducto plan?"

"The plot was already too complex, with too many players."

Harry could certainly see that. "Do you know why the Portkey took me here instead to your . . . uh, your usual quarters?"

Snape's hands, laced together in his lap, tightened. "I don't know for certain. The most obvious explanation is that magic often takes the simplest means to an end. This room is closer to the Great Hall than are my dungeon quarters."

Oh. They weren't in the dungeons . . . Harry had more-or-less assumed that they were. For Snape to go anywhere else for peace and quiet seemed almost unthinkable. Unless it had something to do with the huge changes that had happened during the year Harry couldn't remember. Changes that had made Snape into someone who could hug Harry Potter . . . "Were Draco and I that hard to be around?" he asked wryly.

Snape shook his head. "As solitary a person as I usually am, I enjoyed your company. Except when you were squabbling or being particularly obstinate."

Harry grinned. "Me, obstinate?"

"That was the plural you," said Snape dryly. "And I do believe it is time we returned to the ball. The headmaster's assurances aside, I think your friends and your brother will be relieved to see you."

"Yeah, good idea." Harry stood up and dusted off his dress robes, not that it did a lot of good. The fabric was grimy where he'd knelt down, which made him wonder if the elves couldn't get into this room to clean.

"If I may," murmured Snape. He waited until Harry had nodded, and then cast a spell that caused the dirt stains to fall away in clumps, vanishing as they drifted down toward the floor. "Now, take my arm," he instructed, holding it out as he stepped into the fireplace. "The Floo will accept you if we depart together."

Harry hesitated.

Snape merely waited, his dark eyes looking like he was calculating something. But then, he usually was . . .

Sighing, Harry moved alongside him and laid a hand on the man's left forearm, squeezing it tightly in case the whirling action of the Floo separated them. No telling where he'd end up . . . and Harry had had enough excitement for one evening.

Snape flinched when he squeezed, but then Harry glanced up at his face, he was wearing his usual stoic expression. Still, Harry thought that something was wrong. "All right?"
"Of course. The Great Hall of Hogwarts!"

Before Harry could ask anything else, the Floo whirled them past an empty room and then three more where it looked like parties were happening, before spitting them out into the Great Hall.

Snape wasn't spat out, of course. He stepped out of the large Floo as if he hadn't just been spun around several times. Harry stumbled and probably would have fallen if he hadn't been holding onto the man, then managed to get his bearings.

"Will you be all right?" asked Snape in a low tone. "It's not lost on me that finding yourself there with no explanation must have been alarming, to say the least."

Personally, Harry thought that he should have asked that before they'd arrived in a room filled with hundreds of curious eyes, a lot of which had registered his re-appearance by then.

But in any case, he was all right.

"I'm fine, but since you're taller than me, can you spot Luna anywhere?"

"She is approaching," said Snape in a low tone. "If you do not need me, then . . . ?"

"Severus," said a feminine voice. "The headmaster said all was well, but I couldn't believe that until I saw you with my own two eyes!"

Charity Burbage rested a hand on Snape's forearm, right where Harry had held on, and this time, there was no mistaking the way Snape flinched.

"Where is the headmaster?" he asked, looking like he was trying to shake her off and failing.

"Harry!" said Hermione, reaching him first. Draco and Luna were right behind her, and behind them were Ron and Lavender. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, remembering to stick to the cover story -- there was sort of a crowd around him by then. It made him want to back up into the Floo and go somewhere else. "Bit of a shock when Lucius Malfoy fell into me like that, and then a Portkey? I thought I was a goner for a second, but then the strangest thing happened. The Portkey sucked him in one direction and me another, and I ended up not even leaving the castle."

"Where'd you go?" asked Ron, shoving his way to the front.

"Snape's quarters, actually." Harry still didn't know what to think about the man's private meditation centre, or whatever it was, but he decided it wasn't his business to spread the story around. Just like he'd never told anybody about the Pensieve memory (well, nobody who hadn't been in the memory, anyway), and that had been back when he hated Snape.

Huh.

It wasn't until that exact moment that he realised that he didn't hate Snape any longer. He'd known, of course, that he didn't hate him like he used to. But now, Harry thought he didn't hate him at all.

He didn't always like him, but . . . yeah. No hatred.

That probably just made sense. He couldn't have agreed to try for being friends if he'd still hated him.

Draco made a growling noise. "We were worried sick! Next time it looks like you're abducted
when you really aren't, do you think you could send an owl at least? So we know you're all right?"

Harry knew that Draco was just sticking to the plan, too -- he'd known that "Lucius" would try to Portkey Harry out. Harry was still impressed with his acting.

"Oh, I wasn't worried," said Luna, spinning in place so that her hair flew out like a pale golden banner.

"No?" Harry liked her, he really did, but he wasn't sure he wanted a girlfriend that was quite so divorced from reality. If he was kidnapped for real, for example, he'd like to think that any girl he was dating would at least care that he'd gone missing!

"Oh, no." Luna's smiled, her whole face glowing with serenity. "Not at all."

"Yeah, well . . ." Harry wasn't sure how to do what had to be done. It'd been easier with Cho, who'd taken Marietta's side like that. Luna hadn't done anything awful; she was just being herself. So how was Harry supposed to break it to her, that this was probably all just a mistake?

On the other hand, Luna might not even notice if he broke up with her. So maybe it didn't matter how he did it.

For all that though, he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

Actually, he wanted to kiss her, even knowing that she had such strange ideas that she hadn't even cared that Harry had been abducted by a Death Eater out for his eyeballs.

"I'm fine," he said at large to his friends. "It turned out to be nothing, so no harm done. Bit of a scare, but I'm over it. You go ahead and enjoy what's left of the ball."

Nobody moved.

"Really, it's all right now--"

Still nobody moved. Damn.

Harry turned to Luna, desperate by then to just get this over with. "Um, uh . . . let's go . . . uh, look for night-blooming flowers in the rose garden."

Ron snickered and tugged Lavender's hand, pulling her back toward the dance floor. Hermione went pink, which made Harry wonder just what she thought he was suggesting to Luna.

Draco was the worst, though. He stepped closer to Harry and spoke alongside his ear. "Smooth, Harry. Really smooth--"

Harry elbowed him aside and held out his hand to Luna.

Her eyes sparkled when she took it, which made him feel doubly bad about what he was about to do.

"I love night-blooming flowers," she said as he led her toward the doors of the Great Hall. "They're the only kind that dance, though the daytime flowers do try, poor things . . . Except for violets, of course."

"Why of course?"

"Because they're blue."
Harry couldn't help but grin a bit at that. It was just so very Luna.

He wished again that she were a little more firmly rooted in reality. He was going to miss her.

But there was nothing for it, so Harry sighed and kept winding through the castle. He let her natter on about random subjects until they were outside. At the bottom of the entrance stairs, Harry drew his wand and cast *Lumos*, and once they were walking along a pathway that had been cleared of snow, winter rosebushes surrounding them on both sides, he turned to her and took both her hands in his, sharing the wand between them.

"Luna . . ."

"Luna Luna Bo Buna, Banana Fana Fo Funa."

All right, that was certainly unexpected. "Excuse me?"

"I learned it from a new first-year in Ravenclaw. Harry Harry Bo Beary, Banana Fana Fo Farry. Ronald Ronald Bo Bonald, Banana Fana Fo Fonald. Isn't it grand? Hmm, Draco knows a bit about changing his name. I wonder if he could tell me how to go about it."

"You're not changing your name to Luna Luna Bo . . . Banana."

"Luna Luna Bo Buna, Banana Fana Fo Funa. And why not?"

She asked that the way other people might ask why they shouldn't wear orange if they pleased.

"Wouldn't it annoy your father?"

"I can't think why . . ."

Harry supposed he had to get to it sooner or later. He squeezed her hands a little, trying to let her down easy. "Luna, you know how earlier, I said . . . um, well, it's just that . . ." God, he was bad at this. "Um. I'm thinking now that . . . Look, all right? You weren't even worried about me! What am I supposed to think?"

"But why would I be worried when I knew you were fine?"

"You only knew that I was fine when Dumbledore said so! Until then, you should have-- You should have cared!"

"Oh, Harry." Luna squeezed his hands, then, her smile seeming to spread the rays from his wand into the farthest part of the garden. "The Prenglies told me first."

"The Prenglies?"

"Yes. I was talking to them when people began to gasp that you had vanished, but they told me straight away not to worry."

Sure they had. "How could they know there was no cause for worry?"

"Well, they said that *you* were worried, but that you shouldn't be, because your father would be along in just a moment."

Harry blinked, and thought back over what she had said, and blinked again. He *had* been worried when there was no real need, and his father --well, Snape, anyway-- *had* been along in just a moment . . .
"How could they know those things?"

Luna giggled. "Goodness gracious, Harry! They're Prenglies! They live in the here-and-there!"

Oh. Well, that explained everything.

"I tried to tell your friends that all was well," continued Luna. "It was like they heard me but didn't listen to me. Though I'm rather used to that . . ."

"Did they say anything else?"

"Well, Draco said that he was ashamed to be a Malfoy, and then Hermione said that he wasn't to blame himself for things that weren't his fault, but she was in tears saying it, and--"

"The Prenglies," interrupted Harry. "Did the Prenglies say anything else?"

"Just that they liked the pie-shaped room and wished Old Twinkles would make more like that. That's what they call the headmaster." Luna tilted her head to one side. "I don't think they know he's the headmaster. I don't think they know this is a school. Or what a school is."

They liked the pie-shaped room.

Harry drew in a deep breath. It stopped his head from spinning, at least. His thoughts were still in one huge whirl. "You mean . . . oh, wow. The Prenglies are real?"

"Of course they're real. I just told you that I was talking to them, didn't I?" Luna lifted a portion of her hair to her eyes like she was checking it was still there.

"Yeah, but I thought--"

"Did you?"

From anyone else that sort of question would be cutting, but Luna was looking at him curiously as she said it. It was like she was really asking the question. Like she really wanted to know.

"No," admitted Harry, shuffling his feet. "I guess I didn't. I couldn't see the Prenglies so I just assumed they weren't really there."

"Well, of course you couldn't see them. They're transparent."

Harry thought of his cloak. "I should know things can be invisible and still be there."

"Oh, but they're not invisible at all. They're merely transparent. If you concentrate you can catch a glimpse. Or at least, I can. I don't know about anybody else." Luna sighed a little and made her way over to a small stone bench that faced away from the castle. After she sat down and swished her bulbous skirts to the side, she patted the seat next to her. Only when Harry had sat down there did she speak again. "I think this will have to be my last artichoke."

"Huh?"

"Well, it wouldn't be right to accept another one from you, would it? Not now."

"Why not?"

She gave him a pitying look, then. "You pretended to believe the Prenglies were real. I don't think I can be with someone who . . . who humours me, Harry."
Harry gulped. "Wait. You're breaking up with me?"

She slowly nodded, her eyes fixed on a distant point beyond him.

Harry had come out here to break up with her, of course, but now he found that he could hardly bear the thought of losing her. Not when it seemed like he'd only just found her! How was he to know that Prenglies were real? She was always saying things that didn't make any sense, things that couldn't be true--

Except, maybe a lot of them were. Maybe all of them were.

He suddenly remembered the way Hermione had looked at him that time when he'd first seen the thestrals, when she'd said that the carriages were pulling themselves like they always did. She hadn't known that Harry could see deeper into magic at that point than she could.

He remembered how annoying it had been to deal with people who not only couldn't see, but refused to understand that others could.

The way he'd refused to understand that Luna could.

"No," he said, suddenly grabbing her hands and holding on tight. "You're not breaking up with me. I'm sorry I didn't know how special you were. I-- I just thought you had your own way, and I thought it was charming-- I didn't mean to be humouring you, I just thought . . . I don't know what I thought," finished Harry miserably.

"You thought I was Loony Luna, just like everyone else," she said sadly, tugging a little on her hands. Harry almost didn't let them go, but then he thought about how terrible it was to be restrained like that by someone stronger and bigger, and all the tension left his fingers. He couldn't keep her next to him by force. Even the idea made him sort of sick.

But the thought of losing her made him just as sick. So much so that it surprised him. He hadn't realised he felt so deeply. He hadn't felt like this since Cho . . . but that seemed like a long time ago, and just a pale echo besides. He didn't miss Cho. He thought, though, that if Luna left him like this, he'd miss her until he went mad with it.

All at once, Draco's mooning over Rhiannon snapped into clear focus -- and for the first time, it made sense.

"I never thought of you like that," he said quietly. "I've always thought you were special. I just didn't understand, that's all. You've got some kind of magic that most of us lack--" The fact that she hadn't walked away was something, Harry thought. She could now; he wasn't holding onto her any longer. "Or you know how to really see, then. Most Muggles can't see ghosts, Hermione says. It's not that the ghosts aren't there, it's just that Muggles look right through the things you can see."

Luna slowly shook her head. "I think it's more like most wizards are rushing about so hither-thither that they never even stop to look."

"I don't want to be like that." Particularly not if it meant losing her. Harry smiled, hoping he didn't look too desperate. "Will you teach me to stop and look?"

Luna shifted her gaze to his face and stared at him for a long moment. "I . . . I suppose so."

"Good," said Harry, meaning it. But he had meant something else, too. "Um . . . we're not really broken up, are we? I'd still like . . . I mean, I like you, Luna."
"I like you, too."

Harry cleared his throat. Why was it that asking her to the ball had been so easy, and this was so hard? "I really like you. Um-- you are still my girlfriend, aren't you?"

She arched her back and dropped a little peck on his cheek. "I suppose I am. Thank you for explaining."

Harry didn't think he'd explained very well, but at least she didn't still think he'd been making fun of her, or something. It had never been like that. He just hadn't known.

Now, he did.

He turned his face and brushed her lips with his.

His hands and feet went tingly, and the garden around him seemed to recede into nothingness. The whole world was made of nothing but Luna.

"Mmm."

He wasn't sure who made the noise; he just knew that he agreed with it.

She drew back, touched her lips with her fingers, and let out a small laugh. "Well. That was-- well. Now I'm very happy you explained."

Harry nodded, feeling dazed. "As long as we're explaining things . . . um. I never did know what the cucumber meant. You thought I did, and I guess I let you think that, but maybe now you can tell me."

A turned her face away, the moonlight revealing that a wave of colour had washed into her cheeks. "It was for your coming-of-age. A-- a manhood talisman, wishing you well."

Oh. Oh. Harry liked that idea for about five seconds, and then he hated it, since he'd remembered something else she'd said. "Why did you tell me I should eat more cucumbers?"

"Just then, you seemed like a lost little boy."

"And then when you told me not to eat too many?"

Luna giggled. "Well, you'd just invited me to the ball, and you'd been going on about eating cucumbers at every meal. I'd just meant that I knew you wanted Snape to regard you as an adult, but 'manhood' can be taken to mean more than that, and . . . it seemed like your mind was only on one thing!"

It was only on one thing, but Harry thought he'd better not say so.

He kissed her again instead, this time for thirty seconds instead of five, and then said, a little shakily, that they'd better go back in before they were caught out of bounds.

They walked back to the castle hand-in-hand, stopping to kiss again in a dark corner near the Great Hall. When they broke apart, Harry couldn't help but laugh. "I always used to wish that I had somewhere to go for Christmas, but now . . . I wish I could just stay here with you."

"But I won't be here. Tibet, again. Father's still on research holiday there." Luna laid a hand on his arm. "But I want you to have a good time with your family."
"I'll try," said Harry dryly, but that was more in reaction to the final word than to the idea itself. It somehow didn't seem impossible now that Christmas with Snape and Draco might turn out all right.

"Maybe you'll remember." Luna smiled in a way that lit up her whole face.

"No matter what I remember, I won't forget this," said Harry, and kissed her one last time.

The doors to the Great Hall burst open and students poured out, most of them chattering with excitement, a few of them grumbling that they should be allowed to stay up as late as they pleased.

Harry pulled back further into the shadows with Luna, wanting more time with her, and more privacy.

Snape strode past, his dress robes billowing majestically.

Then he paused, whirled on a heel, and approached the alcove where Harry was, just as if he had a sixth sense.

"Miss Lovegood," he said, tipping his head slightly to the side. His voice sounded tight with strain.

"Professor." Luna gave that brilliant smile again. "Did you enjoy the ball?"

Snape's expression said quite plainly that he hadn't. "I didn't attend in order to enjoy it, but to safeguard Harry and Draco from certain of the school governors. A fortuitous decision, as it turned out, though Malfoy will no doubt claim that he meant no harm, and the fools that make up the Wizengamot will believe him."

"Yes," said Luna, nodding. "He wasn't at all what I expected, though. I don't know why not. He looks just as he did the last time I saw him, but for some reason . . . I expected him to be more statuesque."

Snape's eyes narrowed to slits, his voice emerging as like a hiss of silk. "Why would you say something like that, Miss Lovegood?"

"I don't really know," she murmured. "I just . . . expected it."

"Hmph." Snape turned his attention to Harry. "Will you come to my quarters after breakfast? We will use my Floo to depart."

"Can I bring Sals?"

"Of course." Snape inclined his head again. "Good-night, then."

"Good-night," echoed Harry.

"Good-night," said Luna too, but Snape still didn't move. It was like he was waiting for Harry to move first, or something.

"I'll walk you to your common room," Harry said to her, holding back on a strong urge to give Snape a we-want-to-be-alone look.

The man seemed to get the point, anyway. He stared at them for one moment longer, and then turned away, his robes billowing with the sudden movement.

Luna turned to Harry, bouncing on her heels a little. "You don't need to walk me back. I know the
way."

"I'm going to walk you back like a proper gentleman would," insisted Harry, leaning down to speak close against her ear. "How else can I expect a good-night kiss at the door?"

Luna giggled and traced a couple of fingers over the artichoke blossom she was wearing, brushing purple bits of it to the floor.

Harry didn't get a good-night kiss at the door to Ravenclaw, though.

He got it twenty feet away, around a corner, where there was nobody to see that it went on and on until both he and Luna were breathless . . . where there was nobody to see that when the kiss was finally over, Harry could barely let her go.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter 31: "All I Want for Christmas"

~

Notes: Laskin's Bluff is an original historical romance I've written, now available online. To read a summary, see what other readers have said, and preview the prologue and first chapter, go here: http://tinyurl.com/aspenoriginals

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------
Harry had thought he was prepared, but he wasn't.

Seeing Grimmauld Place again was still like being given a sharp shove right into things he tried not to think about. That year when Sirius had lived here, hating every minute of it, his mother bellowing like the shrew she was, every room and corridor a reminder of his own schooldays, of a family who resented him for sorting into Gryffindor . . .

Harry pressed his lips together and shivered. The worst part was that he wanted Sirius to still be here. Wanted it with all his heart, even though Sirius had been so miserable in this house.

"From here we will Apparate," said Snape, holding out his arm.

Harry shook his head. Running away would be cowardly, wouldn't it? And Sirius deserved better from him. "I need a minute to look around."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

_Sirius_, thought Harry, but he didn't say as much. "No. I just-- the last time I was here--"

"Ah." Snape nodded as if he understood, though Harry didn't see how he possibly could.

"Yes, I should see how my property's holding up." That got Draco a reproving glance from Snape. "Well, it is my house," he insisted. "Present tense."

Harry forced himself to start walking. He'd already known all that, anyway. He wasn't sure what to think about it, though. Maybe he should have kept Sirius' legacy, as a way to honour and respect the man. Maybe giving it away said something about Harry.

Like that he felt guilty about getting Sirius killed.

It was somehow wrong for Harry to benefit from that.

But wasn't it just as wrong to ignore Sirius' final wishes?

Harry sighed and turned a corner, trudging along, his eyes sweeping left and right in some kind of insane effort to locate Sirius in the shadows. Stupid, stupid, _stupid_ of him!

"Now, you will notice some changes--" said Draco as he began walking alongside Harry.

"Draco," said Snape in a warning tone from behind them.

"Please. That was future tense. Just how careful do I have to be?" Draco gave Harry a quick wink, as if to tell him that he'd do his best, even during the holiday, to continue giving him information. Snape's presence was bound to make it a challenge, that wink said, but he'd try.
Once Draco had cued him like that, Harry began to see the changes. Maybe he hadn't noticed before because he'd been so caught up in thoughts of Sirius. But the changes seemed to be things that his godfather would have liked.

"Mrs. Black is gone." Harry blinked. "And all those chopped off elf-heads. Um . . . I thought that a permanent sticking charm would be, you know, permanent."

"They more-or-less are," said Draco, grinning as though he'd like to wink again but didn't quite dare. "It takes Dark Arts to unstick them. Dark potions, mostly."

Harry stopped walking and turned around. "Did you take down the portrait, sir?"

"Severus, Harry."

Right. Severus. Harry had to find some way to remember that. It was harder than he would have thought. But then, this was a strange sort of friendship. It hadn't grown naturally, or at least, not that Harry could remember. "Severus, yes. Sorry. What about my question?"

"It is not advisable for me divulge information to you," said Snape, rubbing the bridge of his nose for a moment. "And I do not appreciate your brother putting me in a position where I must either do so or disappoint you."

Harry rocked on his heels, considering that. It wasn't the answer he wanted, but it was more honesty than he'd expected from Snape. "Why don't we play the present-tense game, then? Do you know how to brew the potions needed to deal with a permanent sticking charm?"

"Yes." Snape looked like he'd prefer to growl the word but was holding back.

"Good enough for me."

Harry turned around again and headed toward the staircase. It looked a lot better without all those elf heads. Not that he'd have minded seeing one particular elf head, come to think about it. After the way Kreacher had conspired against Sirius, he deserved anything he got. But then, maybe Harry could get Draco to free him.

Kreacher wasn't like Dobby. He'd hate being a free elf, and he'd probably hate it even more if it was a pureblood who freed him!

"Where's Kreacher?"

Draco was no help on that one. He gave Harry a puzzled look.

"House-elf who used to live here?" prompted Harry, his fists clenching the longer he thought about him. "Dumbledore told me he wasn't at headquarters any longer. Is it too much to hope he's in elf-Azkaban?"

"Kreacher is dead."

"Dead!" Harry whirled on Snape. "What happened?"

"Another question I cannot answer!"

And this time, neither could Draco.

"I . . . I . . ." Harry swallowed. "I wanted him dead. I wanted to kill him myself when I found out what he'd done to-- to-- Sirius, I mean. . . he was an evil little bugger, so why do I think I ought to--"
Draco made a sharp motion. "If you start saying that you feel bad that you don't feel bad, I'm going to owl-return your Christmas present!"

"I . . ." Harry raised his shoulders. "When did I ever say a thing like that?"

"Draco," said Snape in a warning tone.

"Wait, I did used to say things like that? Why?" He didn't have a problem feeling bad about things. He'd spent years feeling bad that he didn't deserve a nice airy bedroom like Dudley had, and once he started at Hogwarts, he'd felt bad that he ever had to go back to Surrey . . .

"I do believe that this . . . tour, for lack of a better word, is not proving helpful," said Snape. "I suggest we Apparate to Devon. Now."

"But--"

Snape glared, but then his gaze seemed to soften a little. "But what, Harry?"

"I . . ." Harry gulped. He knew he was being stupid again. Sirius was dead, and nothing Harry could do was going to change that. None of that mattered, though. He still wanted to stay here, in the last place where Sirius had lived. "I never got to tell him good-bye."

"Oh." Snape cleared his throat. "A few more minutes then, perhaps. Draco and I will wait for you in the parlour, if you would like to do be alone."

"Yeah," said Harry, closing his eyes. "Thanks."

"But--" A glare from Snape silenced Draco.

"Come along," said Snape.

Draco clearly didn't want to, but then he shrugged and went with Snape.

When their soft footfalls had died away, Harry went further up the stairs, up and up until he reached the bedroom that Sirius had used that last year. Nothing of the man's presence remained, but Harry didn't let that stop him. He lay down on the bed, hugging one of the extra pillows to him, then curling himself around it as if he could guard it somehow, keep it safe.

"I'm sorry, Sirius," he whispered, then clenched his lips and said the rest of it without words. *I'm so, so, sorry. I never meant for you to be killed that night. I only wanted to save you. And you loved me enough to come rescue me from my own idiocy, loved me enough to want to save me, and now you're gone and you can't even hear me saying so, but I'm so, so sorry . . ."

After a few more minutes, he sat up and dried his eyes, then tried to straighten the bed so it looked like nobody had disturbed it. A memory washed over him of snapping sheets taut for Aunt Petunia, who'd demanded every laundry day that Harry make the beds -- and make them perfectly. And now she was dead, too.

Damned if that didn't bring even more tears to his eyes. Which was ridiculous. Petunia Dursley was nothing to him next to Sirius.

But . . . she could have been.

Harry decided at that point that Snape had been right. Staying longer in this house wasn't a good
idea. It was just mixing him up.

He went downstairs to find the others, telling himself the whole way that he shouldn't miss Sirius so much.

Too bad he couldn't make himself listen.

"So . . . this is Devon," said Harry, looking around the small living room. If he'd been here as much as Draco had said, shouldn't the place look familiar? A little bit, at least?

It didn't, though. Not at all.

Harry strained, trying to remember. Something, anything. It had worked for him before, and damn it, he needed it to work again now. How was he going to get that stupid mirror working otherwise? He needed his dark powers back, and that meant he needed his memory--

But it was like a door had slammed shut inside his mind, and there was no getting past it.

"Harry?"

"Fine, I'm fine," he said quickly. "Um . . . bit of a headache, that's all--"

"Ah." Was it Harry's imagination, or did Snape seem to hesitate for a fraction of a second? "A draught, perhaps?"

Harry felt worse than ever, hearing a question like that. Had he been such a bastard to Snape that the man was afraid to so much as offer him a headache potion? But then, Snape had been a total bastard to Harry, hadn't he? For years.

But . . . Harry was supposed to be putting that behind him. Friends, all that. Right.

He wished it could feel more natural. Snape and him being friends was a weird concept when you got right down to it. They didn't have much to tie them together, or at least, not on Harry's side. Snape had memories that mattered, Harry supposed. All Harry had was a realization that the man had been human enough to drink himself into oblivion when he'd thought he'd lost Harry once and for all. It wasn't much to base a relationship on.

But still, Harry had told himself that he'd try, so he would. "Yeah, a draught sounds good," he said, holding out a hand to show with actions as well as words that it would be welcome.

It surprised him when Snape fished one from the inside of his robes and offered it straight away. Was he a walking pharmacy? "Do you keep an antivenin on hand as well, just in case Nagini attacks you someday?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Of course."
"He's not a blithering idiot," added Draco.

Harry downed his potion, shaking his head as he held the vial out. Snape took it without touching his fingers, he noticed. "I was joking, but if you actually do keep that on hand, couldn't you have spared some when Mr Weasley got attacked?"

"That attack was what enabled me to develop the antivenin," murmured Snape.

Oh. Well, that was all right then, Harry supposed.

He shifted on his feet, wondering what he was supposed to do or say now. This was all so strange. He felt like he was just a visitor here, but he wasn't being treated like a visitor, and it left him feeling restless and out of place. "Um . . ."

"Come and see our room," said Draco at once.

Right. He was going to be sharing a room with Draco. It was strange how the thought didn't make him shudder. That told Harry two things. One, he really had started to become friends with Draco, and two, when he got sick at the thought of sleeping in Slytherin, it wasn't because he'd be asleep and defenseless in the same room as Draco.

He wondered if it was Zabini who bothered him. It couldn't be Crabbe or Goyle. Especially not Goyle, these days. But it might be the idea itself, that he had some kind of right to have a room in Slytherin.

That thought did make him shudder, so that was probably the issue right there.

"I know, I know, it's terribly small and cramped for two people," said Draco with an aristocratic little shrug. "But . . . it is home, you know."

No, Harry didn't know.

Something of that thought must have shown on his face, since Snape narrowed his eyes at Draco. "Don't pressure your brother."

"Mmm, and of course calling him my 'brother' is no pressure at all."

"Just show me the room."

_Our room_ mouthed Draco, the moment Snape's back was turned.

Harry had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

---------------------------------------------

The room wasn't cramped by Harry's standards, though he could admit that it was small. "No bathroom, then?"
Draco groaned and raised a hand to cover his eyes. "It's so terribly primitive here. There's a stand of woods behind the cottage, and we all . . ." He used his free hand to make a vaguely obscene gesture.

For a single instant, Harry's mind went completely blank with shock. And then he managed, "You're a wizard, and you-- you--"

"Ha," said Draco. "Fooled you."

Harry grabbed a pillow off the nearest bed and threw it.

"Oh, don't be that way." Draco tossed the pillow back. "I just wanted to see if you would think like a wizard. Or maybe I was trying to get your mind off that house. You still look haunted. Anyway, the bathing facilities here are rather primitive. We all three have to share."

"So? You share in Slytherin, don't you?"

"Oh, yes. But that's different. There are elves to see to everything. In Slytherin I don't have my father walking in after me complaining that I forgot to spread a refreshing charm to eliminate . . . er . . ."

"Smells?"

Draco grimaced. "It's terribly embarrassing."

"Then don't forget the refreshing charm."

"You sound like Severus."

Harry sat down on a bed. "I don't really, do I?"

"Well, he's a good deal more ironic in his phrasing, I suppose." Draco sat down too, and raised a single eyebrow. "Interesting choice of bed you've made."

"Why . . . was this one yours?"

Draco waved his wand, looked left and right, and then shook his head.

Oh. So this one had been Harry's when they'd spent time here before. And Draco didn't want to say so out loud, though he'd evidently concluded that any monitoring spells wouldn't capture a non-verbal response.

"Interesting, as I said."

Harry shrugged. "Random chance. Or not even that. It's closest to the door, and since I followed you in . . ."

"You didn't feel drawn to it?" Draco sat down on his own bed and leaned forward. "Not even a little?"

"No. I feel . . ." Harry cleared his throat. "I feel like something's blocking me, now. Worse than ever before. I mean, at least before I was getting the occasional glimmery sort of instinct about things, and sometimes things that were even more clearly memories. Especially when I tried to call for them. But now . . . there's nothing. It's like a block wall."

"Hmm. Is this a sudden change?"
"You sound like Dr Goode."

"I've been doing a lot of psychiatric reading for my project in Muggle Studies this term. Not to mention . . ." Draco looked left and right again.

A signal, one Harry had no trouble interpreting. He nodded that he'd understood.

"So, is it a sudden change?"

"Seems like it." Harry thought back. "Yesterday morning I didn't feel this way. Something to do with last night's ball, maybe."

"If you'd ended up kidnapped by a man who looks just like Lucius, it would make sense. Some kind of trauma reaction," mused Draco. "But the Portkey worked as intended, so . . . I don't know. Did anything else unusual happen last night?"

When Harry thought about that, he felt his collar growing so warm that he had to reach up and loosen it.

"What?" asked Draco, clearly intrigued. "What? What?"

Harry wasn't sure what to say. "Oh. Well, Luna and I . . . er . . ."

"A well-bred wizard doesn't kiss and tell, of course," murmured Draco, leaning back on his palms as he regarded Harry, more than a bit of a smirk on his face. "Say no more, though it would be quite amusing to let Severus know just how wrong he was about your . . . inclinations."

He sounded like he thought Harry and Luna had done a lot more than . . . "We just kissed, is all!"

Kissed and kissed and kissed . . . but still!

"Of course, of course," said Draco in a smarmy voice.

"It was too cold out there to get up to anything else!"

"Ah, but I know that you know how to think like a wizard, so . . ." Draco's voice trailed off.

"Don't be ridiculous--"

"Ridiculous would be forgetting you're a wizard when a contraceptive charm is called for. You didn't, did you? The last thing we need added to our lives at this stage is a surprise infant--"

"We didn't need a contraceptive charm!"

"Of course not." Draco had that smarmy look again. "The night being so 'unusual' for you that it's changed your memory outlook from past to future--"

Harry wasn't sure why he cared so much what Draco thought, but he did. "Look, the unusual part was that Luna tried to break up with me and I couldn't stand the idea, and until then I hadn't known how much she meant to me, and that's all!"

Draco's eyes lost all hint of humour. "Well, I know how that can feel. You managed to persuade her to give you another chance, I take it. Would that we could all be so fortunate."

Harry swallowed. He'd forgotten again. He shouldn't, but not being able to remember Draco's ex-girlfriend made it hard to consider her real. She was clearly real to Draco, though. "Maybe this
Rhiannon will change her mind--"

"Not likely." Draco toed off his shoes and curled onto his side on the bed. "She's in the adult world now, and I'm still a schoolboy. Not even a legal adult by Muggle standards. By her standards."

His voice caught on the next-to-last word.

"Draco--"

"Go away."

"But--"

"Just fucking go away, Harry. I need a while alone. This isn't exactly a merry time for me."

Draco sounded defeated, but Harry couldn't think of anything he could do to improve the situation. He'd stuck his foot in it, though he hadn't meant to. What Draco wanted for Christmas was some time with Rhiannon, just like Harry wanted time with Sirius. Neither one of them was going to get his wish.

Nodding silently, Harry pulled open the door, then closed it on his way out.

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He was sitting on the couch in the living room when Snape emerged from another room, presumably his own bedroom, since the man had changed into fresh robes.

"Ah," said Snape. "Do forgive me, Harry. I forgot about Sals."

Harry blinked, then looked down at his left wrist. Sals was coiled about it, but in metallic form. Snape had insisted, saying that the snake didn't react well to travel by Floo.

Harry had forgotten, too. He held out his wrist while Snape released Sals from the spell, catching the little snake when she uncoiled and began to fall.

Snape took a seat in an armchair, giving the closed door an assessing glance. "Is Draco napping?"

"No. He's . . . well, I said something that reminded him of Rhiannon."

Snape frowned at that, but made no reply.

Harry couldn't think of anything else to say, either. He amused himself by playing with Sals, letting her slither in a weaving pattern between his fingers. It tickled a little. After a while, Sals crawled up his shoulder and onto the top of the couch.

"Tired of me already?" asked Harry in Parsel-tongue.

"I like the warm sstones . . ." She curled up on the hearth and proceeded to doze.
So much for Sals entertaining him while he was here.

"Perhaps you'd like a tour," Snape finally said.

That told Harry a lot. Not just that Snape wanted him to feel welcome here, but also that Snape was nervous. It wasn't like the man to be inane.

"Sure," said Harry, since it would be mean to reject the overture.

As Harry had thought, there wasn't much left to tour. From where he was sitting on the couch he could see a small dining area and to the right of that, a wizarding kitchen. A basin, but no tap. Why would you need one, when *Aguamenti* was so easily cast? No fridge, either, but some of the cabinets were spelled to stay cold.

He did get to see Snape's room and the small bathroom Draco had complained about. It looked fine to Harry. It smelled fine too, at least at the moment.

"So . . . what now?" Harry asked when they were back in the living room, sitting on the couch again.

"What would you like?"

*Christmas at the Burrow*, thought Harry. *Christmas with Sirius*. Those were out of reach, though. Especially the last one, and if he demanded the first one, nothing good would come of it. He was tired of arguing, anyway.

"I don't know."

"A game of Wizard's Chess, perhaps?"

"No . . ."

"When Draco is feeling better perhaps the two of you can go flying."

"Did we do a lot of that over the summer?"

Snape managed to give him a smile that was completely humourless. "It is probably best if you don't attempt to trick me into giving you memories."

Harry blew a breath out, frustrated. "But you told me about the time you were stupid enough to think I didn't like girls, and it's not like the world came to an end . . . Severus."

"That admission was part of a bargain, as I recall."

Oops. Harry had forgotten about that part. "Um . . ."

"So when shall I schedule your appointment with the good doctor?"

Harry almost told him to stuff it. He didn't need Snape, of all people, deciding what he should do. But then he remembered what Draco had said. "Maybe I should talk to her. For a while now, little things had been striking me as familiar, or things would actually call up a memory, but now I feel like there's a wall inside my head, blocking everything out."

Snape laced his fingers together. "A wall? What would make you characterize it thus?"

Harry tried to think. "Maybe it's more like a door. That's what I told Draco it felt like. But it's stuck
fast. It . . . it seems like it got there by slamming shut, not by being constructed from the ground up."

"A door . . . " Snape frowned. "Physical analogues are not always the most accurate representations of what occurs inside an individual mind, though they can prove useful, particularly when it comes to visualizing an internalization . . ."

"Any chance you can repeat that in English?"

This time, Snape's smile held a hint of humour. "The mind is far more complex than any object in the real world."

"I guess so, since now I'm Occluding without even knowing I'm doing it," said Harry. "Could that be it, do you think? I'm Occluding way too much now, and it's getting in the way of remembering things?"

"That's not the problem."

"How can you know?"

"I know."

"How?"

"Because I know the mind," snapped Snape. "Much as you probably hate the thought, I know your mind in particular. You aren't blocking your own memories. Not by means of Occlumency, at any rate."

"But maybe I am," insisted Harry. "And if that's the problem, I could try to ratchet my Occlumency down a notch. I should be able to focus and--"

"No."

"What, I can't focus? But you said I learned Occlumency before, so well that I'm doing it in my sleep these days. That's got to mean that I'm able to--"

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "Stop this, Harry. Stop it at once."

At that, Harry felt like he'd had it. Who was Snape to tell him what to do? "It's my mind, you know! Not yours!"

"No," said Snape slowly, shaking his head, his hands now gripping the arms of his chair. "It's not."

"My mind's not my own?" asked Harry in disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

Snape sighed, his grip on the chair relaxing, though other than that he looked just as tense. "Occlumency."

"Yeah, I got that we were talking about Occumency! What's this about my mind not being my own? **What the fuck have you been doing to me?**"

A few feet away, a door creaked open and Draco emerged, looking like he'd had a nap after all. "What's going on out here? Harry? Severus?"

"Harry's just found out that I've been Occluding for him," said Snape.
"Yeah," said Harry indignantly. "He's been--" Oh, wait. Was that what he'd found out? He'd expected something else. Something a lot worse, like that Snape had been diving into his thoughts, invading his privacy . . . "You've been Occluding for me?"

Draco whistled through his teeth. "I thought that sort of thing was merely theoretical. Doesn't it take so much concentration that . . . but then, you have been rather distracted of late. Particularly when Harry was avoiding you so assiduously."

"Oh, God." Harry raised his eyes, only then realising that he'd been staring at the floor. "Was that why you fought so hard to keep me in Potions? Why Dumbledore kept insisting? Why you wouldn't let me out of Ethics after you lost the Potions battle? Why you . . . why you kept assigning spend-time-with-me detentions, and were going to have Dumbledore 'prevail upon me' to spend Christmas here if I got stubborn, and--"

"All those were going to make the Occlumency transfer much less of a strain," said Snape gently, his eyes so black that Harry felt like he could fall into them. "Of course they were. But that was just an added benefit. My true reason for wanting your company all those times you listed is simply because I enjoy it."

Harry gave a shaky laugh. "You . . . you enjoy it. You enjoy having me yell at you and tell you to fuck off."

"Perhaps I should say that I enjoy the prospect of having you in my life again. I will admit that not every moment has been enjoyable."

"Sorry," muttered Harry. "I know I've been an ass. I can't seem to help it."

"Of course you can help it," said Draco.

"Draco," said Snape. "Either go back to your room or pretend you've done so."

Draco sat down with a *hmph* and crossed his arms over his chest, but he didn't speak again.

"Harry," said Snape quietly, returning his full attention to the boy on the couch, "I understand why you've felt a need to lash out at me. Perhaps it's even for the best that you did so."

Harry nodded. "I guess I'm not through, either. I mean, I did just jump to conclusions. I thought you were going to admit that you'd been reading my mind and that's how you knew it wasn't my Occlumency keeping me from remembering. Which doesn't even make sense. If I was Occluding well enough on my own to keep Voldemort out, you wouldn't be able to roam around freely in my head."

"That you could jump to such a conclusion despite its illogic demonstrates how little you trust me."

Harry could see that. And who could blame him? "You did tell me that I was keeping out Voldemort all on my own, you know. And now I find out that isn't true. You lied to me, so how can you complain that I ought to trust you more?"

Snape closed his eyes. "Because it was a Slytherin lie."

"Oh, well that certainly makes it all right--"

"And you, of course, are above lying in all its forms," drawled Snape. "Pure, honest Gryffindor that you are. You would never, for example, consume a near-poison in an effort to pretend that you are too ill to attend a class."
"Oh, shut up," said Harry crossly. "I never claimed to be pure and honest."

"Did I?"

"Why don't you just explain what you meant by saying it was a Slytherin lie?" *If you can*, Harry mentally added.

"A lie that accomplishes an objective more thoroughly than the truth possibly could. If the surest means to an end requires a lie, and the end is a necessary one, then only the rankest of fools would adhere to the truth."

Unfortunately, that made a lot of sense. Or it could, depending on . . . "So what was your objective? What was this 'necessary end'?"

Snape's throat bobbed a little. "Protecting you from Voldemort. You became quite competent at doing that yourself last year, but your capacity for Occlumency seemed to vanish along with your memories of learning it. I hoped it would surge back on its own, when needed, but the Dark Lord's attack on you during Potions class put an end to such fantasies."

Harry shifted forward on the couch. He didn't care how much he and Snape might disagree, or even fight, he didn't like what he'd just heard. "Not the Dark Lord, all right? Call him Voldemort. He's not your lord and master any longer."

"Yes. Voldemort. Of course."

Harry was still trying to sort it all out. "So he tortured me during Potions class, and you realised my Occlumency wasn't going to show up and save the day. So you stepped in, because you could. I guess you didn't help like that during fifth year because back then you couldn't risk it? But these days Voldemort knows for sure that you aren't on his side, so you don't mind showing your true colours."

"I could let that comment stand," murmured Snape. "Given the context of our conversation, though, I do believe I'll correct your misapprehension. What I do for you now, I could not have done much earlier. It requires . . ."

"Requires?"

It wasn't Harry's imagination; Snape winced. "A certain closeness of mind."

Harry licked his lips. "You mean . . ."

"Yes. In teaching you Occlumency--when I did it in a way you could grasp, that is--I had to enter your mind."

"But you did that all the time back in fifth year," said Harry, confused.

"I dragged memories like knives through your consciousness, and your mind quite rightly began to regard my own as an enemy." Snape shrugged. "Which it no doubt was. My knowledge of teaching Occlumency then consisted of nothing but emulating an attacker. But last year?" Snape relaxed into his chair. "I merged our minds together and taught you from the inside, as it were. We now have the closeness of mind required for me to Occlude for you."

All right, so Harry understood that much. "Any reason you couldn't have just explained all this at the time? Like when I woke up in your quarters after that attack? Instead, you told me I was Occluding on my own!"
"I didn't tell you that. I led you to the conclusion and let you believe it. I did not, technically speaking, lie."

"Same difference!"

Snape made a gesture as though to say that Harry was likely right.

"You could have just told me what was really going on."

"No, I couldn't," said Snape in a low voice. "Harry, Draco is quite correct that Occluding for another person is a debilitating task. I could barely manage it. The only advantage I had was the fact that you had no reason to resist what I was doing."

"Oh. You mean I could have kicked you out? Even though I couldn't do the same to Voldemort?"

"You can't Occlude at present, so no, you couldn't have ejected me. But the mere attempt would have disrupted our closeness of mind and made my task even more impossible. It seemed a foolhardy risk to let you know what I was doing, when the end result could be to allow Voldemort to possess you."

"You could have explained, could have told me how important it was--"

"You hated me! You could not abide the sight of me, and then you stopped talking to me, completely! Can you really expect me to believe that you would have reacted rationally to the information that I was, by necessity, planning to hover constantly over your very mind?"

"I was still talking to you at that point--"

"Harry," said Snape, the name like a razor slashing through pretense.

"Yeah, I get it." Harry cleared his throat. "I guess I couldn't have been reasonable. You were probably doing the right thing, not telling me. I'm not clear on why you decided to tell me today, though."

"You were proposing to attempt to reduce your supposed Occlumency. That's functionally the same as resisting my doing it, with the same consequences." Snape lifted his shoulders. "I did try to dissuade you without revealing all this."

"Because you thought I still couldn't be rational."

"Perhaps more because of all your comments about what things are 'real' to you now. By that measure, Occlumency has always been a sore point between us."

"True," admitted Harry. "And I can't say that I like the idea of you hovering over me the way you described."

"I have Occluded only," said Snape in an urgent tone. "If you believe nothing else, believe that. This was my fear from the start, Harry. That you would discover the truth and misinterpret it. I have not been spying on you. It's not even possible, for two reasons. One, any attempt to sift your mind would risk the likelihood of injury or permanent amnesia, and two, it would require me to stop Occluding, therefore rendering your mind open to attacks by the . . . by Voldemort."

Harry blinked. "Permanent amnesia?"

"Yes," said Snape impatiently. "Why else would I go to such lengths to be certain that Voldemort
could gain no foothold in your mind?"

"I-- I thought it was because buried in there somewhere are an awful lot of secrets about the Order--"

"You complete imbecile!" roared Snape. "I do not love the Order and lie awake at night because it does not love me!"

"He doesn't really think you're an imbecile," said Draco from his chair. Harry had forgotten he was there, he'd been silent for so long. "He meant to call you an idiot child. It's his way of showing affection."

"Draco--" Snape glared, and apparently decided he was better off dropping the topic, though he did add, very stiffly to Harry, "I do not think you are an imbecile."

"I think I understood the word in context, that time," murmured Harry, still feeling stunned. Sure, he'd known that Snape loved him. He hadn't known that the man felt so strongly about it, though. Which made no sense, Harry knew. Except that it sort of did.

"Can I have a hearing potion now?" he joked, sticking a finger in his ear and wiggling it around a bit. He wasn't sure why he did that, except that he had to do something. It was too uncomfortable otherwise, and Harry could hardly claim to love Snape back, could he?

"That one I don't have on hand," said Snape dryly. "Are you sincere?"

"Not really." Harry returned his hand to his lap.

"I'm sorry I misunderstood. I should stop thinking I know everything. Can I at least hope I wasn't as irrational as you feared?"

"You are taking the news in amazing stride, I would say."

"The real test, of course, is whether your subconscious mind can accept this from me, of all wizards."

"I don't want to accept it."

"Precisely what I feared."

"No, I meant--" Harry started over. "Well, I did mean that the way it sounded. You can't expect me to like being helpless. It's not who I try to be."

"And it is never your preference to depend upon an adult."

"Yeah, that too," admitted Harry. "But I also meant that I'd rather be able to Occlude for myself again. Er-- would you be willing to teach me?"

"You idiot child."

"This time he probably does mean it literally," said Draco. "What a stupid question! Of course he's willing to teach you!"

"Yes, I am willing," said Snape with a slight glare at the other boy. "But I am not at all certain that it will be the same as last year. Your magic is different now."

"And it was missing completely then."

"On the contrary, you were accessing dark powers, even then. It's clear in retrospect."

"Oh." Harry swallowed. "So you think I can't?"
"What I think is that you are a capable wizard and that you certainly can, but it may not be the same as last year."

"Well . . . we can find out." When Snape nodded, his dark eyes pleased, Harry had to chuckle. "And to think I was worried there'd be nothing to do here."

"You were concerned about that?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "I thought teenagers pined for the opportunity to do nothing at all."

"Oh, we do." Harry laughed again. "But I thought, you know . . ." He gestured at the room in general. "I knew we were going to try for being friends, but I couldn't really imagine how it would work out in close quarters."

"And now you can?"

"Well, yeah. It helps that you told me something I have every right to know. I mean, now that I was ready to hear it."

"Ah," said Snape slowly. "Then in the interests of full disclosure . . . I should perhaps mention one more thing that you have . . ." He paused as if considering his words carefully. In the end, though, he could do no better than echo Harry. "Every right to know."

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other: Chapter 32: "In Concert"

~

Notes: Laskin's Bluff is an original historical romance I've written, now available online. To read a summary, see what other readers have said, and preview the prologue and first chapter, go here: http://tinyurl.com/aspenoriginals

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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"One more thing?" A tight ball began forming in Harry's gut. When he leaned forward in his seat, it became a burning sensation. Harry clenched his legs, but didn't lean back again. He couldn't. He was too angry. Irrational anger, he knew by now. Snape had been trying to get along, ever since Harry had woken up without his memories. He'd been trying for longer than that, Harry knew, though he couldn't remember it. He didn't need to remember in order to believe it, not when he had so many of Draco's stories of last year inside his head. Unless Draco had been lying . . .

Harry didn't think he had, though a few weeks ago he would have laughed out loud if anybody had predicted that he'd ever, ever start to trust Draco Malfoy.

Or Draco Snape.

All that knowledge of how Snape wanted to get along, though, didn't do a thing to help Harry's anger. How could it? Snape kept refusing to tell him about anything that really mattered. He wasn't Draco, that was for sure.

He couldn't help but jump to conclusions around Snape. He'd endured five years of abuse from the man, and those, he did remember. Deep down where it counted, he didn't trust Snape.

"One more thing?" he asked again, since Snape had yet to reply.

Didn't he know that secrets and silence weren't going to gain him Harry's confidence? But that might be a lost cause in any case. Perhaps Snape even knew it.

"Yes." Snape said the word without any emotion that Harry could detect, but he didn't say anything else.

The burning in Harry's gut felt like a river of acid by then, carving a canyon through his midsection. He clenched his fists, somehow managing not to gasp with the pain. His anger mattered more. It was bordering on hatred, actually, though Harry tried really hard never to hate anybody but Voldemort. Well, and Bellatrix. Snape wasn't in their league and he knew it, but still . . . "Talk, damn it!"

The man gave a curt nod. "It's about the room you Portkeyed into last night."

The room? The pie-shaped room? Was that what this was about?

His anger abruptly dissolved. It was strange how suddenly it fled, like water running down a drain, leaving him feeling strangely empty. He wasn't even sure why he'd got so angry. It had seemed for a moment as though Snape had been about to tell him something almost life-shattering, something that would make him scream in utter despair. He had no idea why he'd assume something like that, though.
Nothing about the pie-shaped room could be so very devastating, could it?

Harry relaxed a little, the acid in his stomach receding. "What about the room?"

Was it his imagination, or did Snape grimace a little? It was hard to tell, since his usual expression was sternness personified. "I told you nothing that was untrue, but now . . . I think now that I should tell you more of the actual truth."

That was just plain annoying. "More of the truth? Why not try for the whole truth?"

No wonder he didn't trust Snape. Who the hell went around telling partial truths to their own--

No. Harry wasn't going there, not even if his mind seemed to want to.

Sort of. Sometimes.

They were just friends, something Harry needed to keep in mind. Something he needed to keep obviously between them. "That's the way friends act, isn't it? Telling each other the whole truth?"

Snape sighed. "Are we friends, Harry?"

Of course they weren't. How could they be? But Harry had promised to try, so he shrugged. "Not yet, really, but I promised to teach you how, remember?"

"You did," said Snape in a low voice.

He didn't sound stoic now, but torn. Hurting. What would a friend do about that? So . . . encouragement.

"Just be brave," he said. "Tell me whatever it is. I mean, it can't be that bad, can it?"

Harry didn't see how it could, unless Snape was going to confess to using the room to conduct Dark rituals that would give Voldemort more power. And that clearly wasn't on. Harry did trust him that much. In fact, knowing what he did about Snape spying for Dumbledore, risking his life and his health and his sanity to help the Order, he suddenly had to say it. A friend would.

"I know you can be brave, sir."

For once, the man didn't say anything about that last word. Instead, he closed his eyes for the space of five seconds, as if steeling himself. Or making a decision. Harry couldn't really tell.

Then he opened them and began to speak. "I told you that the room was a part of my quarters. That much is true; the headmaster made it so. But as long as you remained unaware that I was shielding your mind, it was best to leave off any details that might . . . disturb you."

"A Slytherin lie. Again."

Snape inclined his head. "Yes. For you see . . . the room is located quite close to your own dormitory in Gryffindor Tower."

"How close is quite close?"

Some part of Harry was aware that he shouldn't be able to read Snape like this. Not well enough to catch the nuances in his speech, to know that even now, he was trying to skirt the border between truth and deceit.
"The room is on the same level as your own, and adjacent."

Why couldn't he use regular words once in a while? "It's the room next door, you mean."

"Yes."

"And?"

Snape narrowed his eyes at the prompting, but only slightly. "Very well, then. The unadulterated truth, since you prefer it so very much. I spend time in that room each night, Harry, in a bed a scant three feet away from your own."

Harry stared. "That bed in there, it's just on the other side of the wall from mine?"

"Yes."

"That's . . ." He gave a shaky laugh, not sure what to think. "That's kind of creepy. Um . . . no offense."

"I was certain that you would find it 'creepy.' Particularly when you were going to such lengths to be nowhere in my vicinity."

*Nowhere in his vicinity . . ."But you needed to be close to me," said Harry, catching on. "For the, er, Occlumency transfer to work."

Snape laced his fingers together, but less tensely than before. Not that he looked relaxed, either. "I needed as much proximity as possible. A stone wall between us was not ideal, but it was far preferable to being separated by half the castle for twelve hours out of every twenty-four."

"So that's where you were the times I went to your quarters to see you." More pieces clicked into place inside Harry's mind. "That's the Order business you needed my map for too, isn't it? You weren't just using it to keep track of me, you were trying to put yourself in my vicinity as much as possible. Without me knowing!"

"You couldn't know," said Snape simply. "You would have taken measures to avoid me all the more, and as it was I could barely manage to keep you properly shielded from intrusions. Nor could I explain why the map was being withheld from you. Not without telling you of the Occlumency itself, and at that time?"

"I'd have pitched a fit that you were using your mental powers anywhere near me, yeah." Harry sucked in a breath. "All right. I understand. But, uh . . . can I have my map back, now? You don't have to lurk around to spend time with me. Not if we're friends."

A look of profound relief crossed over Snape's features, though again, Harry couldn't really be sure how he knew that. It wasn't like the man's expression had changed so much that it should be obvious. And yet . . . it was obvious.

"I shall write to Albus this evening, asking him to send it on. It's in his caretaking for the holidays, since he has stayed at the castle."

That made perfect sense, but it still irked Harry to know that his map was being passed around like that. He should be the one deciding who got to use it, who got to see the people wandering the halls and dungeons of Hogwarts . . .

"Hey," he exclaimed. "Why weren't you at home those times I tried to see you? You can floo to the
dungeons from that room, and if you were tracking me all the time on the map, you should have known that I was trying to see you!"

"I wasn't tracking you while I was asleep, certainly."

Oh. Harry had missed something, then. "I thought you weren't sleeping. I thought you were staying up all night to keep the Occlumency going."

"I see that the words, clear your mind before you go to sleep hold no meaning whatever for you," said Snape dryly.

"You didn't explain!" erupted Harry, memories of his miserable fifth year crashing over him. "You just yelled and threw me across the room and screamed for me to clear my mind and never told me fucking how, and all the time somebody could have told me it was just a prophecy he wanted! That was the reason I didn't want to learn the Occlumency, you know! Because I thought Voldemort was trying to get a weapon, and I thought that somebody should care about that!"

"I didn't explain," said Snape, his own voice shaking a little. "That was what I meant to convey with my comment, Harry. At the very least, you should have realised that one can Occlude while sleeping. I was your teacher, and I didn't teach you in a way you could understand."

"You didn't teach me at all." Harry wasn't trying to be nasty, though he knew his words had probably come out sounding that way.

"I taught you in the way I myself had been taught." Snape grimaced. "Which does not absolve me. As the purportedly responsible adult, I should have taken measures to improve my methods of instruction when it became clear that they lacked any hope of success."

"Yeah, you should have," retorted Harry. He was in no mood yet to let Snape off the hook. "But why would you do that? It was great fun to watch me suffer, wasn't it? Well? Wasn't it!"

"What do you want me to say?" asked Snape in a weary tone. "I have already apologized for these incidents. Several times, in fact."

"I just want the truth! You thought it was great fun to make me suffer! Just say it!"

"James had bullied me and I in turn bullied you, hoping with each insult that he was listening and hurting for you. That is the truth."

"I . . . " Harry turned his head away. "Yeah, all right. I believe that's the truth. It makes you a petty, vindictive sort of person, I hope you know."

"That's all in the past, Harry," said Draco from his chair. "You've forgiven me for worse things that that. For Merlin's sake -- I tried to make you fall from your broom at high speed!"

And Snape had once kept Harry from falling.

Somehow, that didn't change his anger, which was back again with a vengeance. He wanted to hurt Snape like he'd been hurt. Wanted it so badly, in fact, that he forgot about his resolve to keep private things private. "So you can Occlude in your sleep. Got it. Can you Occlude while roaring drunk, too? Because I notice that there was one night when you didn't care about keeping your wits about you!"

Draco half-rose from his chair, but a flick of Snape's wand made him fall back into it.
"Was that because I'd just screamed that I didn't ever want to see again?" Harry went right on. "I thought you'd got yourself pissed out of despair, but it was more than that, wasn't it? You decided to fuck the Occlumency! You were in your quarters that night! You didn't even bother to go up to your special room! After what I'd said, you decided you didn't give a flying flip if Voldemort possessed me--"

Harry wasn't sure what happened then, but it was like he'd run out of steam. His eyes hurt like he'd been crying for an hour, but when he reached up a hand to swipe at them, his cheeks were dry as bone.

It didn't seem like Snape had moved, but suddenly he was in front of Harry, kneeling on the floor so their eyes were on the same level. "No. No, Harry. There is no truth in that. Not one word."

There weren't any undertones in his voice, not that time. No prevarication. Just raw, honest truth. Not that Harry thought he could always be sure when Snape was lying. This once, though, he thought he could be sure that he was telling the truth.

"Then . . ." He wanted to swipe at his cheeks again, but didn't want Snape to think he was crying when he wasn't. So he sat on his hands instead. "I don't understand."

"We'd argued because I'd seen Lupin earlier that day and hadn't let you speak with him," said Snape, remaining motionless in his kneel. "When Lupin saw me, he was . . . concerned." Snape's features contorted in remembrance. "The stress of fighting with you, of attempting to maintain Occlumency shields over you when half the time you were nowhere near me . . . he said I looked like a shell of my usual self."

"He knows what you're doing with the Occlumency?"

"Not because I told him," said Snape, scoffing a little. "Voldemort knows, Harry. I can Occlude and hide the fact of it when it is just myself I am protecting, but when I am Occluding for two?" Snape shook his head. "My shield blocking your mind is too obvious to miss. And so yes, Lupin knows. And when he saw me looking ready to snap from the strain, he insisted that I must take an evening off to recover."

"But you can't take an evening off," said Draco quietly. "Harry would be attacked."

Snape's smile was grim. "Not if Lupin took steps to incapacitate his master for an evening."

"He didn't," breathed Harry, horrified at the idea. "He'd be killed--"

"Oh, he's not so foolish as to assault the Dark Lord directly," said Snape, moving to sit on his heels as he remained kneeling in front of Harry. "And I considered the matter dangerous enough that I told Lupin in no uncertain terms that he was to do nothing at all. But your friend has a mind of his own."

"Like all Gryffindors," said Draco.

"Shut up about Gryffindor," ordered Harry. "That goes for both of you."

Draco raised his shoulders as if to ask, But what did I say?

Harry ignored him. "So what did Remus do, then?"

Snape sighed. "He was instrumental, this past summer, in assisting Voldemort to heal after a mad attempt to gain Dark Powers through a bone marrow extraction. Even now, Voldemort has off days
during which he suffers some effects from the procedure, and as Lupin is his most valued Death Eater at the moment, he has been placed in charge of the potions Voldemort relies upon at these times."

"He tainted a potion?"

"Nothing that foolish. However, against my express instructions, Lupin took it upon himself to recommend a bone marrow replenisher that night. He very kindly provided Voldemort with a powerful sedative as well, one which would repress even unconscious attempts at Legilimency . . . though of course, the ostensible reason for the sedative was that it would spare Voldemort the not-inconsiderable pain of marrow replenishment."

"So you knew I wasn't going to be in any danger of attack, not that night."

"The moment Lupin had rendered Voldemort insensible, he communicated as much to me so that I could 'have a night off,' as it were." Snape's eyes were shadowed. "You had just a few moments earlier stormed from my quarters. In the circumstances, it seemed as good a time as any to have a few stiff drinks."

"Yeah," admitted Harry. "I guess . . . I don't know."

"You do know. You thought I'd given up on you."

Harry shifted back in his seat. "Um . . . yes."

"I won't."

Harry heard that like a chime coming from a long way off. He couldn't be sure that it was real. He also couldn't think about it. "If Remus is so trusted by Voldemort, why can't he just slip a fatal dose of something into one of these potions?"

"What is fatal for a wizard of Voldemort's strength would be evident when Nagini tasted it."

"So Remus isn't so trusted."

"Voldemort trusts no-one more than Nagini."

"Damn."

"She also guards him in his sleep, lest anyone think to draw near with wand drawn," added Snape. "In other words, he's thought of everything," said Harry morosely.

"Not everything," murmured Snape. "You do indeed possess a power the Dark Lord knows not."

Harry didn't bother correcting him on using that title. Too much else was on his mind. "No, I don't. I guess I used to, but you know what my magic's like now."

"It will be all right."

"Maybe," said Harry morosely.

"Of course it will," said Draco. "You'll get your dark powers back, just like you got your light powers back. Dad didn't think that would ever happen, but--"

"Draco!"
Harry sighed. He didn't want to hear again how nobody was supposed to tell him anything. "Maybe we should just get started with the Occlumency lessons, Severus. Who knows? Maybe that'll unlock something in my head that'll let my dark powers flow again, assuming I still have them at all."

Snape rose from his kneel and stretched a little. "We'll have to share thoughts, to some degree at least. That won't bother you?"

Of course it would, but getting his memory back would be worth it. Anything so he could make that mirror work again. "It won't," said Harry staunchly. "Just-- well, if you can manage it, just don't do what that healer did. Yatesborough? It felt like knives slicing into me when he was trying to make me remember--"

"He was trying to bring forth your lost year," said Snape, tapping a finger against his chin. "We've all been warned not to force that. Therefore, I'll swim through only recent memories as I try to show you how to Occlude them. Will that be--"

"I'm going to London!" Draco suddenly announced, jumping up from his chair and shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "I have to see Rhiannon. I'll take my broom, but don't worry, I can Disillusion myself in flight, and--"

Snape rounded on him. "You are not going to London, and that's final."

"She won't even be there, will she?" asked Harry. "Uni's on holiday too--"

"Then I'll find her wherever she is!" Draco's eyes looked wild as he darted a glance from Harry to Snape and back. "I can't just stay here while the two of you do this. I have to be doing something!"


Draco's mouth dropped open. "You can't do that!"

"Don't talk like a Hufflepuff. It's tedious."

Harry supposed that this wouldn't really be the best time to tell them both to stuff their contempt for the other houses. "It won't fly except here and at Hogwarts?"

Draco scowled. "Then I'll walk. Or are you going to cast Incarcerous too?"

"Don't tempt me."

"Go ahead! Hex me again!"

"Did I mention that your brother has an impulse control problem?" asked Snape dryly. "Perhaps you could go flying with him and help take his mind off his petite amie."

"As if anything could do that!" Draco suddenly stilled. "But . . . all right, fine." He stomped to where Snape was standing and snatched his broom rather viciously, then was out the door, calling, "Come on, Harry!"

Harry glanced doubtfully at Snape. "Maybe we should find a way to help him see this Rhiannon girl. I mean . . . sometimes I think he's not all that stable."

"Come on, Harry!"

After one last glance at Snape, who was looking . . . huh, more thoughtful than angry now, Harry
I don't really have an impulse control problem," said Draco as they circled each other, high in the air over the cottage. Harry was glad that Ron had got him over his fear of flying, since otherwise... well, they were a long way up. "I just didn't see much point in staying if Severus was going to see into all your recent memories."

"Why? There's nothing... oh," said Harry, feeling stupid. "Our talks. All our talks in the Room of Requirement."

"They were worth it, every word," said Draco fiercely. "You trust me, now. Some, at least. And sometimes you even act as though you might like me!"

"I do like you. Except when you're insulting my friends or Gryffindor."

Draco sighed. "Right. I'll work on that. Not that it'll matter much. As soon as you two start sharing minds, I might as well hex myself. It's probably better than waiting for Severus to do it."

"He's not going to hex you."

"Ha. He made me eat poison, don't forget. Eh-- bad choice of words."

"I'm not going to let him hurt or punish you for telling me things." Harry wasn't sure how to stop it, not exactly, but he was determined to figure out a way. It wasn't right that Draco should have to suffer, not for that. He'd been the only person Harry had been able to rely on. He'd been the only one acting like a true friend. And Harry had needed that!

And Draco had been the only one to figure that out.

"There's no way around it," said Draco, sliding his hands forward on his broom handle, his body following until he was lying down on it. That just proved what a good flier he was. It was difficult to stay in that position and still keep the broom going in level circles, but Draco made it look easy. "You can't back out of these Occlumency lessons."

"Too suspicious?"

"Too dangerous." Draco flipped over on his back, controlling the broom with his feet.

"That's too dangerous. Knock it off."

"Just knock me off. Put me out my misery."

"Stop it!"

Draco gave him a long, hopeless look, but then he flipped over and sat up properly. "It's not like I have any illusions, Harry. You're more important than I am, both to the war and to Severus, and my..."
own mother couldn't even be arsed to send me a letter for my coming-of-age. All I really had was Rhiannon, and--"

"Stop it," said Harry again, meaning something completely different that time. He didn't like hearing Draco talk like this.

"Why should I stop it? You have to learn to Occlude on your own again. Severus can't keep this up forever; it's a miracle he's managed as long as he has. So . . ." Draco gulped, just a little. "I'll lose my father when he finds out I couldn't be the son he wanted. Seems to be my lot in life."

A hand seemed to reach inside Harry's chest to squeeze his heart. He hadn't known that Draco's anguish could affect him so strongly. He supposed it meant that he'd grown to care about him. Or maybe he'd never stopped, even if he had forgotten. Harry didn't know. He did know one thing, though.

"You won't lose me," he said, flying close enough to reach out a hand, putting it on Draco's broom to steady it. "We're brothers. And no, I don't remember. It's just . . . it feels real, now."

Draco gave him a wan smile. A smile that didn't reach his eyes. "That's something, at least."

"You're a good brother, too." Harry shook Draco's broom a little to emphasize his words. "You knew I needed those talks, and you're not going to lose your father over it. Or get punished, or anything. You don't deserve it."

"Isn't it fortunate that we don't all get what we deserve," said Draco in a tone that was . . . odd, somehow. Harry didn't know what to make of it, or of the stare that followed.

"What?"

"Perils of desperation. Severus says that, and I was hoping to cue your memory. If we could fly down there and you could announce that you'd remembered everything on your own . . . no, it probably still wouldn't matter. He's going to hate me."

"He's not going to hate you."

"Why, because he's such a loving person at heart? You don't believe that." Draco gulped. "And you don't know how many times he lectured me to be careful what I said around you. You didn't hear our arguments."

"I heard some of them--"

"And for him to find out that I did it deliberately, that it wasn't even carelessness, but defiance--" Draco shuddered. "Lucius had strong views when it came to defiance. Not that I'm expecting a wizard's beating, but somehow I care more about what Severus thinks of me, so it's going to hurt worse when he says I don't-- I don't--" Draco stiffened his spine and lifted his chin, his knuckles white where he gripped the broom. "So be it, then. Maybe I don't deserve to be his son, but I'm old enough to be past needing a father, and--"

"Don't be stupid." Harry shook the other boy's broom again. Draco's brittle pride was even worse than his open pain. "Nobody's that old."

"Including you?"

"I don't have one. But you do, and he obviously matters to you--"
"And to think that you were telling me not to be stupid," said Draco softly. "He matters to you, too."

"Look, friends is about all I can possibly imagine, and even that's a stretch since I can't really . . ." Harry's voice dropped off as he drifted into thought. Hmm. He could think of several reasons why his idea had merit. It probably wasn't perfect, but it was hard to see a down side. Unless, of course, Snape refused to go along with it, but that was pretty damned hard to imagine, particularly if Harry was careful . . .

"Since you can't really what?"

"Oh. Trust Snape," said Harry, only slowly coming back into the present. This could work, couldn't it?

"You're daft if you don't trust Snape. He loves you!"

"Well, I do trust him on some levels," mused Harry. "I definitely trust that he's on Dumbledore's side in the war. I guess I must trust him not to make Occlumency a nightmare this time. But I don't really trust him as a friend, you see?" Harry thought it over once more, and then nodded. Yes, this could work. Actually . . . if Snape really loved him and was desperate to re-establish any tie he could, Harry's plan couldn't possibly fail.

"I'm going to go down and have a little talk with Snape," said Harry. "Probably best if you aren't there, considering his temper. When I come out and wave at you, it's safe to join us. And don't you dare chicken out and run off to London."

"He hexed my broom to keep me here!"

"You said you'd walk."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Figure of speech. I'd Apparate at the very least."

"Well, don't. Promise?"

Draco looked doubtful, but then he shrugged a little. "All right, then. I promise. But what . . . what's your plan?"

"Make him promise a couple of things."

"He's a Slytherin!" Draco moaned, low in his throat. "I'm doomed. Doomed, doomed, doomed--"

"You know how you kept asking me to trust you?" Harry smiled. "You're just going to have to trust me."

"To manipulate Severus!"

"No . . . well, yeah. Yes."

Draco shot Harry a glance. "Actually, you've done that a fair few times, but in those cases, Severus was letting you."

Interesting. "He's going to let me this time, too. All right then?"

"What if it goes wrong?"

"It won't."
"But what if it does?"
"Can things get any worse?"
"No, I'm doomed either way."
"Right then. I'm off!"

Draco groaned, but didn't try to stop him as Harry angled his broom into a steep dive.

----------------------------------------

"I see that Mr Weasley has done a very fine job indeed," said Snape as Harry pulled up sharply on his broom and hopped off. "You're entirely comfortable in the air."

"It probably helps that I can't actually remember the accident. But yeah, Ron was great."

Snape glanced up. "Has your brother calmed down?"

Hmm. Harry wasn't bothered that time by the "brother" reference, though it was the tiniest bit annoying to have Snape harp on it. "Some, and I think I should explain something. I know he's my brother. There's no need to try to convince me of it."

Snape went still, then asked, very carefully, "Do you know he's your brother in an intellectual sense, or . . .?"

"No, it's pretty real."

"I see."

Damn. Harry would have thought that would make Snape at least a little bit happy, but instead, he'd spoken stiffly. Well, that just went to prove that being a grown-up didn't make you grown up. Snape was probably feeling left out. Which was . . . well, understandable, Harry supposed. But it was still a little bit petty to begrudge Draco.

On the other hand, Harry could use that to his advantage. "Come inside. I need to talk to you about something."

Even jealous of Draco, Snape still obviously cared for him. He glanced upward again. "Perhaps we should keep Draco in view."

No chance. Draco would be watching, maybe even using some kind of telescopic spell, and with his frame of mind, he didn't need to see Snape looking like he wanted to strangle him.

"He'll be all right." Harry looked up at Snape without smiling, but without frowning either. "Trust me."

The man drew in a shaky breath. "I . . . very well." His robes swirled in a dramatic arc as he
whirled around and strode through the door of the cottage.

Harry shut it firmly behind them and pulled the curtains shut for good measure. Just in case. Though he was hoping, really hoping, that Snape would handle himself better than Draco was expecting.

Snape sat down and waved for Harry to do the same, and then looked at him with a steady, expectant gaze. It wasn't without wariness, either. "You needed to talk to me, you said?"

"Yeah. Um . . ." Harry cleared his throat. Somehow this had all seemed a lot simpler when he was up in the air, thinking of the big picture. Now that it was down to details, down to words to choose, he wasn't sure how to get started. Huh. Maybe with the big picture. "I've decided something. I'd . . . uh, I'd like to be able to trust you better."

"Trust me better," Snape slowly repeated. "I don't know what you mean."

"The way friends trust," Harry hurriedly added. He hadn't meant to make it sound like he couldn't trust Snape at all. "I mean, I already do trust you a lot, but only with certain kinds of things. Like the war, right? But that's not personal."

"Ah. You would like to be able to trust me on a personal level, I surmise."

It was strange how Snape almost seemed to be leading this conversation, but Harry shrugged that impression off. He probably just knew how to put things. At least he was using only words that Harry could understand.

"Yeah, trust you on a personal level, that's it. I mean, friends do, and I think that's part of why this is so hard for me. It's just . . . it's missing. But I was thinking, and--"

"Were you."

Okay, Harry didn't have a clue what that was supposed to mean. On the other hand, he didn't feel like he was being called stupid. So maybe he did trust Snape on a personal level already, just a tiny bit. But that was beside the point.

"Yeah. I was thinking, and it occurred to me that we should do something about that. It's not going to just pop into existence all by itself."

"These things take time," said Snape in a voice that was so smooth it was almost oily.

"Yeah, they usually do, but . . ." Harry cleared his throat. He wasn't sure quite how this would all go, but he wasn't expecting Snape to act like . . . Harry didn't know. It was just . . . odd, in a way he couldn't put his finger on. "Um, but maybe we could do something to, I don't know, kind of build some trust on purpose?"

"That does sound promising," murmured Snape. "Dare I hope that you've already settled on specifics? Because if not, I could suggest a range of alternatives. I do believe there's a technique in therapy wherein one party tips over backwards, trusting the other to catch him. Perhaps we could try that."

"I think you're too heavy for me--"

"You would need to be the one to fall, presuming that the purpose of the exercise is for you to learn to trust me."
Somehow they'd got a long way from the point Harry had been trying to get to. "That won't work. I mean, I do already trust you to save me. You've done it enough. So I thought that maybe--"

"Shall I suggest some other trust-building alternatives? I have heard, for example, that among the wild pixies of North Africa, there lives a tribe of wizards who--"

"I already have an idea!" exclaimed Harry.

"You don't think, perhaps, that mine might be better?"

"No. I know what I want."

"Ah. Well, then, by all means. Do explain."

Now Harry was right back where he'd started, trying to find the right words. He'd set it up pretty well, and Snape seemed more than receptive, but Harry could still ruin everything if he blurted out the truth. "Well, it's complicated."

"More so than advanced arithmancy?"

"Complicated's not the right word," muttered Harry. "It's difficult, I meant. All right, look. I'd like to tell you a secret. Something really personal, and it involves another person, and you have to promise. I mean **swear**, that no matter how upset you feel, you won't take it out on this other person."

It wasn't until the next moment, when Snape started to look grim, that Harry realised the man had been enjoying himself the moment before. "I imagine you would also like me to swear that I won't vent my displeasure upon you."

"Me? I didn't do anything--""

Snape jerked forward in his chair, almost snarling. "You got Miss Lovegood with child without **doing** anything?"

Harry gaped. "What? No! She's not, I didn't-- oh, my God. We just kissed, is all!" His eyes narrowed when he thought of something else. "How is it that you can go from thinking I'm gay to assuming for no reason at all that I'm getting girls pregnant?"

Snape's expression was shuttered, by then. "It was brought home to me rather forcefully last night that far from being attracted to young wizards, you are rather enamored of Miss Lovegood."

"Yeah, well there's a difference between 'enamored' and . . . and you know!"

"Yes, I can see that there is." Snape sat back, steepled his hands together, and drew in a long, slow breath. "At this point your secret is bound to be rather anti-climactic. Perhaps you should just reveal it."

"Not until you promise."

"Ah, of course. So you can learn to trust me."

Harry didn't know why he sounded so sardonic about it. "Yeah, that's right."

"Very well. I promise. I trust you haven't changed your stance on unbreakable vows?"

"No, and then I'd only get to trust that you don't want to die. I want you to . . . uh, keep faith with
me because it's what friends do. So, promise."

"I do believe I just did."

Harry wasn't going to fall for that one. Draco had been right in what he'd said about dealing with a Slytherin. "Be specific."

Snape stared straight at him. "I swear that no matter how upset I may be, I won't 'take it out' on this other person."

"Or me," added Harry. By then he'd decided that when you looked at things in a certain light, he had done something Snape wouldn't approve of very much. He'd listened. No sense in getting in trouble when there was an easy way to avoid it.

"Or you," said Snape. "Ah, but you prefer specifics. I swear that no matter how upset I am--"

"That's good enough," interrupted Harry. He didn't like the feeling that Snape was making fun. Actually, the fact that Snape might be finding this amusing was a bit alarming. What if he'd already figured out a way around Harry's wording?

Harry thought back, trying to see if there was any leeway in the way he'd put things. Any loophole-

"I also swear," said Snape calmly, "that I understand the difference between the letter and the spirit of the law, and that I've no wish to disrupt whatever fragile accord we can manage to forge. I will regard my promise as one of letter and spirit both."

Yeah, well he wouldn't be happy he'd said that once he knew what it was all about. "You won't do anything sneaky, like assign detention for something unrelated, or even just act like you hate the person even though you can't do anything about it?"

Snape raised an eyebrow. "No, but I think you should realise how much you have already revealed. There aren't a great many people of your acquaintance that would care whether or not I hate them."

Harry gulped. He probably had said too much. Although, Snape had already promised, so . . .

"I also think it's time you provided specifics."

"All right. I . . . well, it's like this. The past month, er, month and a half, it hasn't been easy, and . . . well . . ." Harry gulped again. He'd never imagined it would be this hard to say it. But then, when he'd been in the air with Draco, he hadn't been thinking about how he'd promised to keep all this a secret. It would probably be all right . . . in fact, by then Harry was almost positive that it would be, but that didn't change the fact that in saying anything more, he'd be breaking faith with Draco.

When it came right down to it, he couldn't do it.

Especially not like this, all dressed up like trust was what mattered.

He pressed his lips firmly together and shook his head, only to be startled when both his hands were suddenly grasped in a firm, cool grip. "Please trust me, Harry."

Snape was on his knees again, and Harry didn't like it. He yanked his hands away and shifted over, one sharp gesture saying that Snape ought to sit beside him. Only when Snape had moved did Harry manage to speak again. "I can't, but it's not you. I just . . . I made a promise, too. I don't know why I didn't remember that sooner. I just thought this would be brilliant, but it's not, and it's not the
amnesia's fault. This time, it's all mine." He raised his eyes to Snape's. "I do think that you'd keep your promise, not that it probably matters now."

"It matters." Snape paused. "Would it help if I told you that I'll keep it still? Your trust and respect are worth far more to me than a week or two of annoyance."

"I still can't tell you."

"No, of course not," murmured Snape. "You can't break your word to your foolish brother."

So Snape had guessed that Draco was involved in the secret. Harry had given it away with that "you can't hate him" concern.

"He wasn't foolish," Harry had to say. "He's been wonderful."

"It's good that the two of you are getting along so well." Snape closed his eyes and looked deep in thought for a moment. "Well. Intriguing as it was to watch your fledgling manoeuvres, I think I should let you know that I'm aware of Draco's misdeeds."

Ha. Talk about manoeuvring. "Now you're just trying to catch me out," said Harry, slanting Snape a wry glance. "It won't work. I won't tell you--"

"That your brother has been taking you aside to speak a word in your ear?"

"I don't know what you mean," said Harry, crossing his arms. It was almost true, too. *Speak a word in your ear?* Who talked like that?

"Oh, you weren't aware that he's been telling you all about last year? Perhaps you should have listened. You might even have been able to ask some pertinent questions."

Harry carefully kept his expression blank, even though Snape's tone hadn't been hostile. Just . . . sardonic, still. Like he'd known everything before this conversation had even started. No wonder he'd seemed so darkly amused half the time. "I still don't know what you mean--"

"At the risk of sounding unlike myself . . ." Snape leaned over sideways and looked Harry even more deeply in the eyes. "Give it up."

"Give what up?"

Snape chuckled.

"Oh, all right," said Harry crossly. "How long have you known?"

"Not long." Snape relaxed against the couch, stretching out his legs and crossing the ankles at the heels.

"If you tell me that I gave the game away with this stupid 'trust' discussion--"

"No, Draco gave himself away," interrupted Snape. "I believed in his sudden urge to see his petite amie for approximately two minutes. By the time the two of you were outside, it occurred to me to wonder about the timing. Just as I'd made it clear that I would see your recent memories? I could only think of one circumstance that would warrant such alarm on his part."

"His lack of impulse control did him in."

"Yes. Had he remained more collected . . . ah, but just as well that he did not. At least this way, I
had some time to come to terms with what he had done. That might not have been true if I'd first seen it in your mind."

Harry suddenly felt nervous. He almost sat on his hands to hide their trembling, but then decided that clasping them tightly together on his lap wouldn't be too huge a giveaway. "So, uh . . . have you come to terms with it?"

Snape grimaced. "Yes. I'm not pleased, but while you were still flying I'd decided that pouring too much invective on him would only alienate you as well."

Harry swallowed, thinking of the things Draco had said. "You ought to care just as much if you alienate him, sir. Um, Severus--"

"You misunderstand." Snape made a vague gesture. "My relationship with him is such that it would recover."

"Draco thought you were going to hate him forever," blurted Harry. He knew a second later that he shouldn't have said it since it was Draco's private business, but in that instant, he couldn't help himself. Snape obviously thought that Draco was a lot more resilient than he really was.

"That idiot child," said Snape softly. "Well, I shall endeavour to rectify that."

Harry nodded. "So why'd you let me go through that whole dance, then? You could have just said you already knew. I mean, once it was obvious what I was on about."

"It was absolutely fascinating to watch."

Harry almost stuck his tongue out. "You still could have said something."

"Once I understood your purpose," said Snape in a voice that was somehow low and off-hand all at once, "I was rather looking forward to the chance to prove myself worthy of your trust."

Oh. "If you'd already forgiven him, it wouldn't have been a very good test of your trust, though." Harry rolled his eyes. "See? I knew you were going to be sneaky in some way I couldn't anticipate."

"You must allow me my own manoeuvres." Snape sighed. "Such a shame that I scuppered you. I would give almost anything to have the chance you were offering. It was a very sound idea you had, no matter that your execution was rather . . . awkward."

"Pathetic, I think you mean."

"Endearing."

Harry clenched his hands a little more tightly. This was going places he hadn't counted on.

"But not to be, I suppose." Snape made as though to rise to his feet. "Shall we go and let your brother know that all is forgiven?"

"You really aren't going to yell at him?"

"No."

"Lecture him?" asked Harry suspiciously.

"I might mention it at some point. Not tonight, I think."
"But you were so worried that it would ruin all my chances to remember--"

"True, but there's nothing to be done about it at this point. Will railing at Draco unravel the past?"

"No . . ."

"Besides," added Snape. "Draco will merely argue that his way was best for you. I know he was convinced of it. He did what he felt a good brother had to do, and he was willing to brave my wrath to do it. I'm torn between respect and annoyance, if you must know."

Harry whistled. "You're a lot more . . . nuanced, than I thought you'd be."

"Only a child or a fool sees nothing but black and white. For all that, though, I still wish you had something you could entrust to me."

As Snape stood up, Harry reached up and put a hand on his arm. Five minutes ago he'd never have done this, but now, he knew it was the right thing to do. "Wait," he said, rising to his feet. "There is something. The same deal, though. The same promise. You have to be good about this as well. As good as you're being right now, which is . . . well, let's just say that I'm impressed and I really want to let myself trust you. All right?"

Snape paused, but not in hesitation. He looked like a man afraid to believe in the good fortune raining down upon him. "Yes, all right. I promise. In spirit also, as before."

Harry hadn't needed that last bit. He'd understood. "When we first started talking, Draco didn't think I'd believe anything he said, so he came prepared. He . . . uh, he nicked a bottle of Veritaserum from your private lab."

Snape bared his teeth. "Why, that sneaky little--"

"Promise!" Harry reminded him.

"I didn't promise to love hearing it!"

"But you do love him," said Harry urgently. "You do, still. Don't you?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "How did I end up with two such idiot children? The pair of you expect me to stop loving you at the flick of a wand?"

"Yeah, and he's up there worrying about it even now!"

Snape made an impatient noise at that. "May I borrow your broom?"

Harry blinked. "Oh. Well, I said that when it was safe to come down, I'd give him a wave--"

"Harry," said Snape softly. "Trust me."

So . . . Harry did.
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:
Chapter 33: "A Christmas to Remember"

~

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------
A Christmas to Remember

Chapter Notes

Kim and Kristeh are the best!! It's so nice to have betas that stick with me even when I take forever to get through a chapter.

"How do you feel about that?"

Harry managed not to grimace, but it was a close thing. "I think that's the third time you've asked me that in . . ." He checked his watch. "Fifteen minutes."

Marsha Goode lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug, but didn't back down. "A little jealousy wouldn't be unusual. It's quite normal for siblings to compete with one another."

"I'm sure it is, but I'm happy for Draco and Snape to spend so much time together. They both like brewing, and Draco needs-- well, it's good for him, is all."

He had the feeling that she didn't believe him about the jealousy, but all she said was, "Snape?"

Harry knew what she was asking. "Well, I'm starting to get used to calling him Severus to his face." He grimaced a little. "When he's not around, it just seems more natural to use his last name."

"Could that be a way of keeping him at some kind of distance?"

Harry widened his eyes. "I don't know. Could it be? Could that really be it?"

"It's not kind to mock people who are trying to help you."

That was too much. "I thought you got paid every time we talked."

"And now you're trying to keep me at a distance."

Of course he was. His idea of a holiday didn't include a session with a therapist, but he'd made that deal with Snape, so now he was stuck with it.

All in all, though, it hadn't been too bad so far. He'd told her about finding Snape drunk that time, and how until that moment he hadn't really been able to believe that the man truly did care about him. He'd wanted to tell her about Snape shielding his mind and how he'd started to teach Harry how to do it for himself, but that was Order business, so he thought he'd better not.

Her vow of confidentiality wouldn't mean much if Voldemort decided to order her tortured.

That wasn't likely to happen; Snape had taken extraordinary precautions to get her to Hogwarts in complete secrecy. Draco hadn't liked that; he'd wanted all of them to go to her office because then, he might have been able to argue his way into a side trip to see Rhiannon.

Instead, he and Snape were brewing in the private lab in Snape's quarters while Harry met with the "good doctor" in the bedroom he'd once shared with Draco. Strange how it seemed all right to have a session there, now. Snape had promised not to eavesdrop, and somehow . . . Harry believed him.
At the very least, he believed that he wouldn't do it in front of Draco.

"You haven't replied about the way you're trying to keep me at a distance," said Dr Goode, leaning back a little, her hands splayed out on Draco's green and silver bedspread.

Harry met her eyes. "You're the one who got Snape to tell everybody in sight not to let me know anything about last year. I already resented him for adopting me at all, and then you went and made him into the bad guy who turned all my friends against me. What were you trying to do, make sure I'd hate him forever?"

"I had nothing but your best interests at heart."

"Yeah, well so did the Dursleys, every time they shoved me into a dark cupboard. They were wrong, too."

She didn't bat an eyebrow at that, which made Harry think he must have vented to her about the Dursleys before.

"What makes you think I was wrong?"

Well, at least this time Harry had Draco's permission to blab. Good thing, too. He was tired of all the secrecy. It couldn't be helped when it came to things like Occlumency, but this, Harry could talk about. "Because Draco's been answering any question I care to ask him. I know ten tonnes about what went on last year, and the more he told me, the more little bits I started to remember on my own."

"Are you sure that's not the power of suggestion?"

"Yes, and I'll save you the bother of getting him in trouble. Snape already knows."

"I'm relieved to hear that, because if he's doing something to harm you, it falls outside the bounds of confidentiality."

"It's not harming me! I needed some fucking context or I was never going to remember!"

Dr. Goode shifted her position on Draco's bed. "By that metric, you should be remembering more and more as he continues to provide context. Is that the case, would you say?"

"It was," said Harry sourly, "but then something happened. I don't know what, but now it seems like something's slammed shut inside my mind."

"Tell me about that."

The trouble was, Harry couldn't. Not with any specifics, anyway. He wasn't going to say that he'd been scared out of his mind for a second that Lucius Malfoy might actually be the real Lucius Malfoy. But he supposed he could tell her something.

"Well, this is a magical castle, right? The staircases move, and the portraits talk, and--"

"Most squibs have heard all the stories."

"Right. So I ended up trapped by accident in a smallish room without doors or windows, and... well, I don't really think I panicked or anything, but I could feel something happen in my head, right about then. It's been over a week since then, and I haven't remembered a single new thing."

She didn't say anything, but that wasn't unusual. Sometimes when she wanted him to talk more,
she'd remain quiet to let him.

Harry didn't have anything more to say, though. "What do you think it means?"

"Several possibilities come to mind."

"Such as?"

"Perhaps Draco's meddling has finally convinced your mind that it has no reason to remember on its own."

Trust her to see things that way. "That's not it," said Harry firmly. "Look, I know that you're the memory expert, but I'm the one with the amnesia. I could tell that he was helping me, and even if he wasn't, it meant a lot to me that he was the only one who could at least be arsed to try. But anyway, I was remembering things right up until I ended up trapped."

"It could be that the act of being trapped pushed your memory too close to something painful, to something you aren't ready to remember. A case of too much context, so to speak."

Since Harry had already sort of remembered having needles shoved into him all over, that was hard to believe. What could be worse than that?

His doubt must have shown on his face. Marsha Goode lifted one hand in a brief gesture. "Another possibility is that for the time being, you've simply enough to process and your mind knows it. It's not easy to integrate the past and the present, particularly not in circumstances such as your own."

"In other words, until I remember more, I won't know why I stopped remembering."

"Essentially."

"No offense, but that's just fucking brilliant, it is."

To Harry's surprise, she chuckled. "So how are your classes going?"

He had no idea why she'd ask that. It didn't seem like wizarding subjects could make much sense to her. What was he supposed to tell her, that he'd only made it to the second stage of the Animagus transformation, and anybody could do that even if they weren't an Animagus at all?

But maybe she was really only asking about one subject. Or possibly two. "I dropped Potions."

She didn't look surprised, which Harry took to mean that Snape had mentioned it to her. For all Harry knew, he'd told her all about their running battle. Truth to tell, it was kind of a relief to that whole issue settled. His friends had been right that Ethics wasn't bad at all, the way Snape taught it.

He was less willing to believe that the man was a decent Potions teacher these days, but even if he was, it didn't matter. Harry still couldn't stand the thought of learning that subject from Snape. Another case of too much context, he supposed.

"I wasn't asking only after your classes with Professor Snape," she retorted in a wry voice. "I was actually wondering about schoolwork as a whole. Do you feel under undue stress trying to learn two years' worth of material at once?"

"Not so much." Harry had been wondering for a while if it would be rude to toe off his shoes. Now, he went ahead and did it. "Sometimes it seems like all the teachers have to do is remind me of things, and it sort of comes back, and I feel like I knew them all along. I was hoping it would be
the same when Draco told me things, but it wasn't."

"The difference between impersonal and personal information," she murmured.

"Yeah, I suppose."

"You sound troubled."

Harry swallowed. "I'm just wondering what I'm going to do if I never remember anything more."

She leaned forward on the edge of the bed, her eyes kind. "You'll live your life, Harry."

*Without Sirius.*

Strange how that should hurt so much, when it was just the way life was. People died, and then they were out of reach.

But Sirius didn't have to be . . . unless, of course, Harry could never remember. He'd been hoping that learning Occlumency would help his memories somehow. That hope had been dashed a little by Snape's decision to work with recent memories only when they shared minds, but then Harry had told himself that since he'd learned Occlumency during his missing year, maybe the sheer act of re-learning it would open up something inside his mind.

It hadn't, though.

*I thought that went rather well,* Snape had said after their fourth session, the first one during which Harry had made some real progress.

Harry had agreed, but only with his voice, not with his mind and heart. It wasn't going well, not when his memories seemed more locked away all the time. He wasn't sure any longer if the analogy of a door slamming shut was spot on; it was more like his memories been walled in.

Of course, Snape didn't know that Harry had been hoping to get more than mental shields from their sessions. And if Harry only considered the matter of Occlumency, things were going quite well. The difference between personal and impersonal knowledge again, he supposed.

Harry could raise a wall of fire in his mind at will, and keep it going for as long as he wanted. It felt odd and yet natural, all at the same time, like he used to do it for months at a time. Which he had, he supposed. Draco swore to it, anyway, and even Snape had mentioned the matter.

That was another side benefit of Draco's telling him so much. Now, since Snape didn't have any idea what Harry did and didn't know, he was a lot more willing to let things slip about last year. It was hard to see the point in secrecy when Harry probably knew everything, anyway.

"You haven't answered about living your life," said Dr Goode in an odd tone, making Harry wonder how much time had passed while he thought things through.

"Yeah," he said gruffly, thinking of Sirius again. "Not much choice, eh?"

She gave him a sad little smile and checked her watch. "Before I go, would you send your brother in for a moment?"

Harry almost told her *no.* He could just imagine what she'd have to say to Draco. Unlike Snape, *she* hadn't made any solemn promises.

Promises that Snape was keeping both in letter and in spirit, as far as Harry could tell. In fact, he
was making some obvious efforts to pay more attention to Draco; it was like he'd actually listened to Harry about the other boy feeling like he didn't matter as much as Harry did.

In the end, Harry decided he couldn't tell the therapist no, and not just because Snape would probably overrule him. There was also the fact that she was Draco's therapist too, and he might need to talk to her about something.

Sighing, Harry got up and opened the bedroom door. The anti-eavesdropping wards sizzled as he stepped out. He wondered if Dr Goode could hear those at all.

He knocked twice in quick succession on the door to the Snape's laboratory, but nobody answered. So he knocked again, and then again.

"Just try the door," said Dr Goode from behind him. Harry hadn't noticed her leaving the bedroom.

"I don't know if--"

Harry stopped himself before he said something completely stupid. Of course it was all right for him to open a door here. It wasn't like this was Snape's bedroom, where the man might expect privacy. This was just a potions lab, and if Harry could put up with Snape's hands on his temples and his forehead practically touching Harry's during Occlumency lessons, then Snape could put up with Harry walking into a room in the man's quarters!

Or maybe he couldn't.

"It's locked," said Harry baldly, feeling shocked and even betrayed by that fact. Not that he had much idea why he should feel those things.

He didn't have much time to feel them in any case, since before Dr Goode could finish the sentence she'd begun, the door was creaking open. Snape stood there, his hair looking oddly . . . floaty. Not that it was floating or anything, but it was sticking out a bit more than usual.

"Any particular reason why you're locking doors against Harry?" asked the therapist, her eyes narrowed when Harry glanced back, surprised at her tone.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "So I'd have time to bespell the poisonous fumes from the air before he, or anyone else for that matter, stepped in."

She looked like she didn't think that was a very good reason, and her next words made it clear why. "Any particular reason, then, why you aren't gasping from the fumes yourself?"

That eyebrow of Snape's rose further; Harry had the feeling he wasn't used to being called a liar to his face. Instead of answering, he turned his body slightly and made a gesture.

Draco joined him at the door, his hair sticking out worse than Snape's, but that was hardly noticeable since his entire head was enclosed in what looked like a hardened version of the bubble-headed charm.

Snape turned back to Dr Goode, his tone so smooth it was almost oily. "Have you any further questions?"

To her credit, she coloured slightly. "I wanted to speak with Draco for a few moments."

"Ah." A wave of Snape's wand and Draco's protection dissolved before their eyes. "The good doctor would like a word with you."
Draco cleared his throat. "Oh. Well, we're quite busy brewing, as you can see--"

"Yes," said Snape in a dark voice. "I seem to be missing small quantities of quite a few potions. Draco has kindly agreed to assist me in replenishing my stores."

Draco gulped, then nodded, looking a little shamefaced.

Snape wasn't through with him yet, though. "However, I see no reason why you can't speak with the good doctor for as long as she desires."

"Please do stop calling me that," said Dr Goode, smoothing down the skirted suit she was wearing. "Your tone makes me sound like the mad scientist in a horror film. A role more suited to you, to be quite frank."

"Quite frank," agreed Snape, now sounding like he was having trouble not laughing.

Harry stared at Draco, a question in his eyes. A vague question, since he didn't know how to word it. *Is he . . . is she . . . are they . . .*

Draco shrugged, then grinned like he'd questioned that himself.

He wiped the expression off his face the moment Snape glanced his way. "Right, then. Marsha and I will have a bit of a chat. Please excuse us."

He led the way to his room with aplomb, just as if he wasn't expecting a dressing down. The wards sizzled again as he stepped through.

After the door had clicked shut, Snape sank down into the chair he seemed to favour and sighed as he looked at Harry, still standing. "You shouldn't be so perturbed by a locked door. I have good reason for all I do."

"I wasn't perturbed," denied Harry, taking a seat too, but not too near Snape. "It was more that I knocked and knocked, and--"

"I knew somebody was in there, since I could hear things being shifted about, but it never occurred to me that you couldn't hear me knocking." Snape finally stopped pinching his nose. "You thought I would ignore you."

Maybe he felt defensive because Snape sounded so bleak. It was weird to care about that, but apparently he did. "Um, well, it's not like I thought so, but it seemed like you were, so--"

"I should have realised that a locked door was the wrong kind of precaution to take," Snape finally stopped pinching his nose. "We were getting along so well in Devon that I suppose I thought we were past some of this."

Harry nodded. He thought they were past some of the things that had kept making him so angry. The way Snape had handled Draco's defiance . . . well, Harry had been impressed. He'd watched the two closely in the days since and seen Snape keeping his word, and . . . it had made a difference in the way he thought about the man.

On the other hand . . . "So Draco nicked more than *Veritaserum*, then?"
Snape's nostrils flared. "To say the least."

"It's hard to believe you wouldn't have noticed that on your own--"

"Try Occluding for two, some time," said Snape dryly.

He could have said more, like, *Try doing it for someone who acts like he hates your guts and runs away when you desperately need proximity.*

"I understand," murmured Harry.

"Dare I inquire how your session with the-- with Dr Goode went?"

Harry shrugged to cover his interest in the way Snape had changed wording. "You can inquire."

"I see."

Well, maybe there was one thing Harry could divulge. "She knows about the time you got so drunk."

"As does Draco." Snape's hands clenched a little. "How many of your friends did you tell?"

Harry grimaced; he knew he hadn't given Snape much reason lately to have faith in him. "Nobody, Professor. I swear. I know you probably don't believe me, but I didn't even tell Draco about that until it slipped out in Devon."

Snape held up a hand. "As it happens, I do believe you. As I recall, you also exercised remarkable discretion during your fifth year. I will admit that I fully expected to hear taunts of *Snivellus* echoing through the corridors of Hogwarts once again. But then, at that time I did not yet understand what an impressive young man you can be."

Harry coloured. "I'm not. I'm just-- well, I know what it's like to be called mucky names."

"You do." Snape gave a brusque nod. "But this is our home, so do your best not to call me 'Professor,' if you would."

Had Harry done that? He couldn't really remember. It still struck him as odd that Snape, who had spent years insisting on the title, now wanted so badly to shed it, but that just went to show how differently he regarded Harry these days.

And that was . . . well, good, Harry supposed. He was getting used to it, anyway.

Snape flicked his wand to reveal a ghostly clock that wavered in the air for a moment before dissipating. "Lunch, I think. Would you like to set the menu?"

Harry had seen Draco do it, so he nodded. "Um, should I tell the elves about Dr Goode?"

"It would be polite."

Harry nodded and knelt down by the fire. It took a while to get the menu straightened out, since unlike Draco, he wasn't just going to shout out what he wanted. He thought that was high-handed. Besides, he was hoping for a bit of chat with Dobby.

By the time lunch was on the table, Draco was emerging from his bedroom. He looked chastened but not disturbed, so Harry supposed that was all right.
"We're just sitting down for a repast, if you'd care to join us," said Snape to the therapist, his tone so neutral that Harry couldn't tell if he really meant the invitation or not.

Maybe Dr Goode couldn't tell, either. "I'm sorry, but I have to be getting back to my office."

"Very well," said Snape, still in that same tone. "I'll see you safely there."

"Thank you."

Snape took a pinch of floo powder from a box on the mantle, then pierced Harry and Draco with a glance. "Be good until I return."

Harry waited to speak until Snape and the therapist had flooed away. "Be good? Does he think we're five?"

"Oh, he always says that." Draco eyed the lunch with interest. "Good manners dictate that we wait, but since I'm in a family now that doesn't always stand on ceremony . . . ."

With that, he picked up his soup spoon and tasted Harry's choice. "Warm potato soup. How very quaint."

"How else would you serve it?"

"Why cold, but of course." Draco grinned, clearly enjoying his meal despite his complaints. "I must say, the bits of ham are a nice addition. A touch more parsley wouldn't come amiss, though."

"Were you in there getting elocution lessons?" asked Harry, exasperated.

Draco reached for his pumpkin juice. "I suppose I am overdoing it. Severus always warns me about that."

"About talking like you've got a stick shoved up your arse?" Harry guffawed. "Snape does that himself!"

"No, he warns me about laying misdirection on too thick. He says it makes me pitifully transparent."

Harry wrinkled his brow. "You're misdirecting me?"

"Well, not at the moment, obviously," drawled Draco. "It's nothing, Harry. I just decided that I'd rather not have to catalogue for you everything I nicked from Severus' lab, so I thought I'd distract you."

"Prat."

Draco shrugged, and picked up a knife and fork to begin eating his cheese sandwich.

"I don't care that much what you stole. I'm more interested in hearing what Snape had to say when he found out."

Draco scowled. "Well, the gist was that I'm to thank my lucky stars that he cares about your good opinion, because otherwise . . . ."

Harry tensed. "Otherwise?"

"He wasn't terribly specific. Not surprising, really." Draco glanced up. "Though he did mention that
he knows of numbers in excess of ten thousand."

It took Harry a moment to place the reference. "The lines."

"Personally, I think the bubble-headed charm was a bit of petty revenge," mused Draco. "He could have used at least a dozen different spells to keep the air clear of toxins, but he insisted we had to have our heads enclosed. And then he wouldn't even let me do my own charm! He used some special version of his that I couldn't get off on my own!"

"That's weird--"

Draco wasn't done complaining. "It was ridiculous, Harry. We had to use wand writing to communicate; we couldn't even hear each other. We couldn't hear anything, and-- oh. Oh . . ."

Harry had finished his soup; now he picked up his sandwich with his hands. "What?"

"I should have seen it before." Draco rubbed his hands together. "Plots within plots. Though it's a bit offensive, isn't it?"

He asked that like he was expecting an answer. "What are you on about?"

"Perhaps it's not so offensive, at that. Perhaps I should take it as a compliment of the highest order."

"Draco!"

The other boy grinned. "Well, it's just occurred to me that Severus might have been most interested in the noise muffling properties of his charm. At this point I suspect he thought I might find a way around his anti-eavesdropping spells, so he put me in a bubble to be sure your privacy would be respected."

"And that's a compliment?"

"Not that he'd suspect me, but that he thinks I might be able to break through his spells? Why, yes." Draco suddenly stopped preening. "Shite. It's probably more likely that he went to such lengths just so that we could have this conversation and I could bear witness that he was also trapped in a noise muffling bubble. So that's it, then. He just wanted you to feel sure he wasn't prying."

Harry felt like his head was spinning. Plots within plots was probably right.

"I should have known it would all be about you," said Draco sourly.

"Don't be ridiculous. How would he even know we'd talk about it?"

"Because I've shown no hesitation to talk to you about everything else? Because he made sure you saw me in that bubble?"

"He didn't make sure. I happened to come to the door, is all--"

Draco scoffed. "He made sure. Sooner or later Marsha would want to leave and you'd have needed to get Severus' attention. And you call me a prat--"

The floo whooshing Snape back into the room cut short Draco's rant.

"We started without you," said Draco with his chin raised high as if he were daring Snape to object.
Snape didn't seem put out in the slightest, though when he cast a re-warming charm on his soup he seemed to give Draco a significant look.

"Blame Harry. He set the menu. Is it my fault he didn't think to be specific?"

"Ah, familiar ground," drawled Snape.

Harry put down his sandwich and gave Snape a puzzled glance.

"He means sibling rivalry," said Draco. "And you should be delighted by it, Dad. According to the good doctor, it merely means that Harry and I are entirely normal."

"Entirely tiresome, perhaps--"

"Do you and she have a thing going?" asked Harry. He didn't want to hear about sibling rivalry. It sounded too much like the way Dudley had always tried to get Harry into trouble. Tried, hell. Dudley had always succeeded.

"What sort of a 'thing' do you mean?"

Draco quickly lifted a napkin to his mouth, but not quickly enough to hide his smirk.

"You know, a romance thing--"

Snape drew himself more upright, clearly offended. "Indeed not. She is my sons' therapist. Any sort of . . . liaison would be unethical on her part and worse than dunderheaded on mine."

Really. That was interesting, considering. Harry wondered if he should leave it at that, but then he decided that trying to be friends with Snape meant he could take some liberties. "Then why were you flirting with her?"

"I most certainly was not!"

"You were. You sort of smiled at her mad scientist joke, and since you hardly ever smile . . . ."

"It was a clever bit of wordplay. I was admiring the wit not the woman, and for you to think otherwise marks you as--" Snape abruptly cut himself off.

"What, a dunderhead myself?" Harry grinned to show he wouldn't take offense. It was rather liberating, seeing that he really could say anything to Snape without points or detentions being threatened. "It's all right, you can say it. Didn't you know that friends insult each other all the time?"

Snape relaxed marginally, his fingers no longer clenched against the edge of the table. "A nitwit, I was going to say. A bit of wordplay of my own, but these asides have ruined the effect."

He sounded sour about it, which made Harry wonder how often Snape had thrown out insults in order to show off his cleverness with the English language. Not that such a motive exonerated him, but it did put things in a new light. In any case, Harry was trying to put all that behind him.

It helped a lot that this time, Snape had stopped himself rather than say something that might cause Harry to go off like a firecracker.

Harry nodded to show that he wasn't upset, and applied himself to the meal.
Snape drew his hands away from Harry's temples, his eyes dark and thoughtful. "It's not the same as last year, not entirely."

"But adequate?"

Snape moved back on the sofa as he answered; Harry tried not to show his relief. He knew by now that the man wasn't going to hurt him during Occlumency lessons, but something about letting Snape touch him, even casually . . . it was unsettling.

"That's difficult to determine. In some ways your mental fire seems as strong as ever, but it's as though the foundations have shifted."

"To what?"

Snape stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankle. "I couldn't say."

"From what, then?"

"Again, I couldn't say."

"You can't say much, can you?" asked Harry, exasperated.

Snape didn't look amused. "The mind is a complex place as your amnesia alone should show you. I don't even believe that 'foundations' is an apt term, but I'm at a loss for what would be."

Harry blew out a breath. That wasn't what really interested him, anyway. "Can I keep Voldemort out on my own, though? I don't want to get attacked again, but I don't want you to have to keep Occluding for two." Harry sighed. "Fucking scar. If only Voldemort needed eye contact to reach me, this wouldn't be an issue. Well, not unless Dumbledore hired another teacher wearing a fucking turban."

"You know," said Snape in a casual tone, "the constant profanity may make you feel more adult, but among adults it really does nothing but make you sound like a petulant child."

Well, that was better than, "Watch your language!"

Harry shrugged, since Snape was probably right. "I'll work on it. What about Voldemort?"

"I'm perfectly able to shield you--"

"I don't want you to have to," said Harry stubbornly. "And you may feel able now, but when we go back to the castle and I'm away from you all day long, most days, you can't tell me it won't be a strain." He let his voice grow mocking. "Do you want Draco able to steal things from your lab again? Without your even noticing?"

"I heard that!" called Draco from the bedroom.

No wonder, since the door was standing open. Harry answered like a prat anyway, just because it felt good sometimes to joke about with Draco. "Yeah, because you always eavesdrop!"
Draco didn't answer, but Harry did see a flash of blue light race across the edges of the doorway. "Show-off," he muttered. A visible Imperforable was harder to cast than the usual kind.

Back to the topic at hand.

Harry took a deep breath, steeling himself. "Um, so anyway . . . I want you to attack me."

Snape stared.

"You know, mentally," added Harry, which he hardly thought necessary, but since Snape wasn't reacting much . . .

"That's not how we train now," the man finally said. "It should never have been how we trained. I thought we were in agreement on that."

"Yeah, but now I am trained. Shouldn't we test how well?"

"We didn't last year."

"No offense, but that was pretty brainless of us."

"You do realise, do you not, than when you say 'no offence,' you invariably follow it with something highly offensive?"

Was it Harry's imagination, or was Snape leaning forward slightly as he asked that, like he was watching closely for any reaction?

Harry didn't know what he expected. "That's kind of the point of 'no offence," he said, then weakly added, "No offence, but someone with your verbal skills should know that."

Snape sighed. "Your memory recovery really is quite stalled."

"Oh, was that supposed to be a clue?" Harry's eyes narrowed. Draco was right about plots within plots, it seemed. "Or was it just a way to get the conversation away from testing my Occlumency?"

"I am not going to attack you." Snape crossed his arms.

"What, not even to save my life later?" jibed Harry. "You can hold me down for needles but you won't take any real initiative to help me?"

The look on Snape's face gave him pause. "Sorry," he muttered. "That was a low blow. I just . . . look, we are getting on, more or less. Sort of like mates, and I'm sure our . . . er, relationship can stand the strain of Legilimens, if that's what has you looking so . . ."

Snape's black hair swayed as he shook his head. "That is not a good idea."

"Severus," said Harry, using the name on purpose to get the man's attention. "We'll still be friends, all right? I swear. It won't be like before. This time I'll understand why you have to . . . uh, try to hurt me."

"Such faith," said Snape, but the mockery was mild. "I might well do worse than try to hurt you if we were to attempt something so insane. Don't forget, I was specifically advised to avoid using magic to trigger memories. That's exactly what Legilimens is all about. Legilimency serves to unlock memories, not psyche."

"Was that another clue?"
Snape nodded. "The question sounded familiar, then?"

"You were looking at me funny."

Another brisk nod. "Back to your request, then. It's not a sound notion. It could end very badly."

"With no more hope of my memories ever returning, you mean?"

"With your mind a puddle," corrected Snape. "And possibly the rest of you."

"But . . ." Harry chewed his lip. He wanted to say that it would be worth the risk if it could trigger the memories that would let his dark powers flow so that he could use the Mirror of All Souls. He knew that Snape wouldn't agree, though.

He knew it would just make the man sneer something about Gryffindor risk-taking.

Harry didn't want to listen to it.

"All right," he said, despondent. "But I want you to stop shielding me. I can keep my fires going now, you know that. You just . . . stay out of that creepy little room, and we'll see what if anything happens. If it does, we can re-evaluate."

"Harry--"

Harry didn't want to talk about it. "Just say you'll stop."

"I'll stop, but only until such time as it appears appropriate to re-evaluate, as you put it."

Harry supposed that was probably as good as he was going to get. But considering this was Snape . . . it was pretty good, really. He tried a tentative smile. "Good. Thanks, Severus."

Snape looked exasperated for some reason, but it was beyond Harry to figure it out. "Perhaps you'll see," said Snape lightly.

All right, now things were just getting weird. A Snape with twinkling eyes? Except, they weren't actually twinkling. They were just glowing. A little. Maybe. "I think you'd better tell me--"

All that got him was a sly little smile. "Well, since you will press me, would you prefer an outright lie over the Slytherin variety?"

"No! I mean-- I mean, I don't want a lie at all!"

"And I don't want to spoil the surprise."

"Fine, I'll ask Draco."

Snape folded his fingers together. "Ah, but I trust his discretion in this matter."

Harry smiled. "Well . . . that's good, I suppose. Good night, Severus."

"Good night, Harry."
"A spell tree," said Harry, blinking as he stared at it.

Draco gave Snape a bit of a dismayed look. "I thought he'd remember this at least."

"Teach him the decorating spells and perhaps he shall."

"No, I won't." Harry sighed. "That door's slammed tight. I don't know what happened. I was doing pretty well, and then--"

Snape made a move as though to lay a hand on his shoulder, but retreated before they touched. "Don't let it trouble you. Just enjoy the day."

*How can I, without Sirius?* thought Harry bleakly. He knew there wasn't much point to thoughts like that, but he couldn't seem to stop them from running almost constantly through his head sometimes.

"Wand out," said Draco as he began to demonstrate spells.

It was hard not to get into the spirit of the activity after a while. Stepping back later, Harry thought he'd gone a bit over the top. But Draco had insisted that as they were all three full wizarding adults that year, the tree should represent all of them, including even their aspirations. He'd challenged Snape with a look as he'd said it, but Snape had made a motion of assent.

Harry didn't know what that had been about. He wondered if it was something to do with last year again, but his memory remained stubbornly unhelpful.

"The singing angels aren't half as melodic as she is," lamented Draco as he ran the tip of one finger over one of them, gently fluffing strands of honey-blonde hair. "My spell-work just can't do her justice."

"They sound pretty good to me." Harry hadn't ever heard such beautiful music. Not that he could understand it much, since it wasn't in English. On the other hand, he thought that might not make much difference. The sound the tiny angels were making was so perfect it didn't even seem like it could come from voices.

Draco shoved his hands into his pockets. "You don't remember hearing Rhiannon."

"Draco," said Snape, very gently. "I wonder if you're familiar with the old adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

The words obviously hadn't been gentle enough, since Draco bristled. "Are you saying that I don’t really love her? Are you saying that it was just a summer fling? She's the love of my life and--"

"I'm only saying that you're seventeen, and that sometimes . . . things change."

"I think we'd better not talk about it."

"Probably a good idea," said Harry, quickly changing the subject. Not that he could think of much.
"Do you like the tree, Severus?"

"It's rather literal."

Harry supposed it was. There were ornaments like snitches to represent Quidditch, and here and there little potions bottles were nestled among the branches. Red, gold, silver, and green velvet ribbons were draped and woven through boughs, and in one place, just one, Harry had hung a transfigured radish to represent Luna. He hadn't really wanted to; it just made him miss her more, but Draco had threatened to create even more singing angels if Harry didn't give in.

The tree had taken most of the morning. They spent the afternoon cooking a feast, with Harry a little bemused to see Snape and Draco do so much of the work, even if they did use magic constantly to accomplish even the smallest tasks.

He tried not to think of the last Christmas he could remember, with Sirius in Grimmauld Place.

Harry and Draco went flying after the meal, and then there was a discussion of putting a candle in the window, and Harry found out that Draco had wanted to do magic for Rhiannon without getting caught, so he'd aged himself, which meant that Harry was actually younger than Draco now.

"But I'm not really--"


After that was done, that was when Christmas Eve took a sharp left turn toward the truly bizarre.

"Ready?" asked Draco.

Snape had an expression almost like a grimace on his face, but it vanished the moment Harry glanced his way. He merely nodded, his expression neutral.

And then they began.

"It came upon the midnight clear, That glorious song of old, From angels bending near the earth, To touch their harps of gold: "Peace on the earth, goodwill to men From heavens all gracious King!" The world in solemn stillness lay To hear the angels sing."

Harry stared, and not just because Snape had been singing off-key. "What's that about?"

"You sang it to us last year."

"Though you didn't know all the words," added Draco. "Hermione wrote them down for me when I hummed a few measures, and Severus and I have been practicing for ages."

Harry didn't want to seem ungrateful, but he couldn't stop the question. "Why?"

"Because you can't remember your only Christmas with us," said Draco with a slight smile. "So we wanted this one to be special for you, which meant we had to come up with something just for you."

"Thanks," Harry said to them both.

"You don't seem very happy," said Snape quietly.

Harry thought that talking about Sirius would just make him feel ten times worse. It would probably make Draco feel worse too, and not just about missing Rhiannon. Draco's father was dead.
and his mother could be as well, for all they knew. Not that Harry had any urge to spend Christmas with the likes of Narcissa Malfoy, but Draco probably did.

Harry really couldn’t blame him.

"I’m all right--"

"No," said Snape, just as softly. "I don’t think that you are."

Harry lifted his shoulders. "I suppose I just don’t have that many jolly Christmas memories. I mean, I appreciate the carol, I swear I do, but it mostly reminds me how I’d get left at home sometimes when they went to church on Christmas Eve, or yelled at if they let me come."

"You have jolly Christmas memories," said Draco, stepping forward. "You do, Harry. With us. Forget the horrible people you grew up with. We’re your family, and you’re going to have nothing but splendid Christmases from now on!"

Harry tried to nod, but it was half-hearted at best. There was family, and then there was family. Snape and Draco sort of qualified, in some strange way, but his real family had fallen through a Veil, and it was all his fault, and he couldn’t even apologise, not until he got his stupid dark powers back--

"I think I’ll head to bed," he said.

"It’s early!"

"Let him go, Draco," said Snape. "Harry . . . I realise that this is a large adjustment for you, but everything will be all right. Truly."

Harry didn’t answer, but trudged off to bed, hoping that sleep came quickly.

It didn’t.

"Wake up, wake up, wake up, Harry!" shouted a voice close to his ear. Too close; Harry winced. "It’s Christmas! We’ll have presents!"

You will, thought Harry sourly, but he knew that was just his past with the Dursleys talking. He didn’t have any doubt that Snape would give him a present.

"Yeah, all right," he muttered, dragging himself out of bed. Sometime after Draco had come in, smelling faintly of alcohol, Harry had finally managed to drift off, but he’d slept fitfully, waking up several times to listen to the wind howling outside. He felt like he hadn’t got a wink.

"Come on, come on, come on," said Draco, practically bouncing on his heels. Actually, when Harry looked closer he saw that the other boy was doing just that.

"We should get dressed--"
"It's Christmas!" Draco obviously couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed Harry's hand and tugged him into the living room. Snape was there already, and not in a grey nightshirt, either. He'd obviously taken the time to get dressed.

Several presents were tucked under the tree, which mean that Harry didn't understand why Draco dived toward the mantle. Both their stockings looked empty.

Oh. Draco yanked it down and began pulling things from it. Obviously, it was stuffed with sweets and such, including a candy cane so huge they gave Harry a stomach-ache just looking at it.

And not because of the Slytherin colours.

"Happy Christmas," said Snape with a slight, knowing smile as Draco kept pulling more loot from his stocking.

"Happy Christmas," echoed Harry, trying to get into the spirit of the day. He didn't really want to, but he knew it was the right thing to do. He began to drift toward the mantle, but then he remembered. "Oh. Um, back in a second."

He went outside and around to the back of the cottage where he'd hidden his gifts to Draco and Snape, transfigured to look like a couple of rocks. It had seemed a bit ridiculous to him, but Snape had warned him that Draco was "absolutely terrible" about opening his presents early if he could find them.

"You idiot child," said Snape, coming around the back of the cottage just as Harry finished fetching the gifts. "You're not wearing any shoes!"

"I was just nipping out--"

Snape just shook his head and cast a warming charm at Harry's feet. Harry coloured a little bit and hurried back indoors. By then, Draco had obviously fetched his presents too, since the pile under the tree had grown to what Harry thought were ridiculous proportions.

Harry put his two paltry offerings with the rest and told himself that it wasn't his fault that he didn't know much about what Snape and Draco wanted. He didn't know them very well.

And whose fault is that?

Harry told his conscience to shut up. He'd done the best he could.

The presents were interesting, as wizarding gifts went, but what was a lot more interesting was the way Snape and Draco kept watching him like they were waiting for something. Harry didn't know what.

"It's a nice shirt," he said, holding it up as if for size.

"If you tap the buttons it switches colours," said Draco in an offhand voice, like it didn't matter, when his piercing silver gaze said that it did.

Oh. To Slytherin colours. Harry knew that should annoy him, but really, he was just too depressed to care. He cheered a little bit when Snape gave him a nice box for Sals and explained about her Floo problem, but by then the strange looks were getting to him. "What?" he finally asked. "What!"

Snape and Draco exchanged another look. Then Snape sighed. "We gave you these same gifts last Christmas. We were hoping to awaken some glimmer of memory. Truly, has nothing seemed
familiar?"

Harry shook his head, touched and heartbroken at the same time. That had been a nice gesture, and he supposed it might have worked . . . but it hadn't, which meant that Sirius was just as far away as ever.

Draco misunderstood his expression. "It's all right to be annoyed, Harry. We meant well, and we do have some new presents for you as well--"

"I don't care about presents," said Harry, gulping as he tried to stay in control. But this was it, wasn't it? He was never going to remember. No matter what anybody said or did to jog his memory, it was all just going to stay . . . gone.

"Oh, of course you do," said Draco, reaching behind him for a bright scarlet box with a golden ribbon. "Here, open this one next. I'll bet my vault it'll cheer you up and stop you looking so serious--"

_Sirius_. Harry promptly hid his face and started sucking in huge, violent breaths so he wouldn't burst into tears.

Snape silently handed him a handkerchief and knelt on the floor beside him so he could pat him rather awkwardly on the back. He stopped it when Harry shifted over to move out of range. Draco, sitting on the floor already, was a little less subtle. He grabbed Harry's hands, hanging on even when Harry tried to tug them free.

"What is it?" he pressed. "We didn't mean to upset you, Harry! Not with the song last night and not over the presents. I'll get you ten new presents if it'll help!"

Harry somehow got himself under control, but it took a few sniffs that sounded suspiciously like sobs. When he managed to speak at all, the words shot out of him like a spell gone wonky. He couldn't help it -- he couldn't believe that Draco was still going on about stupid fucking Christmas. "I don't want presents!" he yelled, yanking his hands free at last. "I just want to make that bloody mirror work so I can talk to Sirius!"

For a moment there was silence, save for Harry's harsh gasping breaths.

Then Snape spoke, even as one of his hands descended on Harry's shoulder again. This time, Harry didn't fight it. "Oh, Harry. The mirror . . . I didn't realise that you had learnt about the Mirror of All Souls."

"Yeah, no fucking thanks to you," said Harry through gritted teeth as he looked at the man. "Ron told me. I suppose it was too much for you to bother." He spared a glare for Draco. "Or you."

"I didn't want to hurt you," said Draco earnestly, leaning forward a little as the three of them sat on the floor. "That's all, Harry, I swear. All those times we talked -- you didn't ask me about it, so I didn't think you knew. I couldn't bear to volunteer the information when I didn't know for certain if you could make the mirror work now. I thought the mere thought of the mirror might just torture you."

"As it seems it has," said Snape, his voice almost breaking.

No-one spoke for a moment; there was no noise except Harry gulping. Then Draco ventured, a little hesitant. "So then . . . you tried it?"

"With Ron," said Harry dully. "He told me how, and I cast and cast with all my might, but . . ."
nothing."

"I do wish you had mentioned this," said Snape, his fingers tightening on Harry's shoulder. "I can see now that it's been weighing on you for weeks. I should like to have known that you were in this kind of distress."

"You wouldn't want me talking to Sirius," accused Harry. "That's probably why you clung so hard to never telling me anything at all, so you could tell yourself it was all right to keep me ignorant about the mirror, and all because you hate Sirius worse than poison--"

"No, no," said Snape, his tone earnest. "I would have taken you to the mirror myself had I any idea that you already knew of it."

Harry shoved Sals' box away from him, part of him wishing he could smash it, for no other reason than that it had come from Snape. "No point anyway," he said, wiping at his eyes. "I can't make it work. I'd probably be better off not knowing about it, not that Ron was trying to hurt me."

Draco sat back on his heels, his eyes glinting strangely. "Wait. You said you cast and cast. Was that in Parseltongue or English?"

"It needs my dark powers," said Harry, confused. "So Parseltongue. But I can't cast anything in Parseltongue these days! You know that--"

"I know that I told you over and over to try English on the mirror," said Draco, speaking so fast that the words almost tripped over each other. "I don't think you ever did. You were afraid of wasting a shard of your broken mirror, you said. But Harry, I always did think that it was you, not your Parseltongue magic, that was the true master of the Mirror of All Souls!"

Harry's mouth fell open. "You mean I don't have to get my dark magic back? I can make it work--"

"I'm sure you can. I'm positive! I have an intuitive grasp of magic, don't you know, and--"

"Stop," said Snape in a harsh voice. "What if you're doing right now what you just swore you wished to avoid? Rash guarantees like those could end very badly if you're wrong, Draco."

"You just don't want me to see Sirius!" shouted Harry. "You hate him! You've always hated him, and you'd probably dance on his grave if he had one! You bastard!"

Snape went white about the mouth. "I do not like him, certainly. But I did not stop you from speaking with him before and I will not do it now. Harry . . . I don't wish to see you shattered if Draco is wrong."

"I'm not wrong--"

"Be quiet," snarled Snape. He took a moment to visibly calm himself. "We will go to Hogwarts, then. We will test Draco's theory. And if it works, you have my absolute blessing to speak to your godfather for as long as your heart desires. Do not say again that I would stand in your way."

That was easy for him to say when he was sure that Draco's idea wouldn't work, thought Harry, still angry. He thrust out the handkerchief, not looking at Snape when the man took it.
"Maybe a different wording," said Draco two hours later as Harry stood in front of the Mirror of All Souls, his wand angled, his features balled up with concentration, a shard of mirror grasped in his other hand.

Harry whirled around. "You said that six times already!"

"Well, I thought English would work!"

"It fucking well doesn't!"

Snape had long since retreated to lean against a wall, his features shuttered, but now he came forward. "I am sorry, Harry."

"Oh, you are not," said Harry, wishing he could do something violent to the man. "You knew it wouldn't work. You were just humouring me the whole time."

Snape's voice remained level. "I hoped it would work, though I feared it would not."

Harry narrowed his gaze. "You haven't been the soul of enthusiasm about this. You know what? I think you were afraid it would work, but you didn't know how to stop me from trying it."

"Why would I be afraid it would work? You spoke to Black numerous times before you lost your memory-- ah."

"Yeah," said Harry, pointing a finger. "Before I lost my memory. I bet you're worried now like you weren't before that Sirius could turn me against you!"

"The thought did cross my mind," admitted Snape. "But the simple truth is that I love you more than I distrust Sirius Black."

Harry scoffed. "Sure you do. I know how much you hate him."

Draco spoke then. "You're just disappointed, Harry. Anybody would be. But don't take it out on Severus."

Was that what he was doing? Harry wasn't sure. He was definitely disappointed, though. In fact, he felt sick with it, and suddenly standing up just seemed like too much work. He slumped down to the floor, sitting with his legs bent and his arms wrapped around them. He wished he'd never heard of the mirror. Maybe if he hadn't, he'd have accepted by now that Sirius was gone forever. He wouldn't feel this torment--

But he'd probably still feel every bit of the regret. Why hadn't he been more intelligent? Why hadn't he listened to Hermione? She'd told him that the vision was a trap, and she'd been right, and Harry hadn't had brains enough to listen to her. Not even for five seconds.

A trickle of steam tickled his nose. When Harry opened his eyes, he saw that Snape was crouched in front of him, holding out a cup of conjured tea. "Milk and four sugars," he said, extending it further.

Just the way Harry liked it.

"It won't help."
Harry took it anyway and sipped at it for a moment, feeling ashamed. Draco had been right. Harry had been lashing out because he wanted to blame someone. It was the act of a child, believing that things would get better if only there was someone to blame.

But things weren't going to get better. Harry knew that now. He sighed. "Fucking Parseltongue. I never wanted it anyway, did you know that? But now I wish there was some kind of lever I could flick that would make my brain switch over into it so I'd have to cast in it." He sighed again and drank more of the tea.

Snape suddenly stood up, his black eyes flashing as he waved his wand in an imperious gesture. "Accio Harry's coming-of-age present from Fred and George Weasley!"

"Huh?" asked Harry.

Draco understood, though. "That's brilliant, Severus! Why didn't I think of it!"

"Because you were single-minded and caught up in your sense of magical intuition," answered Snape as a small parchment box came flying into his hand. "It's a flaw that can keep you from seeing other possibilities. A flaw that even the most skilled potion-maker must strive to overcome."

Harry just stared at them and waited.

Snape came and knelt beside him, opening the box. "The red sweets in this gift are intended to force one to speak a foreign language exclusively. Parseltongue isn't precisely that, so they may not work on you. And even if they do, there's no guarantee that they'll enable you to cast spells in Parseltongue. But if they do work . . ."

He left the sentence hanging in the air.

"Sirius," breathed Harry. "Oh. Oh, my God. You think?"

"I don't know. All we can do is try."

Harry nodded and reached a hand out, snatching one of six tiny red ribbons in the box. He hesitated before putting it in his mouth, though. He might not have listened to Hermione when it really mattered, but he had been listening to Snape in the hospital wing that time. "Um, instructions?"

Snape nodded and found them on the inside of the box top. "Chew and swallow."

Harry still hesitated. For some stupid reason he needed reassurance. "What if it doesn't work?"

"You know the answer to that."

"Yeah, no worse off. Except . . ." Harry steeled himself. It was hard to bear it when hope died. He knew that. But he wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing, so he popped the red ribbon in his mouth and chewed it thoroughly. It tasted like marzipan and something else, something faintly foul. Harry swallowed anyway, then asked the obvious. "Did it work?"

"I would say so," said Snape in a dry tone.

Only then did Harry realise that he must have spoken in Parseltongue.

Jumping to his feet, wand in hand, he approached the mirror again, his wand shaking in his hand. He angled it up to the surface of the mirror the way he had before, and fixed Sirius firmly in his
thoughts as he held a shard of broken mirror pressed against the larger Mirror of All Souls.

"Show me--" he only said.

Before he could finish the sentence, a fierce surge of energy raced through his arm and out his wand, the blast so sudden and powerful that he was knocked backwards onto his arse. Harry gasped. Was *that* what it was like to cast with dark powers?

"I think your wand has missed this side of you," said Draco from where he'd moved off to one side.

Harry would have asked if it had worked, except that the answer was obvious. The surface of the Mirror of All Souls had turned liquid, and the shard that had been in his hand was nowhere to be seen. But that was good -- it must have been absorbed, like Ron had explained.

He was suddenly glad that he'd been thrown backwards, because all at once, the mirror reminded him a bit of the Veil in the Department of Mysteries. It looked like a frame surrounding fog now, like you could step straight through it and into the afterlife. Harry shuddered, remembering Sirius falling--

And then the mirror snapped solid, bright and shiny, and Sirius was there, grinning and waving at him.

"Sirius!" shouted Harry as he jumped to his feet and took two steps forward. "Oh, Sirius!"

"He can't understand you," said Draco quietly. "Parseltongue."

Harry nodded that he'd understood, but somehow, he couldn't stop talking. Maybe because his own words sounded like English to him. "You must have been wondering why I haven't called you in a while, but I've been trying, and I don't know what we talked about before, but that's the whole thing, you see? There was this Quidditch accident and--"

"Harry, Harry!" called Sirius, leaning forward into the mirror. "You're hissing, I can't catch a word. But where's the snake, you aren't even wearing your glasses-- why aren't you wearing your glasses?"

Harry tried to explain, but he knew from the look on Sirius' face that all that came out was more hissing. And by now Sirius was starting to look worried about him, and that wasn't on.

He looked helplessly at Snape, who gave a brisk nod. "Of course. I'll let him know that you need a few moments."

His tone was matter-of-fact, like it wouldn't be a chore to speak to Sirius civilly. Like he'd done it before--

For Harry's sake.

All at once, the past few moments suddenly snapped into clear focus in Harry's mind. He'd been ready to give up; he'd accepted that Sirius was going to stay beyond his reach, that Draco's brilliant idea just wasn't going to work.

And then Snape had stepped forward with an idea of his own.

He didn't have to; he could have stayed silent. Harry would never have known about the twins' special candies. And even if he'd somehow found out, Snape could have simply lied and said he'd forgotten all about them. Instead, the moment he'd remembered them, he'd summoned them to see
if they could help Harry . . . even though Snape had no reason to want Harry talking to Sirius.

He knew that Harry wanted it, though, and that had been reason enough.

"Wait," Harry said, putting a hand on the man's sleeve when it was clear he hadn't understood the hiss. Harry turned and waved for Draco to talk to Sirius.

Draco looked a little unsure, but he gave a curt nod and stepped in front of the mirror and began speaking. Harry didn't really listen; he trusted Draco to do a good job explaining. Fragments of sound drifted near him, phrases like memory loss and trying and just a few moments.

In the meantime, Harry gazed at Snape like he'd never seen him before -- because he hadn't. Even drunk, he hadn't got through to Harry like this. Then, Harry could believe that yes, the man loved him.

This . . . this was something else again. This was proof that Snape loved him like a father should a son. Proof Harry shouldn't have needed, after everything that Snape had said and done since Harry woke up without his memory--

Or maybe he had needed it, because the raw truth was that he didn't know that much about how fathers should love their sons. He couldn't remember his own father at all, could he, and Uncle Vernon was hardly an example. Not even with Dudley, who'd been spoiled and indulged to the point of ruin.

He knew now, though, how a father should love his son, and what was more, it was that special kind of knowledge that felt real. That was real, even though Harry still couldn't remember his missing year.

Snape leaned down a little. "I know it must be frustrating to see your godfather and not have him understand you, but your usual words should come back in a few minutes--"

Harry shook his head wildly. "No, it's not that. It's just--" He knew without asking that Snape couldn't understand him either. But if words were no good at the moment, there was always action.

And Harry couldn't wait.

He took a step toward Snape and wrapped his arms around the man, hugging him tightly. "Thank you," he said, uncaring this time if he was still hissing. "Thank you so much. I'm sorry I've been so horrible. I just-- I didn't, I couldn't understand. Not completely. And I probably still don't understand completely, maybe I can't and won't until I have a son of my own, but-- but--"

He couldn't say any more. His throat was closing over somehow, his eyes clenched tight so that he wouldn't cry. He hadn't known that it would feel like this to have a father. Or really, to know he had one. Because he'd had one for a long while now, without knowing.

Knowing, though -- it made everything different.

Harry hugged Snape tighter. He smelled of cinnamon and clove, and even though Harry couldn't really remember . . . it still felt like coming home.
Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Thirty-Four: "A New Year"

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Many thanks to Kim, who read this through as it was being written and then reviewed it more than once after it was complete. I also want to thank Claudia for her amazing skill at finding those small things that I can't see myself, and Arwen, who wrote me a long and lovely detailed list of Xmas present ideas, some of which I used and others of which I'm holding in reserve for later on!

Harry sat down at the table in the dining alcove and helped himself to a biscuit from the plate in the centre. A moment later he had to wonder if it had been charmed in some way, since as soon as he touched it, a door down the hall practically flew open. Snape and Draco came into view a moment later, both of them holding half-filled wine glasses.

Harry flushed a little. That hug he'd given Snape hadn't felt awkward at the time, but looking back at it now, he wasn't quite sure where he'd got the nerve.

Draco gave Snape what seemed like a significant look and waved his wand to summon another wine glass and then the bottle, both of which landed smoothly on the table. Harry wasn't sure how he'd managed that—oh, right. Intuitive grasp of magic.

But then, maybe that came from being drenched in it from his earliest years. Not for the first time, Harry wondered how different he'd be if he'd been able to grow up with a wizarding mother and father.

Though . . . he couldn't deny any longer that he had a wizarding father now. Of sorts, at least. And he hadn't put that fact to very good use, had he? Well, at least he'd finally got Occlumency straightened out, but Snape probably knew loads of things that could come in handy in a fight. After all, he had been a Death Eater at one time, and--

Harry winced and raised a hand against the sudden pain that speared through his left temple, pain so searing and intense that his fingers seemed to go numb from it. The biscuit slipped from his hands to shatter against the stone floor, and as it fell, a faint voice from what seemed like miles away cried out in alarm.

Then he blinked, and the world seemed to right itself. Until that instant, he hadn't really been aware that the room had somehow flipped upside down without moving at all.

"Harry? Are you all right?"

He blinked again at Draco's question, just then noticing that long, taperered fingers were in front of him, snapping. When Harry pushed Snape's hand to the side, the snapping noise stopped.

"Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Uh . . . bit of a sudden headache, but it's gone now. Not sure what caused it, really--"

"Your godfather said something to upset you."

"No, he didn't. Honestly." Harry shook his head a little, still getting his bearings back. "I don't
know what it was. It doesn't matter, I suppose. Um . . . this'll sound strange, I bet, but Luna isn't in here somewhere, is she? I thought I heard . . . I don't know. My name, maybe."

Snape knelt on one knee and peered into his eyes. "To my knowledge, Miss Lovegood is not in the castle at all."

Draco tapped him on the shoulder. "I don't suppose you've had a dose or two of Waldenholfer's Acuity Draught, have you?"

"What's that?"

Draco sighed. "I was hoping you'd remember."

"Draco, this is not the time for games," snapped Snape. "Harry may need a potion, or possibly a nap, or--"

"I wasn't playing games! I was trying to cue some memories, and don't tell me you haven't done the same, therapist or no therapist!"

"The good doctor said that hints could be beneficial as long as we left it to Harry to make meaning from them or not!"

"Yeah, I know. You mentioned--"

Harry arched his neck against the top of the chair, suddenly sick of both of them. "For fuck's sake. Are you sure you two aren't the ones with a rivalry problem?"

The silence that followed had him sitting up straight to look at them again.

"Do you need a potion of some sort?" asked Snape, a little stiffly.

"No. Whatever it was, it's gone now."

"But if you're hearing things . . . " That was Draco.

"I'm not sure I heard it." Harry shrugged. "Or maybe it was the Prenglies. I don't know. I do know that I'm fine."

Snape peered at him for a long moment before standing, apparently satisfied at whatever he'd seen. "In that case," he said as he poured some wine into the empty third glass, "I do believe some Christmas cheer is in order."

"Are we celebrating?"

"If you like."

If he liked? Harry didn't understand. Or maybe it was more as though Snape didn't, though he could fail to was a good question. "Um . . . I know you couldn't know that I was saying through the hissing, but I sort of thought that the . . . er, hug . . . would, uh, speak for itself. I mean, I was kind of admitting . . . well, you know. Things. And I didn't want to admit them only to myself," he added defiantly. He wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing, and the next time someone in this family decided to badmouth his House-- well, at least he had that taken care of when it came to Draco.

Or would, soon.

Snape might be a tougher nut to crack when it came to the way he hated Gryffindor's guts.
But that was a conversation they could have later, since Harry knew full well it was going to come up. For the moment, he gave another little shrug. "I finally understand how sincere you are about . . . um, me. Don't you think that's worth a celebration?"

"Indeed it is." Snape's lips almost turned up into one of those slight smiles he sometimes had these days, but then they firmed again. "Are you absolutely certain that your godfather said nothing to upset you?"

"We've been worried sick," added Draco.

Oh. Harry hadn't expected that, but it came to him now that he really should have. Snape had mentioned how little he trusted Sirius. "It's all right," he said, smiling over at . . . no, not Snape, he decided, giving a little mental nod of his head. He'd had trouble calling Severus before, probably because he'd been trying so hard to be friendly, but without feeling that they were friends in any of the ways that counted.

Now that he understood the man a bit better than before, things had changed. He really had been a father to Harry, strange as the idea still seemed at times.

Harry didn't think he could call him "Dad" the way Draco sometimes did, but he could say "Severus" more naturally, at any rate. He smiled again, feeling more relaxed than he had in a long while. "You don't need to worry that Sirius will turn me against you, you know, not after what you did with those sweets. That meant a lot to me, in case you couldn't tell."

Severus met his eyes. "I could tell."

Harry flushed a little, but decided he might as well get used to the feeling of heat under his collar. This having-a-father business seemed like it got uncomfortable at unexpected times. He wondered if it had been that way before.

He cleared his throat. "Um, anyway, maybe you should know that Sirius didn't really even try to insult you. Well, not much. When I told him it was Christmas he said you ought to know better than to keep me cooped up in the castle during a holiday."

"I do know better."

Harry laughed. "Yeah, you do. And I told him that, but the Fidelius wouldn't let me mention Devon." Harry's grin grew even wider. "So we chatted for a bit. Did you know that time is very different there? Sirius didn't even know it was December, let alone Christmas. He told me he'd met a funny wizard there who was going about claiming to be Merlin's favorite nephew, but nobody much believed him, and I asked him if he'd ever met Luna, but he hadn't. So I told him a bit about her, and he said he'd almost fallen for a girl rather like that once. And anyway though, this was the bit I was trying to get to -- after we'd been talking for a while, Sirius actually said it sounded like you'd been good for me."

Severus' voice was utterly flat. "That's not even a Slytherin lie, Harry."

"Yeah, 'cause it's not a lie at all," said Harry, sitting up straighter. "He did, Severus. Honestly. He said that he loved me and wanted what was best for me--"

"Sirius Black does not think that I am 'best' for you--"

"Yeah, well if you'd shut up and listen, you'd know what he does think, wouldn't you?"

Severus blinked, then leaned back slowly in his chair and folded his hands together. "I am
"Are you sure?"

"Harry," said Draco, shaking his head. "Don't be a prat."

"Yeah, all right." For all that, though, Harry still took a long drink of wine before he went on. It tasted pretty awful, but he tried not to let it show. He couldn't figure out what Severus and Draco saw in the stuff. "He said he was sorry that I couldn't remember, but that he'd seen quite a lot of me lately, and that he'd never seen me happier, so you must have been good for me." Harry grinned again. "And then of course he had to add that he didn't like to say anything in your favour, but he'd got tired of my dad sitting on him when he'd been stupid about you before."

Severus made a vague sort of gesture. "Ah. You know, then . . . you know about the prohibition . . . ."

"Ron explained weeks ago that I couldn't expect to see my parents. Was that why you thought I needed some Christmas cheer?"

Severus sighed slightly. "In part--"

"We've just spent an hour worrying that you were letting guilt eat you alive again," blurted Draco, his chair scraping the floor as he scooted it toward Harry. "You didn't want us there once your English came back, that was clear enough, but when you first got the mirror working last time . . ." Draco's voice drifted off as if he thought he might have said too much.

"Sirius gave me a recap," said Harry. "About how he told me not to blame myself, that it was his time. I'm not sure he's right about that, but he seems to really believe it, and he seems happy to be there with my parents."

Severus peered closely at him. "You're at peace, then?"

Harry thought back over his years at Hogwarts, and all the years before, too. There wasn't a lot of peace involved, so he shrugged and reached for another biscuit. "I don't know. I still feel terrible about the Veil, but it's almost like Sirius is alive now. I mean, it's like he's in another country and I have to ring him up to talk to him, but-- uh, a telephone is a--"

"I know what a telephone is." Snape put both his hands on the table, palms down as he leaned forward. "I don't intend to cause you pain, but it worries me to hear you speak this way."

"That's just because you're used to the old system where if someone wasn't a ghost they were cut off when they died."

"It is the natural order."

"Well, not in this case," said Harry, crossing his arms.

"But you'll run out of shards someday," said Draco in a slightly wobbly voice. "Harry--"

"I'll deal with that when I have to."

Draco looked across the table at Severus but the man merely shrugged and poured them both more wine as he spoke to Harry. "I suppose you will. Now, shall we repair to Devon to finish opening presents?"
"I'm pretty hungry," said Harry.

"Going without breakfast and lunch has something to do with that, no doubt," murmured Snape. "Why don't you and Draco set the menu? Something special for Christmas."

"Nothing too fancy," Harry warned Draco as they both stood up.

Draco shot him a look. "Would I order something fancy, really. Moi?"

They ended up with wizard's pie, which was the same as shepherd's pie except that the potato layer on top was molded into a castle that would rival a model of Hogwarts. It was a shame to eat it, but Harry was hungry, so he didn't hesitate.

''Oh," said Harry later that day as they sat in chairs placed around the Christmas tree in the Devon cottage. "A book. Thank you, Severus. Um . . . no title?"

He wondered for a second if that meant the book was about something dark. It did look a little bit worn, like someone had used it before, and after all, Snape had been a Death Eater--

A twinge of headache hit him again, but it went away when Snape said, "It's a journal."

"Oh. A journal." Harry wasn't sure why that relieved him so much, but it did. "Well, thank you again, then. I haven't ever had one of my own. At least, I don't think I have--"

Snape's forehead creased. "Look inside."

A zing of magic zapped his fingers as he opened the book. The page facing him was blank, which gave Harry an eerie feeling, since it reminded him of Tom Riddle's diary. The next page, though, was filled with messy writing that he recognised at once. "This was already mine?"

"Yes," said Snape, his hands gripping the edges of his chair a little, like he was braced for something. "When the good doctor said you were to have access only to public forms of information, I thought it best to place your journal in my office. But now . . ." He looked up, his eyes shadowed. "Truly, Harry, I'm not certain even now that I'm doing the right thing in giving it to you. But I begin to think that perhaps I overreacted to her advice."

Harry had thought that for a while. That Snape could admit it was interesting, though. "I appreciate hearing that, sir. Er, Severus. Sorry." He smiled a little. "Believe it or not, your name is starting to come more naturally."

Snape merely inclined his head in reply.

Harry hated to ask the rest, but he couldn't stop himself. "Uh . . . you know, I'd like the truth more than I'd like to be protected from it, so please, just tell me. Did you read this?"

"You shared the first set of entries with me yourself. We were trying to reconstruct a dream-- Has
Draco mentioned that you were experiencing prophetic dreams last year?"

Harry nodded.

Snape shot Draco an annoyed look, like he thought that was going too far, but didn't comment further. "I have never read further."

"There's a charm on it to keep us out," said Draco, a little peevishly.

"And you would know that how?"

The other boy had the grace to flush a little.

"I, for one," said Snape with another annoyed look at Draco, "have never had my fingers burnt from trying to snoop in Harry's journal."

"He wouldn't have, though," retorted Draco. "He cast the charm himself. He could have removed it!"

"Draco!"

"I didn't say you did. I just said that you could have!"

"I'm happy to have it back," said Harry, trying to stop their bickering even though some strange part of him kind of liked it. The Dursleys had certainly never jostled each other to get close to him.

Bending down, he sifted through the presents until he found one wrapped in pale green. "Here, Severus. This is for you."

Snape cast a spell to slice the wrappings off in two neat pieces, then lifted the lid off a small wooden box. "Ah. You wrote out a potions recipe for me?"

"Maybe."

Snape frowned a little as he studied the parchment he'd lifted out. "Hmm. Anise oil, gum arabic... an extrusion charm?" He glanced up at Harry. "I don't understand what this would make, or what magical effects it could possibly have."

Draco leaned over to look at the parchment. "The beeswax would cancel out any, I think."

Snape, though, had figured it out. "Ah. The roots you specified... I seem to recall that glycyrrhiza glabra is the Muggle botanical name for liquorice."

Harry smiled. "Right you are. I should have titled the parchment, but I thought it would be more fun to see what you made of it. Anyway, I was going to buy you the things you needed to make your own liquorice sticks, but then I realised you probably have them all on hand already and you just needed to know how to use them for something besides potions."

"Thank you, Harry. Very thoughtful indeed."

Harry braced himself, though he wasn't sure why he should. "There's more."

Draco scowled. "If you give him your key again--"

"No, not that." Harry glanced back at Snape, a little uncertain still, even though he knew perfectly well that the man wouldn't refuse. "Um, I know that Potions class didn't work out so well this year,
and I honestly do think it's for the best if I keep it off my schedule, but . . . well, this isn't exactly a potion, is it? So I thought that maybe we could cook up a batch together and um . . . try to get along even though cauldrons are probably involved?"

"I would like that very much," said Snape, his fingers caressing the edges of the parchment like it was something precious.

"Honestly, the two of you give the oddest presents," said Draco, fishing through the pile as he spoke. "A diary that was already his to begin with and a recipe he could have looked up in any cookery book. Well, here are mine to both of you, then. I suppose you'll think less of them for being new."

He thrust out two boxes that were wrapped the same but different sizes. The one for Snape, in fact, was barely larger than an envelope. Harry's looked like it was big enough only to hold a Snitch.

It turned out to contain a beautiful golden locket. Harry thought the gift was a little bit on the girly side, but then he flipped it open and understood. On one side there was a picture of James and Lily posing with Sirius, who was elbowing them both a little as he mugged for the camera. On the other side stood Draco, Snape, and Harry, who looked a little bit stiff, considering it was a wizarding photograph.

"Were we fighting when this was taken?" asked Harry, pointing.

"We've never posed," said Draco. "I had to magic that one together. But . . . I thought we should be in there too. Your entire family?"

He sounded anxious about it. "I know you are," said Harry. "It's still strange to me, though."

Draco nodded. "Did you see the cover?" He pointed out how the Potter crest and an engraving of a lily had been wound together. "That’s to represent them both."

Harry rolled his eyes.

“No, I meant . . . them both, Harry. So your mother would stand out as much as him. I meant--”

Draco blew out a breath. "You represent the best of both worlds. Pureblood and Muggleborn."

“Oh."

He knew he must have sounded doubtful, since Draco was the one who rolled his eyes, then. "If you could remember the way I fell hard and fast for Rhiannon, who isn’t even magical at all, you’d understand."

“What I remember,” interjected Snape, “was how hard you struggled to believe her a witch despite the evidence staring you in the face."

“It was a difficult transition, but I made it,” retorted Draco. “And now it’s a new world where people are just that, though I will say I'm quite grateful I was born with magic. Are you going to open that, by the way?"

Snape slipped a fingernail beneath the wrapping to reveal a parchment envelope, opening it to draw forth two strips of paper that had computer printing on them. Harry almost goggled.

“Tickets to the January showing of La Traviata,” said Draco. "Hermione's parents helped get them to me."
“Only two tickets,” said Snape slowly.

Harry tried not to let the number bother him, even though a little voice inside was saying that Draco had plenty of money to afford a third ticket if he wanted. “That’s all right,” he said, determined to be the bigger man. “I’d probably be bored at a fancy French opera, anyway.”

“It’s Italian, you cretin, and I wouldn’t dream of leaving you out,” retorted Draco. “I was actually hoping that Dad would take someone else.”

*Oh . . .*

“Marsha, maybe,” he added. “Well?”

“I have told you how inappropriate any social liaison would be—”

“Methinks the Severus doth protest too much,” said Draco, laughing. “But fine, be that way. I happen to know that a certain single professor would be delighted to be asked to the opera by a tall, dark, brooding Potions Master of her acquaintance . . .”

“I have not the least bit of interest in Miss Burbage, I quite assure you.”

“She dances well. I saw the two of you together at the Yule Ball. Quite the couple, I thought. Light and dark—”

“Draco—”

“Fine. Take Sprout for all I care,” sniffed Draco. “Just get out and *do* something, Severus. I don’t want to see you end up old and alone like Dumbledore.”

“The matter is truly not your concern.”

“No? I thought you were my father.”

Snape’s nostrils flared. “And is this a proper way for a son to speak to his father? Urging him on dates?”

“Well, I wouldn’t do it if you were married to my mother!”

“Perish the thought,” said Snape, looking appalled.

“Don’t insult my mother,” snapped Draco. “She’s beautiful. You’d be the luckiest wizard alive if she would consent to have you!”

“She’s lovely on the outside, but have you forgotten how she killed her own great-uncle so that you could inherit his funds?”

Draco lifted his chin. “That’s just speculation and you know it.”

Snape gave Harry a look like what he knew was fact, but he let the matter drop, merely saying, “I do hope that Narcissa contacts you soon, Draco. And thank you for the tickets. I will consider what to do with them.”

“Don’t you dare give them away.”

“It is not polite to demand that the recipient of a gift use that gift only in the manner you deem appropriate.” Snape immediately Summoned a box and handed it to Draco. “Your own present.”
It turned out to be a book as well, but not a diary.


“Hey, I need one of those!” said Harry.

“No, you don’t. Nobody’s going to look at your application and think, ‘Hmm, probable Muggle-killer . . .’”

“It’s not just about applying, though, is it?” Harry asked Snape.

“No, it covers the training regimen as well,” he murmured, his voice sardonic. “And it’s fully up to date, I’ll have you both know. A N.E.W.T. in Potions is not listed as a requirement for entry.”

“But those of us with one will make better Aurors,” said Draco with a significant glance at Harry.

“You will both make fine Aurors.”

Harry glanced at Snape. “You don’t sound very happy about it, though.”

“I have not encountered many Aurors of whom I can approve.” Snape sighed. “Do not allow my own chequered past to influence you, Harry. I’m quite certain that you will uphold the moral standards expected of Aurors. Not all do.”

Harry fished in the pile again and handed a box to Draco. “This might help your Auror ambitions, too.”

“Really . . .”

When Draco had it unwrapped, though, he raised an eyebrow. “A lion statue?”

“Yes.”

Draco gave it a hard look, tapping it with his wand more than once, but the little marble statue didn’t react. “I don’t understand,” he finally complained. “It’s just a statue?”

“No, it’s more than that.”

The other boy suddenly scowled. “Oh, nice, Harry. How dare you? So this is supposed to remind me to be more like a Gryffindor, is it? Are you saying that a Slytherin can’t become an Auror unless he changes who he is? As if I’ve got the slightest interest in turning into a bloody stupid Gryffindor--”

The statue suddenly gave a harsh roar that had Draco flinching back, but he couldn’t go far since he was holding the lion in one hand.

“That’s what it does,” said Harry smugly. “If you disparage Gryffindor, it’ll let you know. If the lion’s not with you when you do it, it’ll repeat your words when you get back to your room, and then it’ll roar. And I’m not sure about this last bit, but I think if you insult Gryffindor too many times in one week, it might start to bite you.”

Draco was staring at him incredulously. “And that’s supposed to help me become an Auror? Are you daft?”

“Of course it’ll help you.” Harry crossed his arms. “You need to become more aware of when
you’re casting insults so you can learn to stop it. You know you’ll have trainers who were
Gryffindors, don’t you? Best to get in the habit now of speaking with respect. For all the houses.”
He grinned. “Because your birthday’s in a few months, isn’t it? I could easily get you badger and
raven statues if I think you need them.”

“And I could easily pitch this in the bin, or better yet, banish it!”

“Mmm, go ahead and try,” murmured Harry.

Draco paused in his wandwork. “Why, what’s going to happen?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Yeah, nothing at all. So go ahead.”

Draco scowled and performed a rather elaborate flourish with his wand.

Just as Harry had said, nothing happened. The little lion certainly didn’t vanish, though it did sit
down on its haunches as it rested on Draco’s palm and begin licking its front paws.

“Hermione charmed a binding to me,” explained Harry. “You can’t banish it unless you’d also like
me to vanish from existence. And if you bin it, it’ll hunt you out again and definitely bite you.”

“You give lousy presents!” Draco sputtered. “A present is supposed to be . . . it’s not supposed to
tell someone what you think they should do!”

“Not like opera tickets, no,” said Harry with a straight face.

“That’s different!”

“Actually, no, I don’t think it is,” murmured Snape. “Well done, Harry.”

“It is not!”

Harry turned to Snape. “I almost got you one, too.”

Snape drew back so sharply that his head knocked against the back of his chair. “I beg your
pardon.”

“Yeah,” said Harry. “It’s probably your example as Head of House that has encouraged Draco and
the other Slytherins to talk about the other houses so rudely. I’d have got you a statue except I
thought the charms wouldn’t work on someone in a position of authority over the houses. So in
your case I thought I’d just ask you instead. Can you please stop talking like my being a Gryffindor
is some kind of disease I accidentally caught?”

“It never used to bother you!” snapped Draco.

“Well, it sure as fuck bothers me now!” snapped Harry right back. “I’ve tried to make that clear
and it seems like you can only keep it in mind for half an hour at a time!”

“Be quiet, Draco,” said Snape when the other boy opened his mouth to retort. “Harry . . . I am
sorry if I have given you the impression that I think of your house as a disease.”

“Don’t you, though?”
“Once, yes.” Snape grimaced. “I had little reason to think well of anyone in Gryffindor, as you are well aware. But you have seen me give points to Gryffindor this year, have you not?”

“And I’ve heard you make spiteful little remarks about my house. You do it all the time, sir. I’m not sure you even notice, but—” Harry swallowed. “It’s hard to be around. Can’t you stop?”

Snape closed his eyes. “I should have known.”

That remark lost Harry. “Known what?”

He opened his eyes again and looked at Harry, his dark gaze fathomless. “I should have realised last year that you were holding back your true feelings on the matter. I told you that I could not hate Gryffindor and still love you. I thought that was enough to settle the matter, but it evidently was not.”

Harry frowned. “Why would I . . . you mean I didn’t tell you last year to shut up?”

“Not like this,” said Snape dryly.

“But why would I have just let you keep insulting Gryffindor?” A cold chill swept over Harry. “Are you saying . . . oh, God. Are you saying that it didn’t bother me? That I really did become a lot more Slytherin and—”

His stomach churned.

“No,” corrected Snape in a quiet voice. “I think it did bother you, but you neglected to press the point home because you thought it might push us away at the same time.”

Harry shook his head. “That’s just . . . mental.”

“It is normal. Entirely normal.” Snape lifted his shoulders. “Adopted children are often reluctant to be themselves in case it should mean they are no longer wanted. And you had ample experience already of rejection from those who should have loved you.”

Harry mulled that over, remembering how hard he’d tried to make sure that “freakish” things didn’t happen around the Dursleys. Not that it had done him any good. He hadn’t been able to control his accidental magic.

Draco cleared his throat. “Thank you for the lion then, Harry,” he said in a rough voice. “I guess it’s not as bad a gift as I thought, if it means . . . if it means you trust us better now.”

Harry hadn’t known it meant that.

Actually, he didn’t think that it did mean that. It was probably more a case of not being so worried, any longer, about what Severus and Draco might think of him. Last year . . . well, he must have been awfully needy to put up with shite about Gryffindor. That was an uncomfortable thought -- just how needy had he been, and what other compromises with himself had he made?

But maybe that didn’t matter. This was a new year and he was going to go about things differently. Draco could be his brother, and Severus could be his . . . well, probably not father. That was a stretch.

But Harry could accept that Severus thought of himself that way.

And he could accept that the two of them were friends at the very least. Not trying to be friends,
like he’d suggested a few weeks ago. No, they actually were friends now.

Adult friends, which worked better than father and son in any case, since no seventeen-year-old could wake up one day and suddenly need a father. Not when he’d never had one before, or rather, not one that he could remember.

And if Severus thought of him as more son than friend, that was probably normal too, because he was more than twice Harry’s age, after all.

“Are you all right, Harry?” asked Draco. “You look . . . odd.”

“Just thinking,” said Harry. “I’m fine. Are you?” he suddenly asked Snape, because the man still looked a bit like he was wishing he could hex himself.

“I appreciate your trust,” said Snape in a low voice. “But I do regret that I did not do . . . many things differently last year.”

“It’s all right,” said Harry, smiling. “I just told myself that this is going to be a new year. Let’s put the other one in the past.” He chuckled a little. “Probably easier for me than either of you.”

“You could have told us that our remarks were hurtful,” said Snape, still in that low voice. “I would not have unadopted you.”

Harry blinked. “Is that even a word?”

“It’s your word,” said Draco. “You used to think it could happen.”

“Well, let’s just move forward,” said Harry again. “I can’t remember much, but now that I can call Sirius, it doesn’t hurt so much. I think . . . I trust that you’re both as loyal as Ron and Hermione, and you care about me as much, and now that I’m more willing to speak up about things, there’s no reason why the three of us can’t be really good friends.”

“Friends.” Draco huffed. “I am your brother, and I’ll thank you not to compare me to a pair of—”

The lion, which had climbed to his shoulder, suddenly opened its mouth and sucked in a breath so strongly that it made Draco’s hair sway.

“Sorry,” said Draco quickly. “Um . . . I guess I do it without thinking.”

“I know you do it without thinking,” retorted Harry. “That’s why you needed a reminder.”

The lion settled back down and began licking its paws again.

“And you?” Harry asked Snape. It felt really good, he realised, to say exactly how he felt. “Are you going to be ridiculous and pretend that you can’t be friends with . . . er, your own son?”

“No, but—”

“No buts,” said Harry. Wow. It really felt good not to hold back. “Think about it, Severus. When fathers and sons get old enough, I bet they’re more like friends than anything else.”

“You speak from the vast experience gained during your twenties and thirties, I trust?”

“Don’t be snarky.”

“Snarky?”
“You know you are. What’s wrong with you, anyway? You ought to be happy that I feel like we can be friends. Because I do feel that way now! When I suggested it before I wasn’t sure it would work, but now I think we get along pretty well, really. And . . . um, I already decided that if you want to think of me more like a son, that’s all right. It’s just that . . .” Harry shrugged. “I don’t really need a father any longer, Severus.”

“You don’t need a father,” the man repeated. “Are you quite sure about that?”

“Yes.” Something inside Harry unbent a little when he saw how Snape’s lips went tight. “But . . . look, if I have a problem or something and I do feel like I need one, you’ll be the one I come to. All right?”

“May I have your word on that?”

"Yeah." Harry smiled. "Sure."

"Good, because it has recently become apparent to me that you are of an age when it is imperative that you discuss a certain matter with your father."

Draco gave a low whistle, his eyes gleaming.

"What?"

"Your relationship with Miss Lovegood," said Snape. "There is some potential there that things could become . . . heated, shall we say? And so I think it time you hear the time-honoured lecture regarding the wands and the cauldrons."

"The wands and the . . . oh no," said Harry, suddenly getting it. "Uh, I don't need-- I mean, I know how it . . . uh, works, and . . . oh, God."

"Ha," said Draco, grinning. "Count your lucky stars. I had to have the lecture twice."

Harry laughed, feeling half-hysterical at the mere thought of listening to Snape, Severus Snape tell him about . . . the . . . wands! And the cauldrons. "Slow learner, were you?"

"Hardly." Draco grinned again, looking like he was enjoying this far too much. "Lucius and Severus. And Hermione too, come to think of it."

Harry bit his lip and tried again. "Really, sir. I do already know . . ." He winced. "Which bits go where. All right? It's kind of hard to live in the Muggle world and not figure it out. The telly alone is, uh . . ." Harry made a vague gesture.

"Yes, I'm sure it has left you conversant with all twelve kinds of magical contraception."

"Um--"

Snape's eyes glittered. Like Malfoy, he was enjoying this. "If it helps," he said in a magnanimous voice. "do not think of me as your father imparting this much-needed wisdom. I shall merely be your friend."

"But it's not needed! All I did was kiss Luna, you know, and I'm not planning to--"

"Harry," interrupted Snape. "Do you really believe it only happens when planned?"

Harry sighed. "No. Of course it doesn't. And I suppose you'd be a pretty terrible father if you didn't, um . . . right. When, then?"
"No time like the present," said Draco, grinning almost maniacally by then. "I'll clear away out here and sort the rest of the presents. Not that much sorting is needed, since they're all for Harry."

"They are not."

"They mostly are."

Harry suddenly bent down and grabbed one. "That's right, presents. We can't possibly have that talk until we finish Christmas, can we now? Oh, look, this one's even from Luna. I got her a moonfruit plant, and she got me, let's see . . ."

The box was empty, but as soon as he opened it, Harry felt doused in something very pleasant.

"A kiss," said Draco, pointing. "She blew you a kiss!"

"How would you know?"

"I can see it. Just there." Draco brushed his finger against the side of Harry's mouth. "It's quite a nice shade of pink."

"Pink!"

"It will fade," said Snape, sounding torn between soothing Harry and giving in to humour. "Now. Shall we?"

He gestured toward his bedroom door.

That time, Harry got up without a word and went.

------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Thirty-Five: "A Change of Heart"

~
Harry scrubbed a little harder at his face, then leaned closer to the mirror, his eyes narrowed. Huh. The pink kiss mark had faded some, hadn't it?

No, probably not.

But Snape had said that it would fade before the week was out. At least that meant that only he and Draco would see it. It could be worse.

Not that Harry hadn't liked Luna's gift. He had. That feeling that had washed over him as he'd opened the box had given him shivery tingles all the way down to his fingertips, and made him want to kiss her for real again. Soon.

But he did wish he'd been alone at the time, and that the spell she'd used to blow him a kiss didn't leave a mark.

On the other hand . . . he liked looking at it, even if he had spent the last ten minutes trying to scrub it away.

Finally deciding he was stuck with it, Harry padded back out to the bedroom and climbed into bed. Draco immediately laid aside the book Snape had given him and rolled to face him. "Well?"

Harry shrugged and pointed at the corner of his mouth. "I don't suppose you know a charm to . . . ?"

"There isn't one." Draco's eyes gleamed. "I meant the talk."

Oh. The talk. Harry tried to laugh it off. "Well, at least there was no mention of my possibly liking blokes."

"That's all you have to say?"

"What do you want to hear, that it was excruciating?" Harry waved his wand to plunge them into darkness. Better that than know his face was on display as it turned the shade of a ripe tomato.

"It took long enough. Did he show you all the different contraception charms?"

"Show me, hell," said Harry, snorting. "He went on about how I had to learn by experience. He made me practice every one of them until I thought my hand would fall off."

"It could have been worse. You might have had to explain to Hermione in detail why your girlfriend wouldn't end up pregnant."

"How much detail does it take to say that you weren't doing it?"
Draco sighed. "She's too perceptive by half, Harry. She could tell that we were doing something."

**Something?** Harry thought better than to ask the question out loud. Good thing, too. He could hear Draco flopping onto his back, and then noises like he was trying to kick all his covers off, even though it was a bit chilly in the cottage at night. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I didn't ask you to!"

"Yeah, I know." Another long sigh. "I just miss her, that's all. I used to think that Dad would relent. That just like he found a way for me to spend a little while with her at King's Cross, he'd manage something along those lines for Christmas. I-- I didn't know that . . . that there'd be no point."

"Maybe she'll have a change of heart--"

"Ha. Not when she's got that Fox Mumbler bloke all to herself. Hermione said he's *dreamy,*" he moaned. "I can't even send her nice presents to get her to think twice. Not with the way she hates money."

"Well, you wouldn't want a girl who only loved you for your money, would you?"

"No, but I could stand to have it influence her," retorted Draco. "Just a bit, mind. And I don't want to talk about it, I said. It'll just drive me spare. Imagine if Luna had written you a letter saying she'd fallen for some other bloke."

Harry bit his lip, understanding rushing over him.

Draco rolled to face him again. "Speaking of Luna, did Dad happen to talk to you about wanded magic?"

"No . . ."

"He should have. Because if you accidentally cast one of those contraception charms with too much force . . . Well, I don't know what might happen. But things could fall off, so be careful."

"Things could *fall off?*"

"You don't remember how strong your spells can get. What happened with the Mirror today barely scratched the surface."

"You don't mean my--"

"You practiced the 'double whammy' tonight, didn't you? Think about where your wand was pointed and you tell me."

Harry couldn't help it; he squeaked. Just thinking about it was . . . awful. Worse than awful. About the only thing more terrible would be using one of the spells that involved pointing his wand at Luna.

"I hope you're happy," he grumbled, still shuddering as he pulled his blankets more snugly around him. "You've put me off sex for life."

"Just remember what I said when you wanded magic starts coming back."

"It's not coming back."

"All you need is more experience with it, I think. And now that we know you can still cast in
Parseltongue as long as you have one of those sweets handy . . ."

Harry swallowed. He didn't really want the "dark powers" he'd heard described. He didn't want to cast Basilisks and turn people into actual stone statues. On the other hand, he didn't want his friends to die, and that prophecy wasn't among the things he'd forgotten.

Sooner or later, he was going to have to face Voldemort one last time, and only the power the "Dark Lord knows not" could make Harry survive the encounter.

And if Harry didn't survive, what would happen to Draco and Severus? From Voldemort's perspective, they were traitors of the worst kind.

"I have to practise, don't I," he murmured in the dark. "Until-- until it all comes back and I can do it without help."

Draco yawned. "Not such a terrible fate, Harry. Strongest wizard in the world? I'd give my vault."

"But--" Old fears crept over him, ones he could remember Sirius calming. But that was a long time ago, back when Harry's biggest problem was Voldemort sending him terrible visions. These dark powers were different. They came from inside Harry himself. "But what if I go mad with power and turn dark and-- and--"

"And what? You Summon the Snitch? That's about the worst evil you're capable of, and I bet even then your sense of fair play would win out."

"I might Imperio criminals to turn themselves in!"

"That would be a good thing. Just make sure there aren't any witnesses, hmm? You don't deserve to go to Azkaban for judicious use of an Unforgivable."

"It's not funny," exclaimed Harry. "I might do worse. I might Crucio a dark wizard for-- for-- for spitting at McGonagall!"

"Any dark wizard who spits at that old battle-axe deserves what he gets."

"I'm serious!"

"Harry," said Draco, all humour gone from his voice. "Severus won't let you go dark. And neither will I, and neither would Ron or Hermione or Ginny or any of the other people who love you. And don't say that we wouldn't be able to stop you, because we would. You're not like . . . him. You care about someone besides yourself."

Harry nodded, the motion shaky. But Draco couldn't see that. Couldn't see the nod at all, in fact.

"For Merlin's sake, Harry. All Luna would have to do is say that you're hurting the Snorkles and you'd straighten up straight away!"

It was true that he couldn't imagine hurting Luna.

He just hoped he didn't forget that feeling the way he'd forgotten so much else.
Harry closed his eyes and concentrated hard. "What about now?"

Snape shook his head. "Hissing."

"Now?"

"Still hissing."

"I hate this."

Something squirmed inside his sleeve for a moment, and then Sals was poking her head past his cuff. "Harry?"

He’d forgotten that she’d climbed in his cloak pocket earlier that morning. Somehow, seeing her made speaking in Parseltongue seem like less of a burden. Maybe because now, he’d have someone to talk to until the twins’ sweet let go of his tongue. Or brain.

"Hallo, Sals. Have you been with me this whole time?"

He reached out to stroke her neck as she nodded her little head. "Harry is warm."

It must be nice, he thought, to have so few things to worry about. Warmth and food and a nice place to curl up and sleep. That last one was all Harry wanted at the moment. He thought he might pass out.

Which only went to show, didn’t it, that Snape’s advice had been right. Harry probably shouldn’t have started out with a wanded spell. It was just that . . . well, wandless magic had sounded like the harder challenge.

Besides, he hadn’t wanted Snape to think that Harry would take his advice on every last thing. Maybe he had last year, but the more he heard about the things he’d said and done, the more he thought he must have been a mess inside. The kind of mess who’d probably needed someone like Marsha Goode.

Maybe having needles stuck into you all over would do that.

Harry shuddered. Needles. He’d always hated the things, so it was no wonder he’d got kind of mental in the aftermath of all that. But he was back to his normal self now, the one who had stood up to Umbridge even though it would mean writing lines in his own blood. There was no way he wouldn’t stick up to Snape, who’d do no worse than glare at him and say something rude.

For all that though, he still wished he’d started with wandless magic like the man had said.

"Harry is cold?"

Harry knew he should be. When he looked at the mess he’d created, parts of it were already icing over. After that outpouring of magic, though, Harry felt like he was burning up. "No, not cold. Just . . . thinking."

"That was in English," said Snape.

Of course. The sweet had worn off, so now Harry had to look at Sals if he wanted to speak in the
language she understood. He shifted his gaze back to the little snake. "I'm all right, but you must be cold. Sneak back down into my cloth-flap, hmm?"

He tickled the top of her head until she wriggled back into his sleeve, then turned to face Snape. "Again?"

"I think not."

Nodding, Harry staggered over to the cottage and sank down onto a bench near the front door. "Something must be wrong. I mean, it was just one spell, and I feel like I've been flattened by a lorry!"

"It was one wanded spell," corrected Snape.

"So it's always going to be like this? One strong blast of magic and I'll need a nap? I'm supposed to win every duel on the first spell?"

"You'll grow less debilitated with practice. You did before."

"Yeah," said Harry, closing his eyes as he rested his head against the wall of the cottage. "The Mirror didn't do me in like this, though."

"Adrenaline, I imagine. Not to mention the fact that you are its master. Here, this should help refresh you." When Harry opened his eyes, Snape was holding out an uncorked bottle of ale.

Harry smiled as he took it. A few days earlier, he'd decided it was stupid to drink wine just because they did, and even stupider to pretend he liked the stuff. He'd told both Snape and Draco that he'd prefer a good bitter or Butterbeer every time, and since then, there had only been two wine glasses at dinner.

Asserting himself more was working out in other ways, too. The lion he'd given Draco had only roared twice in five days. The second time it had happened, Draco had claimed he was just testing it. Harry wasn't sure he believed that, but he was sure that he'd been hearing a lot less crap about the houses than he used to.

On the other hand, he thought as he drank the whole bottle of ale in three long gulps, asserting himself like an adult didn't have to include being an inconsiderate arse. This was Severus' only home apart from Hogwarts, and Harry had damaged it. That probably wouldn't have been a danger if he'd started with a wandless spell like Snape had recommended. "Sorry about your meadow."

"It's been flooded before."

"Well, sorry about the forest, then." Harry sighed, remembering how he'd miscalculated. "Once I saw how strong my Aguamenti was, I started to worry about erosion. That was why I aimed for the trees, but I really didn't mean to strip them of bark and . . . uh, blast those last few right off their roots."

Draco arrived just then, casting a spell at his dragonhide boots as he paused at the foot of the porch. Droplets flew from them in all directions. "All done, good as new."

Harry managed not to wince. "Sorry about your stone wall."

"That's what Reparo is for, you idi--"

It was probably a testament to how far they'd all come that Snape had stopped in mid-word and
also that Harry could chuckle. "Idiot child?"

Snape's robes fluttered as he yanked them more tightly closed. "My apologies," he said stiffly. "It was not my intent to insult you."

"Yeah, I know," said Harry. "After Draco explained about 'idiot child' our first day here, I thought about the times I'd heard you say that, and . . ." He couldn't help but smile, because the phrase was so Snape. "You really do use it to convey affection. So . . . it's all right."

How could it not be all right? Now that Harry understood, he kind of liked the phrase. Even the "child" part, which should have offended him since it was hardly true any longer.

But he liked it all the same.

Embarassed by that admission, Harry quickly upended his bottle to catch the last dribbly bit of ale, then picked up the spell lexicon lying beside him on the bench. Hermione had insisted he pack it.

Strange how he hadn't remembered it when Snape had returned the other journal, but then, this one wasn't very much like a diary at all. The other one was, it turned out. It started off with some pretty terrible dreams he'd had, but later on there were other kinds of entries, including a long rant he'd apparently written when he'd been annoyed at Draco for insisting that Rhiannon Miller was a witch.

"Diffindo," said Harry now, using Dumbledore's password so he wouldn't have to use his own Parseltongue one. No point in wasting a sweet. As soon as his writing appeared, Harry flipped through the lexicon, wishing it could be alphabetical. Instead, he'd apparently written spells down as he'd tried them, which made it hard to find the entry for *Aguamenti* again. But there it was, finally. He read down the list of translations and frowned. None of them sounded like they should have done so much damage.

"It's not even like I picked the worst version," he complained. "And I started with *Aguamenti* in the first place because it seemed like a spell that couldn't do much harm when amplified!"

"Oh, you've done far worse property damage with your wanded magic," said Draco in a jolly tone. "How many rooms did that *Lumos* blast through, Severus?"

"Several."

"And one time you started melting walls too. While dreaming. That's why the stones in our room look like a lava flow."

Harry narrowed his eyes at Snape. "You know, I don't much like being lied to. You told me I had my dark powers under control."

The man just gave him a bland look in return. "It took time and practice. As it will again."

Time and practice, yeah. But something else, too. Harry looked at the box beside him on the bench. "We'd better order more sweets, then. Each one seems to last, what, about ten minutes?"

"Slightly under, I would say."

Harry snorted. "With the time I seem to need to recover, that's one sweet per spell. Brilliant. I'm going to need boatloads of the things."

"You might consider starting with wandless spells as I advised," said Snape mildly. "That would
allow you to practise far more than a single spell per sweet."

"And there I thought you might not say that you'd told me so."

"Should I not?"

"You should stop walking on tenterhooks around me, Severus," said Harry. "Just be yourself. What good is our . . . whatever we have, if the two of us are being other people?"

"The two of you? Well! I like that!"

Trust Draco to make this about him. But then, that was pretty much what Harry had just asked for - - that they not try hide who they really were. And Draco, Harry thought, was always going to tend toward selfish and self-centred.

Strangely enough, it was part of his charm.

"The three of us, then," Harry corrected. He couldn't help but grin, feeling just a little bit satisfied, however. "Now you know how it felt when I thought I'd been left out of the opera, eh?"

"You hate the opera more than you hate wine!"

"Doesn't mean I want to be deliberately excluded," retorted Harry.

"You won't be, you prat. But those were about Dad, not you and me. Merlin, Gryffindors are thicker than treacle!"

Draco's face immediately went pasty. "Oh, fuck. I've done it again."

"I have heard," murmured Snape to Harry as he stepped foward to awkwardly pat Draco's shoulder, "that operant conditioning is considerably more effective when it includes rewards as well as punishments."

"Really?" asked Harry sarcastically. "I don't remember anybody ever getting any in Potions class."

Snape chuckled. "I don't consider brewing to be a form of behaviour modification, which is what you are attempting with your brother. Though I will take the idea into consideration, Harry. There are some specific behaviours I would prefer to extinguish. Blowing up cauldrons comes to mind."

"The students will faint dead if you put up a star chart," retorted Harry, only to see that Snape looked baffled. "Not like in Astronomy. They use it in Muggle schools. It's a list of students, where you, uh, give each one a sticky star every time they don't blow up a cauldron, and when somebody has, say, ten stars, they get a reward. Or wait until everybody in the class has ten stars, 'cause that'll make the better students help the slower ones, and then the whole class gets a pizza party. Uh, pizza is like a giant round--"

"I know perfectly well what a 'pizza' is."

Oh, right. He would have to know. Harry had already remembered that Snape had eaten one once. "Right. We talked about it, about how you'd told me that my father wasn't unemployed."

Snape's attention seemed to narrow. "Have you recalled more of that particular conversation?"

"No." Harry gulped. "It's walled in like the rest, now." Harry strained to remember more, trying to break through that wall or yank open that door or--
And then something came to him. Not another memory, true. But something startling, all the same.

"Oh-- you know, I did already remember you sitting across from me at Privet Drive, but-- but in the memory, it's you, Severus. Black hair, dark eyes . . . but from what I've heard about that time, shouldn't you have looked like Remus?"

Snape stilled, clearly thinking back to the exchange. "Yes. We had shortly before returned from seeing your aunt in hospital. I remained in disguise until you had gone to sleep." Snape nodded in remembrance. "You marvelled that I had gone three minutes without insulting you."

"We were getting on all right, then?"

"Now and again. When we returned to the school I certainly regarded you far differently, and that was before I knew you turn the Room of Requirement into a pasha's harem when you desire a place to calm down."

Why had he wanted to calm down? "We fought, you mean?"

"We did, but that came later. You took your friends to the Room because you had received word that you could donate marrow to your aunt. You found the prospect daunting."

"I bet," muttered Harry. He knew where marrow was located, so it didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out how Muggle doctors would go about extracting it. *Ugh, yuck.*

Of course, Snape telling him things about last year meant a lot. He was trusting Harry to know what was best, instead of listening to so-called "experts" who had never themselves had any amnesia. Despite all that, though, Harry needed a change of subject. "Did you like the pizza?"

"It was hideous."

Well, with the things Snape usually ate, it stood to reason that he wouldn't think very highly of fast food. On the other hand . . . "Draco said you didn't think fish and chips was so bad. During the summer?"

"Ah, but those are proper British fare."

Draco made a show of clearing his throat. "We can debate luncheon later. Shouldn't we get back to my reward?"

Harry glanced at him. "You like the idea?"

"Of course."

Hmm. He *had* been a pretty good sport about the lion. So maybe a reward to go with it was only fair. The only trouble was, Harry had no idea what Draco could want. Especially now that he and Snape were getting on. "Er . . . Galleons? Two a week?"

"Galleons. Honestly. That's the best you can do?"

Harry thought harder. "Um, well maybe Snape can take a couple of feet off a Potions essay now and again?"

Draco looked outraged. "And undermine the requirement that I fully delve into topics I shall need for the written portion of the N.E.W.T.?"

"Well, what do you want, then?" asked Harry, exasperated. "I can't buy you a new broom every
time you want to insult Gryffindor and manage to control yourself. There aren't enough broom shops!"

"Anybody can give brooms away. I want something only you can give."

"What? My toenail clippings?"

Draco's upper lip curled. "I've seen your feet. If you ever decide to use a pedicure spell, we'll talk. Until then . . ." He sat down next to Harry, his eyes glinting in a way that meant Harry wasn't going to like this.

And he was right. Harry didn't.

"You can start to sleep in Slytherin occasionally."

"Forget it."

"But you're not just in Gryffindor. You're in Slytherin too, and no, that's not an insult to your house. It's just a fact."

Harry sighed. He knew that was a fact. It came along with the adoption, and if he believed the one was real, he couldn't really dispute the other. It was still, however, nothing more than a technicality.

"Look," he said, exasperated, "You want people to know that I like you. I get that, all right? But we spend loads of time together and people know we're brothers and that I'm fine with that, now. Not to mention that I'm already going to classes with the Slytherins. Changing where I sleep won't accomplish anything--"

"It was showing the younger students that Slytherins can stand for something great, too," interrupted Draco. "After all, if Harry Potter can embrace his Slytherin side--"

"I don't have a Slytherin side," said Harry, not caring if his voice was cold.

"That's enough," said Snape sharply, his arms crossed, his features taut. It was a long moment before he spoke again. "We should never have pressured Harry to sleep and eat with Slytherin, Draco. It only fed his belief that his father and brother could not accept him for the person he feels himself to be."

"But he is part Slytherin!" insisted Draco. "I know it and you know it! We just have to make sure that Harry knows it--"

"Harry will come to that realisation on his own or not at all, as he chooses."

"That's right," said Harry staunchly, though some part of him was reeling from the unqualified support. "So pick something else for your reward."

"Fine." Draco scowled. "I want you to at least give some thought to sleeping in Slytherin."

"Why, so you can ask me every other day if I've changed my mind?"

An even deeper scowl, like that had been his plan and now it was stymied.

"I'll promise never to mention it again, but you have to promise to really think about it. Really think about it."
Harry lifted his chin. It seemed like Snape was ready to drop the topic of Harry being Slytherin, and if he could get Draco to drop it too, just for a promise like that... well, it was too good a deal to pass up. "Sure, I'll think about it. First you have to earn the reward, though. Go a whole week without the lion roaring even once. And don't even think about fibbing to get your way. That lion comes with a built-in reveal spell, and I've already set the password."

Draco smirked. "Oh, that's easy. It's Gryffindor."

"No."

"Weasley is our king?"

"No."

"Harry and Luna?"

Harry punched him lightly in the arm. "Stop it."

"Harry and Luna, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G?"

Harry felt his face flaming, not the least because the password did have something to do with Luna. "Stop, I said!"

"I won't. I'll guess and guess until I crack the code!"

Harry ignored him. "So, Severus. Wandless Parseltongue magic, then?"

"Yes. If you recall, the headmaster and I recommended weeks ago that you practise a little each day."

"It hardly seemed worthwhile when casting in Parseltongue was impossible," retorted Harry, though he knew that back then, he also hadn't been very willing to take Snape's advice. Sort of like today. But he'd learned his lesson. Part of having an adult friend he could trust was probably to go ahead and trust him sometimes. "But I'll start now."

"When you grow more used to how it feels, begin practising how to direct a limited amount of magic into your wand."

"Instead of all of it," added Draco. "Prat."

"Wanker." With that, though, Draco jumped up and headed inside. "I've a lion to chat with."

"Enjoy the roar." Harry picked up his spell lexicon again. "I'm ready to start. Some wandless first, and then, d'you think you could help me with some regular magic, Severus? Draco told me you were brilliant teaching Defence last year."

Snape frowned. "Are you still behind in class?"

"No, Morrighan has me caught up on everything you covered. I meant--" Harry shrugged. "I can't rely on dark powers. What if I don't have a sweet on hand when I need one, or worse, somebody figures out my trick and summons them? I have to get better on all fronts, don't you think? And you must know loads of spells that would be good in battle. After all, you were a--"

Harry swallowed as a sudden pain speared through his left temple. Still, he wasn't about to let that
Three grueling days later, Snape decreed that they could all do with a holiday from their holiday. Harry didn't know what he meant, but he was relieved all the same. He'd run out of the red ribbon sweets the day before, which meant that he and Snape had concentrated much of their time since on regular spells instead of Parseltongue ones.

That was all to the good, really, but several hours a day of Defence was exhausting in its own way, even if he didn't count the headaches that would strike at unexpected moments. At least he had ready access to high-quality potions. If not . . . well, he could have managed, but it was better to be able to down a few gulps of potion and be done with it.

Snape had expressed some concern about the headaches, but Harry had already figured them out, by then. They'd only started after he'd got his Parseltongue magic working, after all.

"But you used it for months without ill effects last year!" Draco had immediately objected.

"Yes, but it was the only magic I had," Harry had retorted. "I think the problem now is switching back and forth. I also think I'll get used to it, but it may take a while."

Snape tapped a finger against his cheek, then drew his wand. "Standard diagnostic spell," he murmured. "But nothing appears amiss, so I doubt it's physical."

"Right, because it's magical." Harry laid a hand on Snape's arm. Strange how easy it had become to do a thing like that. But then, he'd hugged the man of his own volition. Perhaps there was no going backwards after that.

Now, Harry bounced a little on his feet. "What's this about a holiday, then?"

"I had originally thought to have Mr. and Miss Weasley out to visit you, but that was when . . ." Snape coughed, a dull wave of colour coming up beneath his sallow skin. "That was when I was not thinking very clearly, I will admit. The stress of extending my Occlumency must have been greater than I had realised."

That time, Harry patted his arm. "Sorry, Severus."

The man waved that off. "At any rate, I have received a letter from Molly Weasley asking when it would be a good time for her children to come. As it's out of the question to add anyone to the Fidelius without excellent reason--"

"But I thought Ron had been out here," said Harry, sure that Draco had mentioned it more than once.
"His sister hasn't, though."

"Oh."

"If I might be permitted to finish," said Snape, a little snidely in Harry's opinion, "Molly and I have arranged that the two of you will go to the Burrow for a short visit."

"Oh," Harry said again, almost wincing when he thought about the fussy way Draco could go on sometimes. "Um, I don't want you and Ron getting on even worse, and if you insult his home--"

Draco stiffened, drawing himself up so he looked taller. "I have absolutely perfect manners when I care to use them. And if you think I would insult Mrs Weasley, who has been very kind indeed to me, then you don't know me as well as you think you do, you stupid . . . er, boy."

Well, at least he hadn't said *Gryffindor*.

"It's just that you haven't seen their house--"

"Actually, I have. We had our coming-of-age celebration there, and I was perfectly pleasant to all concerned!"

"All right, all right," said Harry, holding up his hands.

Snape shook his head slightly and gave them each a bootlace. "Emergency Portkeys courtesy of Albus," he explained. "Harry's Occlumency is quite good now, so we expect no trouble, but if anything arises and you find yourselves unable to Apparate, grasp this in a pocket and say 'Lark Rise.' You will be transported to Grimmauld Place. Should you end up there, I expect you to Floo through to my quarters in Hogwarts at once."

Harry nodded. "What about you?"

"I have a Portkey as well."

Another nod. "Fine, then, but we can't leave anybody behind at the Burrow. I won't leave them there to face Death Eaters--"

"Very well." Snape nodded, and Harry waited until Draco did too, though he cast Snape a bit of a questioning look, only to get a glance that clearly said to drop it.

Snape checked his watch. "They were expecting us five minutes ago. Shall we?" He held out his arm.

"I can Apparate," objected Harry. It was one of the things he'd practiced during the holiday, since the wards at Hogwarts made it impossible to learn it there. "You saw me. All the way across the property and back, that last time. It's like the spells from last year's classes -- it came right back to me with just a bit of review."

"Before you Apparate all the way to the Burrow, I should like to see more mastery."

"I'm sure it's fine. I could do it before, couldn't I?"

"Harry," said Snape quietly. "It would be a terrible thing to see you Splinched."

"It's terrible to *be* Splinched," added Draco. "Trust me on that."

Harry remembered then how he'd told himself he should be willing to take advice from friends he
trusted, so he nodded, even though he'd much rather have Apparated on his own.

Draco nodded too, then grasped his wand tightly and vanished.

Harry latched onto Snape's arm and closed his eyes.

"So we can tell him anything, really?" asked Ginny as she set down her teacup.

Ron beamed from ear to ear. "That'd be just brilliant, sir!"

Snape inclined his head, very slightly. "I must hope that it will be for the best." He slanted Draco a glance as he spoke. "But I must say, Mr Weasley, I did appreciate your willingness to consider well-intentioned advice."

Draco just looked blandly back at him. Snape hadn't said that Draco had gone against that advice; he'd merely alluded to "new information they had received on the topic."

Ron and Ginny had taken that to mean that the amnesia expert had decided to try a different treatment.

And Harry had let them.

A Slytherin lie, he supposed, even though the phrase kind of made him wince. He just didn't see the point in outing Draco; it would only lead to resentment from his friends who'd gone along with Snape's plan.

And frankly, with Draco having taken Hermione to the Yule Ball, platonic as it all had been, there was already too much resentment in some quarters.

Take the way Ron had reacted to the Christmas present Draco had sent to the Burrow. Apparently it had been a book that looked like it was about Quidditch, but when opened turned into *Etiquette Advice for the Modern Young Wizard.*

"He was crawling on the floor to snog his date, Harry! Hermione would never have sunk to such lower-class behaviour, but as he's now with a girl who has no social acumen whatsoever, your friend needs to develop some of his own," Draco had explained when Ron's sarcastic thank-you note had arrived.

"I just want to do whatever was best for Harry's recovery," Ron said now.

"As do we all, I feel quite certain," said Draco, chin lifted high.

"But it will be a relief not to watch our words so carefully," Ginny quickly put in. "It was harder than I would have thought, leaving out any reference to last year but being able to speak freely about the ones before that."

Molly beamed a smile at her daughter, then shifted her gaze to Snape. "Oh, dear. Is that marking
you've brought along, Severus? During your holiday? I must say, I don't think they pay Hogwarts teachers enough. No, not nearly enough."

Snape gave a rather studied shrug. "I will admit to some procrastination. I've preferred to spend time with my sons, but as I thought they'd be otherwise occupied here . . ."

He let the suggestion drift off.

"You must use our kitchen table, of course," insisted Molly. "Best to spread your papers out. And have you ink and quill?"

Snape drew them from inside his robes as he rose. The ink, Harry noticed, was a brilliant scarlet red. He winced, thinking back to some of the caustic comments he'd got over the years.

Ron waited until the kitchen door had clicked shut behind Snape and his mother, then turned to Draco like he had a point to score and knew just how to do it. "I don't suppose Harry mentioned what he was getting me for Christmas, did he?"

Draco made an elegant gesture with one hand. "Ah, well. He's my brother but with the pair of you rooming together in Gryffindor, you're far more likely than I to know such details in advance."

Harry sat on his fingers to keep from clenching them into fists. That was underhanded, bringing up the idea of sleeping in Slytherin like that -- in a way so oblique that Harry couldn't really even complain!

"Oh. Then I suppose I have to be the one to tell you the bad news," said Ron with a bad attempt at hiding his obvious glee.

Harry braced himself for the explosion.

"A Firebolt XL! And with his own broom being XL level, Slytherin won't have much of a chance in the rematch."

Ron had miscalculated, however. He should have sprung it as a total surprise rather than angling so hard for a reaction. Draco merely lifted his shoulders in a shrug that looked very French even before he said, "C'est la vie, c'est la guerre."

Now it looked like Ron might be the one to explode. Ginny hastily intervened again. "Speaking of presents, those ever-blooming flowers truly are lovely, Draco. Thank you again. And Mum loves the cashmere jumper. She says she can't remember the last time someone thought to give her a jumper!"

"My pleasure," drawled Draco. "Rather fortuitous, I thought. Seeing as she gave me a jumper in return."

Ginny smiled, just a little. "She wasn't sure if your own mother would send . . ."

"No, no word from that quarter at all."

Ron elbowed Harry. "Let's grab a couple of brooms. We play Hufflepuff in February and I've worked out some ideas I wanted to show you."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "I'm on the team, too, you great berk."

"Yeah, but you've already seen these in action--"
"And you're being very rude," interrupted Ginny. "Leaving out Draco?"

"I'm hardly going to share my new strategy with the captain of Slytherin team!"

"I fancy a turn around the garden in any case," said Draco, standing up and holding out his arm to Ginny. "Would you care to join me?"

Ginny jumped up and took his arm. "You know, I think I would!"

Draco smiled down at her. "We had a bit of a flood at our place. The garden tour there includes a giant ice floe."

Ginny giggled. "Oh, dear. Well, here, I think the best we can offer is some mischevious gnomes. Best to have your wand at the ready."

"Oh, it always is. . . ."

They strolled out together, and when they were gone Ron managed to stop sputtering. "Was he . . . was that git . . . flirting?"

Harry shrugged. "No idea." If so, Harry counted it a good thing. Draco could stand to spend less time moaning about Rhiannon. "I don't suppose you've seen Luna?"

Ron stopped staring out the window. "Why would she visit me?"

"I thought she might be back from Tibet. You haven't seen her walking down the lane, or . . .?"

"Sorry, mate."

Harry tried to put it out of his mind. "Let's try out these Quidditch ideas, then."

"Just as well," said Ron darkly as he got up. "I think I ought to keep an eye on that brother of yours."

"He has perfect manners," said Harry with a straight face. "When he wants to. And if he, you know, decides to snog Ginny or something, then--"

"Ewww!"

"Then it'll be because she wants it too!"

"That's even worse! Ewww!"

Harry grabbed one of the brooms Ron had found. "I think they might suit each other."

"Ewww!"

"That is a singularly annoying noise, Mr Weasley," came Snape's voice from behind the kitchen door.

Ron flushed red down to the roots of his hair and dropped the subject. In between Quidditch plays, though, he kept circling 'round the Burrow, looking down at Draco and his sister.
Snape had promised them a short visit, but they stayed until the sun was setting.

When it was time to leave, Molly Weasley pressed a large box into Harry's hands. "The twins sent this," she said. "Though I can't think it a good idea for a growing boy to have quite so many sweets within reach."

It was filled with nothing but the red ribbons that would force him to speak Parseltongue, of course, but Mrs. Weasley wasn't to know that. Only Harry, Snape, and Draco knew that his Parseltongue magic was back -- though Fred and George had probably figured it out when they'd read Harry's request for more sweets. He'd thought about ordering a wide assortment in order to keep the secret concealed, but then realised that unless he was very specific, the twins might think it a capital idea to slip some practical jokes into some of sweets, ribbons included. This was too serious for nonsense like that, so he'd written them a sternly worded message about needing ribbons and only ribbons and nothing else. He'd also used the word "order" prominently and underlined it wherever it appeared.

"Thanks, Mrs Weasley," said Harry. "I won't eat too many at once, I promise."

She cast a glance at Snape like she thought a father ought to have something to say about nutrition, but gave it up when Snape merely inclined his head.

Once back in Devon, Harry wasted no time opening the package. There was a folded slip of parchment on top of the neatly packed sweets.

_Dear Harry,_

_Thank you for your order, but you must be in need of a Remembrall if you think we'll charge our number one investor for filling his order. No arguments. You can't order us about, but you can order whatever you like. Molly's the word!_

_Fred & George_

"I think they know it's for Order business," said Harry dryly as he passed the letter to Snape.

"Rather pitiful attempt at code, particularly at the end, but then, yours was no better," said Snape.

Harry opened his mouth to retort.

"You did tell me not to walk on tenterhooks," added Snape.

"Yeah," said Harry, smiling a little. "I did. I suppose it was pitiful. Well . . . I've had a bit of a break but now it's back to work. But wandless for now, right."

With that, he popped a ribbon into his mouth, held his wand at a slightly wrong angle, and started through the spells he'd memorised from his lexicon.
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:  
Chapter Thirty-Six: "Luna?"

Comments very welcome,  
Aspen in the Sunlight
"What?" asked Harry blankly at the door to Ravenclaw. "But the Express pulled in over an hour ago."

It had been torture waiting that hour before he went in search of Luna. But he thought that she'd want a chance to settle in a little after spending most of the day on a train.

"I would know. I was on it," said the girl, who looked like a fifth year at the most. Though that wouldn't explain the way she was blinking so much. Harry tried not to stare, but it was hard. "Luna wasn't, and she's not here now."

"Well, where is she?"

"No idea."

"Can you see if somebody in Luna's year might know?"

"All right. Do you want to-- no, you'd better wait here." She closed the door, but was back in a moment. "Nobody knows, but I can tell her you came by. What's your name?"

Harry was so unused to that question that he probably goggled. "Uh, Harry."

She blinked some more. "You're supposed to ask my name, now."

Harry wondered then if a lot of the Ravenclaw girls were odd. Of course, Luna was odd in a charming way, while this girl just struck him as vaguely creepy. "What's your name, then?"

"Orla Quirke."

Strange name, but Harry didn't say so. "Thanks, Orla."

Still more blinking, like she had a tic in her eye or something. "We could go look for her together, if you like."

"No, that's all right--"

"Oh no, I'd love to. Really."

Harry shook his head and took a step backwards.

The girl stood in the doorway, apparently undecided about something, but then finally shrugged and closed the door.
"Well, she's probably still in Tibet," said Hermione in an eminently reasonable voice. "With her father, I think you said?"

"Yeah, but--" Harry frowned. "Something was off about the way that girl in Ravenclaw was acting."

"Off how?"

Harry was embarrassed to say, but he should have known that Hermione wouldn't drop it. "How, Harry?"

Harry looked down at his hands. "It's just that I'm not used to students here asking me for my name--"

Ron guffawed. "She didn't know who you were?"

"No, and then she said that I was supposed to ask her name--"

Hermione patted his arm. "It sounds like she was trying to flirt, Harry."

Harry thought of the way the girl had been blinking like something was in her eye. "Yeah, all right. Not too nice when I'd made it clear I was there to see Luna." He thought back and frowned. "She wouldn't let me come in. Do you suppose maybe Luna's there and this Orla girl was refusing to let me see her?"

"Oh, I doubt that--"

"Be more of a Slytherin thing to do, wouldn't it?" asked Ron.

Harry winced a little, thinking of all the times he'd made a point to Draco about his tendency to badmouth Gryffindor. "I think we should stop judging so much by house," he said firmly. "I also think I'd better check my map for Luna."

Ron started. "Snape gave it back, then?"

"Not yet." Harry made a move as though to jump up from the common room couch, but noticed that Ron and Hermione were exchanging what seemed to be a pointed glance. Hermione's brow was furrowed and Ron was frowning. "What?"

"Ah . . ." Ron's frown grew even more pronounced. "It's just . . . he might not want to."

"He said he'd give it to me." Harry leaned closer and spoke in a low voice. "Snape was using it to keep track of me so he could Occlude for me, but we worked on that over the holiday. I don't need help now, so he said I could have my map back."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Maybe you should just check it for Luna but leave it with your father, Harry."

Harry expected Ron to laugh, or maybe reach out a hand to check her for fever, but all he did was
hesitate a moment, and then nod in agreement.

"Why would I do that?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "Well, he . . . er, might need it for something else."

"You never know," added Ron.

"For what? Catching Gryffindors out of bed after hours?"

"He's never used it for that," said Ron quickly.

It had been a while since Harry had that through-the-looking-glass feeling, but he had it again now. "You trust him that much? Snape? Head of Slytherin? Obsesses about the House Cup? That Snape?"

"Yeah," said Ron, almost fiercely. "I do trust him. Not about everything, but this? Yeah. He took a thousand points from Slytherin to convince the nasty element there that they'd better not attack you again--"

"Ron!" Hermione poked him in the arm. "We're not supposed to--"

"Oh, that's right. You don't know yet." Harry gave her a bit of a smug look. "Snape says it's all right, now. Anybody can tell me anything they please."

"That's your worst ploy yet!"

Harry choked back a laugh. He supposed he couldn't blame her, considering the way he'd tried to trick his friends into letting things slip. But this was no trick. He was just about to tell her so when Ron beat him to it.

"Snape told me that himself," he said in a smarmy tone. "When Harry came to the Burrow during the holiday. Told Ginny and me both that it was fine, now."

Harry was surprised he hadn't added a childish So, there.

"Did somebody check him for Polyjuice?"

"It was him!" retorted Ron.

"Well, it doesn't sound much like him," said Hermione, eyes narrowed. "He was quite emphatic about the absolute importance of letting you remember on your own. And now suddenly, it's just fine to blab as much as we please?"

"It is fine!" snapped Harry. "You don't know everything, Hermione."

"Obviously. So tell me what I'm missing."

Harry didn't want to lie outright, but this was one of those times when he thought misleading her might be in order. Otherwise she was never going to let it go. "Snape received some new information," he said, levelling a glare at her. "I had another appointment with my therapist. Is that enough information for you or should I tell you everything we discussed?"

"And she changed her recommendation, just like that?" Hermione shook her head. "That doesn't make sense!"
"Maybe she knows more about mind and memory than you do!"

"It just--"

"Want to come down with me to see Snape so he can tell you himself? After you check him for Polyjuice, that is?"

"Harry, I just care about you--"

"Then ask him yourself," said Harry, weary by then. "And until you do, keep your own counsel if you want. But don't harass Ron or Draco for telling me things--"

"Draco!" exclaimed Hermione, her eyes narrowing. "That's it, isn't it? That snake! I thought it was odd, the way you started getting along with him so suddenly when it took you ages to believe Snape might be decent these days. He started telling you things, didn't he? Against your therapist's instructions!"

So the game was up. He should have remembered that Hermione could think circles around almost everybody else. "He was the only one who bloody cared how I felt," said Harry, crossing his arms.

"We all cared!"

"It didn't look that way to me." Sighing, Harry gave up on the defensive stance and ran his hands through his hair instead. "I understand that you meant well, but you were wrong. The whole lot of you. I only started remembering things on my own after I had a little context. Like..." He tried to think of an analogy Hermione could appreciate. "Like my brain was a library without shelves, but once talking with Draco had built some, I had some spots where books could go."

He decided not to mention that he hadn't remembered anything new since before the night of the Yule Ball.

"Anyway," finished Harry, "Snape said it's fine now for anybody else to fill in the holes that might be left."

"Now that Draco's wrecked any chance for your mind to heal as it should," said Hermione scathingly. "Did he have to write ten thousand lines? Because I think it should be a hundred thousand!"

"I asked Severus not to punish him."

"And he agreed?" asked Hermione, aghast.

Harry grinned. "Well, I kind of made it a test of my trust, so he wouldn't have much choice. You know, with us getting on better he wouldn't want to risk me going back to..." Suddenly it wasn't so amusing. "The awful way I'd been."

"You're calling him 'Severus' again?" asked Ron cautiously.

"Spending Christmas with him brought a few things home." Harry smiled again. "It's strange, in a way. I can still step back and see how completely bizarre it all is. Christmas with the two Slytherins who've done the most to make my life here miserable? But at the same time..." Harry gave a little shrug. "I can see how much they care. Both of them."

He stood up. "I have to get my map so I can see where Luna might be."
Ron and Hermione exchanged another intense look.

"What?"

"I think we have to tell him," said Ron in a low tone.

Hermione chewed her lip. "But what if he . . ."

"Will Severus know why you don't want to him to give it to me?" asked Harry, exasperated. "Because you clearly don't."

"Yeah, he knows, mate."

"He'll tell me then, if you won't. So talk."

Ron cleared his throat. "It's just . . . you used to use it to . . . er . . ."

Harry's eyebrows drew together. "What could I use it for except sneaking around a bit? Or seeing who's about. What's wrong with you two?"

"Room of Requirement," said Hermione, brushing off her robes as she stood up. "The common room is too busy."

It didn't look so busy to Harry; they'd more or less had the corner sofas all to themselves. But if it would get them to talk instead of exchanging those speaking glances with each other, fine.

"Let's go," said Harry.

---------------------------------------------

Harry stared blankly at his friends and tried to make sense of what Ron had just said. "But I can't stand needles."

Ron winced. "I think that was sort of the point. You had some idea about the fear being used to corrupt you if you couldn't conquer it on your own."

"But . . ."

Harry didn't know what to say. This all sounded so unlikely. He couldn't imagining picking up a needle and deciding to . . . to . . . he could hardly even think the words, let alone contemplate the deed.

And yet he knew his friends wouldn't lie to him. Not about something like this.

Not about anything, really. But then, he hadn't really thought they'd been lying when they'd claimed he was Snape's son and Draco's brother and liked being both. He'd told himself that he must have fooled them about all that.

"Harry," said Hermione, leaning forward in her chair. "You weren't the first young person ever to try to deal with stress that way. And you've had more stress than average."
"To say the least," muttered Harry. "But needles?"

"It only started after you'd killed Lucius Malfoy," said Ron. "And considering what he did to you with needles . . . there's probably some connection there. But your therapist helped you get it under control."

"That's why I needed her," realised Harry. "Oh. Ick. I'm a nutter after all."

"You're not!" exclaimed Hermione. "You just had some things to work through. And you did. Listen, Harry. There were times last year when I though the adoption was a bad thing for you, and—"

"Really? Because that's not the impression you've been giving me since I woke up with my head bandaged!"

Ron crossed his legs at the ankle and gave Harry a wide smile. "I handled your adoption better than she did, believe it or not."

"You slandered Snape and he gave you ten thousand lines," said Harry dryly. He'd heard it all from Draco.

"Yeah, but she wrote letters to Wizard Family Services saying that Snape was letting you get beat up. And that was after it was clear to the rest of us that Snape was a good dad."

"I know all this," said Harry impatiently. "Draco's pretty thorough. What's the point?"

"The point," said Hermione with a glare at Ron, "is that one of the reasons I've been so supportive of Snape this year is that he proved himself beyond all doubt in the end. When you needed help, he got you a therapist. Do you know how remarkable that is? Psychology is a Muggle science. Most wizard parents wouldn't even think of getting that kind of help for a child. Yours did."

Harry felt a little smile coming on. "Yeah, I guess he did. And according to Draco he was reading up on helping children cope with trauma before he even adopted me. Muggle books, again."

"So don't call yourself a nutter again," said Hermione sharply. "It just insults what your father did for you."

"All right," said Harry. He could manage not to say the word. He still thought he shouldn't have tried something as bloody stupid as sticking needles in himself. Nobody was going to want him as an Auror if he couldn't handle killing a dark wizard better than that. "So I guess I used the map as a lookout?"

"Yeah, to see if anybody was coming."

Harry shrugged. "Severus did say he'd give it back, so I don't think he's worried about me going back to . . . that. Or maybe it's that he knows you two would notice and let him know."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "You're all right with that, are you?"

Harry couldn't help but smile. That's right -- they didn't know. He hadn't had a chance to tell them. "Yes. Over the holiday he figured out how I could get the mirror working. And I talked to Sirius, and even he had to admit that Snape's been a good dad. But I could tell before then that he . . . really does love me."

"He does," said Hermione softly.
"It still feels strange," admitted Harry. "And I don't mean because he's Snape. Though granted, that still startles me if I think about it too hard. It's also that I'm pretty used to assuming that I'm not the type of person that gets to have a real parent. Just seemed like fate always stepped in to put an end to it."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione's voice was even softer than before. "You deserve a father as much as anyone else."

"I never said I didn't."

"Part of you thinks it, though."

Huh. Maybe part of him did. Maybe that was why he'd had such a hard time accepting what had happened last year. "I'll work on that," he promised. "Severus has earned that much from me. Is there anything else? I still do want to see if Luna's in Ravenclaw."

"If you feel tempted to use a needle, even a little--" Hermione swallowed. "Tell one of us. Or Snape, or Draco."

"I'm not going to be tempted to use a needle." Harry shuddered.

"Not good enough, mate."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'll tell somebody, yes."

Ron gave a sharp nod while Hermione smiled at him.

The whole thing made him feel vaguely uncomfortable, even though he was grateful they'd explained something about his missing year. He just wished it could have been something less disturbing.

---------------------------------------------------

"Harry," said Snape, laying aside a book as Harry let himself into the man's quarters.

"It's all right to just come right in without knocking?"

Instead of answering, Snape gave him a long look.

"Got it," said Harry after a moment. "Of course it's all right. I suppose I'll eventually get used to having a home besides the tower. Anyway, though, you remember how you said you'd let me have my map back? Can I have it now?"

"Ah. Certainly." Standing, Snape summoned it and held it out.

Harry hesitated, but really, Snape already knew the incantation, so it was a bit stupid to be so reluctant. Old habits, maybe. "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," he murmured, tapping the parchment. Then he quickly unfolded it and looked through Ravenclaw for Luna.

"Damn." She wasn't there, or anywhere else in Hogwarts that he could see. He checked again,
peering more closely, but there was no mention of her anywhere.

"Problem?"

"I don't know." Harry almost asked if he could sit down, but it only took him a second to decide he didn't want to get that long stare again. He sat down without asking and waited until Snape did the same before he gestured toward the map. "Luna's not back from holiday yet. She wasn't on the Express. I don't know if she's just staying longer in Tibet or--" Harry gulped. "What if--"

Snape held up a hand. "Perhaps before jumping to conclusions, it would be best to see if Filius has any information. Shall I?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Snape paused on his way to the Floo. "No thanks are necessary between us."

"But they're polite, aren't they?"

"Odd as it may seem to you, I would rather that you take me for granted."

Harry tilted his head. "Yeah, that does seem odd. I thought um . . . parent-types were supposed to hate that."

"In our case it would mean that you believe it acceptable to rely on me."

Harry could see why that would appeal. He was different from Ron and all his friends, he supposed. Some part of him thought he shouldn't, or maybe couldn't, rely on an adult. Maybe if Sirius hadn't had to stay in hiding so much . . .

Or maybe it went a lot deeper than that, like Hermione thought.

Did he really believe, somewhere deep inside, that he didn't deserve to have anybody take care of him? Had the Dursleys damaged him that badly?

"I seem to have given you a great deal to consider," said Snape, crouched down by the Floo by then.

"Ron and Hermione told me about the needles," blurted Harry.

The moment the words emerged, he wanted to cringe. He hadn't meant to say that.

Snape appeared to be reviewing possible replies. "Shall we discuss that, then?"

"Luna first."

"Very well. Filius Flitwick's quarters!" Snape reared back slightly as the Floo flared, then thrust his head and torso into the flames. "There has been no word from Miss Lovegood or her father," said Snape a few moments later as he waved his wand to douse the fire.

"Can we firecall the headmaster to see if he's had any?"

"Of course," said Snape, but that proved to be just as much a dead end.

Harry jumped to his feet and started pacing. "What if she's been snatched by Death Eaters like those children in the summer?"
"Those children were half-bloods and muggleborns."

"So what? Voldemort's expanding operations!"

"Not in that manner. He would not wish to alienate the pure-bloods he considers his natural supporters." Snape moved until he could rest a hand on Harry's shoulder. "It is probably nothing more than Xenophilius following some odd lead for his newspaper."

Harry wanted to brush the man's hand away, maybe because it was hard to believe that he wasn't really alone in this. But the idea that he might not be . . . that was a good feeling. He let the hand remain.

"I will do what I can, through Lupin," continued Snape, "to find out if there is any connection. But that is merely to ease your mind. I do not believe you have true cause for worry."

Harry swallowed. Funny how just a few weeks ago, he'd hardly ever spared a thought for Luna, and now, it seemed like he couldn't bear another minute without her.

He couldn't even imagine how Draco must have felt when Rhiannon Miller had broken up with him.

"Yeah, all right," he finally muttered, since it seemed like Snape was waiting for an answer. "Tha-- er, good."

Snape didn't comment on the aborted word. "And now to your other concern," he said, gesturing. "Shall we have a seat?"

"Maybe not. I didn't really mean to say that bit, you know."

Snape looked like he might, in fact, know. At least that was what the glimmer at the back of his black eyes seemed to suggest. But if he cared about Harry that much, then why the hell--

"Why didn't you ever mention it?" erupted Harry. "And don't trot out that tired old line about my therapist. Even she thought I could be told things that had some implication for my quality of life. I'd think a tendency to slit my wrists would fall into that category!"

"Don't exaggerate. Not like that." It wasn't until he saw Snape's shuddering shoulders that Harry knew he'd gone too far.

"Needles seem even worse to me than that, Severus," he said quietly, finally sitting down as the man had suggested. "I can't make sense of it, you know. It's . . . the whole thing . . . it's mental."

"You were worried about some malicious words of Malfoy's. Lucius Malfoy," clarified Snape, sitting down right alongside him and leaning close. "He intimated that you were going dark, and the needles were your attempt to redress the situation."

"Fucking stupid attempt," sighed Harry. Though the rest of it sounded a bit familiar. Not that he could remember, but he could certainly recall that time in Number 12, when he'd had some of the same fears and Sirius had assured him that there was good and bad in everybody. "What was I thinking?"

"That your fear of needles could be used against you in some fashion, so it was up to you to extinguish the fear on your own through exposure, I imagine."

"Don't make it sound so sensible!"
"My point is that you were trying to do the right thing as you then perceived it." Snape's eyes glimmered again, like he'd thought about smiling but had decided against it. "The very opposite of 'going dark,' in fact."

Harry snorted. "It was still a mental thing to do."

"We had a long talk about reasons not to indulge the impulse again. Infection featured, as did undue blood loss and general weakness and malaise."

"I'm sure you had a lot to say. The question now is why you didn't say anything to me about this in the last few months. A question you didn't answer." Harry glared a little. "Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"Perhaps I hoped you wouldn't." Snape sat back and folded his hands together. "I suppose the heart of it was that I feared the power of suggestion."

"You thought I might . . ."

"I thought it less than sound to place the idea in your head at all."

"Is that why Draco didn't mention it either?"

"You will have to ask him that yourself, but I would hope that when he spoke to you so freely, he managed to retain some discretion as to what it might be wise for you to hear." Snape steepled his fingers and glanced at Harry over them. "As for me, I suppose I also feared that learning such a thing, in the state you were in weeks ago might . . ." He cleared his throat. "You might have jumped to an unfortunate conclusion."

"What, that I was trying to kill myself, or--"

"No," said Snape in a low voice. "That an unwanted family situation had driven you to it."

Oh. Oh. "You thought I'd blame you, sort of."

"You spent weeks taking everything I said and did in the worst possible light."

"Like 'idiot child.' Right." Harry smiled, just a little. "Well, I don't think that way now. Though I do wonder why you'd be so willing to give my map back, when the last time I had it I used it to hide out so I could . . . uh, stick myself. Ron and Hermione told me," he added, even though that was probably obvious.

"I could not explain retaining it without explaining the needle situation as well." Snape rubbed the side of his nose like a headache might be coming on. "And had I insisted on keeping the map once you knew I no longer needed to stay near you to shield you . . . I can't imagine you would have taken the news well."

"I probably wouldn't have." Harry checked the map again for Luna, then incanted the words that would wipe it clean. "Any worries now, though?"

"About your regard?"

The man seemed a little obsessed with that, thought Harry.

"About my needle habit."

"Only the same one I imagine your friends gave you. If you feel inclined toward it again, you must
seek someone out. Your brother, your friends, myself. You need not fear, as you did last time, that any of us will judge you."

Harry frowned. "How can you not?"

"Everyone has problems, Harry," said Snape. He seemed to hesitate, then added, "You would know this already were your memory fully healed, but I have had my own troubles with addiction. Purple loosestrife, in my case."

"You're all right now?"

Snape shrugged. "I am susceptible, but resisting."

"Keep resisting."

"My own advice to you is the same, should needles begin to have any sort of appeal. And speak to someone. At once."

"I will."

"Then all that remains is for me to make my inquiries about Miss Lovegood. I will let you know what I discover, though I do expect her absence has nothing to do with Voldemort."

"Let's hope so," said Harry, shivering. He was actually thankful when another thought distracted him from the vision of her broken and bleeding, or worse, lying utterly still forever. "Oh. Um, but that's not all that remains. I guess I understand why you didn't tell me about the needles until now, but if there's anything else important that I should know, I really wish you'd just tell me. All right?"

Snape stared at him for a long moment. So long, in fact, that the question was answered before he even opened his mouth to speak.

Snape seemed to realize that as well. When he did finally speak, his voice rasped over the words. "There is . . . something, Harry."

The way he said it made Harry's spine sort of convulse. "About me?"

"About . . . me." Snape drew in a breath as if steeling himself. "But you are not uninvolved. It concerns something you overheard just before the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch match. And . . . I fear that it may well be the true reason why you have lost your memories."

"I thought that was because I took a Bludger hit."

"That may only be the proximate cause," Snape said, his voice sounding almost rusty by then.

"And the real cause might be this thing I overheard? What is it, then?"

"It is a long story." Snape's hair swayed as he shook his head. "As many times as I have rehearsed this . . . I don't know where to begin."

"At the beginning," said Harry simply.

Snape looked at him for a moment more, then gave a sharp nod and started at the beginning, as Harry had said.
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*: Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Map

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
"You are aware, of course, that I was once a Death Eater," began Snape in a low tone. "We have discussed the matter, although . . . not as thoroughly as we should have. I did many things that I deeply regret, although--"

He broke off when Harry stretched his head to the side so he could rub the back of his neck where a persistent sharp stabbing pain had started. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Touch of headache, is all."

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Did you have one coming down?"

"No--"

"Not even having just heard about your struggles with needles?"

"No. Why?"

The man's eyes narrowed still further. "It appears to be brought about by stress. Are those tendons you are rubbing tight?"

When Harry nodded, Snape sighed. "I should have seen this before. It all seems quite clear now. Are you aware that you've been getting a headache whenever I mention my Death Eater past? It happened in Devon. Several times, as I recall."

"Really? I--" Harry gasped a little. "Oh, owww. I think you're right. All I have to do is imagine what you might have . . . I'd better not try to imagine it. Damn, this hurts. I have to stop thinking about it. Um, Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers-- I can't stop thinking about it!"

"This is probably beyond the power of a children's rhyme to mitigate." That time, Snape's voice was grim.

Harry clutched his head and tried to use his hands as a vise, though the chance of squeezing the headache out was pretty small, all things considered. "Maybe you shouldn't tell me this story, after all."

Snape hesitated, his eyes bleak. Then he shook his head. "I'm afraid that might be even worse, in the long run. It's quite clear to me that you already know the crux of what I have to say. Your mind is trying to warn you away from learning it consciously again. But this war inside you . . . it must stop, whatever the cost."

Harry drew in a sharp breath. "It can't be that bad, whatever you did."

Snape didn't answer that at all, except to say, "A strong potion is in order, I think. Something beyond a standard headache draught. Accio . . . Draught of Lillehammer!"

"It is used for the worst types of headaches, including migraines so debilitating that the only other cure is a sleeping spell," said Snape as he caught the small bottle flying towards him. Harry's vision was wavering by then, the headache sweeping through him in surges as he kept trying not to think of what Snape could have done that would be so very horrible. He could barely see, but even so, he noticed that Snape's hand was shaking a little as he held the bottle out.

Harry grabbed for it, missed, and grabbed again. For once, he didn't even think to worry about how foul it might taste. "All of it?"

"Yes."

Harry downed it so fast he didn't even notice any taste, then rubbed his head for a while longer as the headache ebbed. When it was finally gone he looked up, startled. "I can't feel my head at all."

"The point, I do believe."

"No, I mean, I can't even feel it with my hands!"

Snape gave a very slight shrug as he sat in a chair a short distance away from the couch. "That is the only side effect. You will return to normal after sleeping for six hours, though one hopes the headache will be gone in truth by then." At Harry's blank look he explained, "You still have it. You simply cannot perceive the fact."

"Oh. Well, I know you want me to take you for granted, but thanks, all the same."

Snape inclined his head.

"You were going to tell me about your Death Eater activities," prompted Harry. The words were hard to say, like he didn't really want to believe they had happened. That made his voice emerge sounding rough, but at least he had no trace of headache. Hard to, though, when it seemed like he had no trace of head.

"Yes," admitted Snape, his own voice just as rough. "When I agreed to be branded with the Dark Mark, I was . . . rather fanatical in my disdain for Muggles and Muggleborns alike. I had to be, because my initiation had involved some truly terrible things, and if pureblood philosophy was in error, then . . . the cost had been too high. This cost, though . . . it is not really a part of this story. What I have to tell you now involves . . . what came later."

Harry nodded. "I did have those visions, you know. I don't even have to imagine what he makes his followers do, or what he does to them--"

"This is nothing you could have imagined." Snape cleared his throat. "The story is complex, to say the least, but it does not involve depredations of the kind you are clearly anticipating. You see, when I was taken into the Dark Lord's service, he almost immediately set me to work creating new potions for him. It was this that provided me salvation, of a sort. I was able to persuade him that I had to maintain 'clean hands' in order to brew effectively the types of potions he was demanding. This meant that I could no longer perpetrate the brutal tortures of which he is so fond, though I was still forced to witness them."

Harry blinked. Strange not to feel it. "And hold people down, I suppose."

"At times," said Snape, barely speaking. His jerky nod said it all. Then he seemed to recover himself. "I counted myself lucky at the time. After what had happened at my initiation, I had no
taste for violence, not even toward the Muggleborns I so despised. But of course I wasn't truly lucky. I had to brew things I can barely speak of, even to you. Violent poisons. Torture draughts . . . and yet, the one that was to truly bring disaster raining down upon me seemed so innocuous in comparison. 'Brew me an Animagus potion, Severus,' the Dark Lord commanded, shortly after I'd joined his service. Compared to the other things he demanded of me, it seemed . . . harmless."

It sounded pretty harmless too, Harry thought. But of course it must not have been. "It helps a person find his form?" That couldn't be it, though. McGonagall would have let them have some, unless the potion was still a secret--

"No. It empowers an existing Animagus to temporarily assume an alternate form."

It still didn't sound so bad.

"I didn't know for whom it was intended," added Snape, shifting in his seat to face Harry more fully. "You must believe that I didn't know. All the Dark Lord said was that--"

"Voldemort," interupted Harry, as gently as he could. Snape was obviously in pain, telling this story, and Harry didn't like it. Part of him knew that even a few weeks ago, he wouldn't have cared very much, but he cared now, and no matter what terrible thing Snape had done with this potion, Harry didn't want to hear him saying 'the Dark Lord' again. "Call him Voldemort. You aren't his servant any longer."

"I am not," said Snape on an exhale. "You are quite correct."

He didn't say anything else, though, perhaps because he couldn't. "So you brewed the Animagus potion," prompted Harry. "And?"

"I brewed enough for several dozen doses." Snape sighed again, sitting back in his chair and steeping his fingers before his face as if lost deep in the past. "And then I largely forgot about it, as the-- as Voldemort had me move on to a vast array of other projects.

"It was less than a year later when I came to my senses regarding the utter inconsistency and foolishness of the blood purist point of view. Voldemort was beginning to kill those he termed 'blood traitors' even though any dunderhead could see that the pureblood population was far too low already. I began to research as only a Potions devotee can, and I discovered that there is no such thing as a pureblooded wizard, not as the purists use the term. It was difficult to admit that I had made such a massive mistake, but there it was, staring me fully in the face. I struggled not to accept it, but in the end, I went to Albus and threw myself on his mercy, such as it was."

"Such as it was?"

Snape lifted his shoulders. "He insisted that I drop my shields entirely and allow him free access to my mind. He had always known that I was Occluding, it seems. He saw that my change of heart was indeed true, but insisted that he could not grant me absolution. Only I could do that, and only through atonement. As I had helped the-- Voldemort to advance his agenda, I must now devote myself to working against it, else my 'newfound humanity,' as he put it, would prove to be merely theoretical. And so I began my time as a double-agent, to use the Muggle term."

He looked Harry fully in the eyes, then. "I had to seem to spy on Albus, carrying Voldemort just enough information to make the ruse credible. I had to attend meetings as a Death Eater, Occluding against Voldemort in such a way that he would never suspect I was anything but loyal -- which meant making him believe that he could read my mind when indeed he could not." Snape gave a rueful shake of his head. "I did my best, but there must have been minute cracks in the façade, for
some time later I began to sense that I was being followed about the castle as I pursued my daily
tasks."

Harry bit his lip, a gesture that was less than effective when he couldn't feel it. "Voldemort knew?"

"Nothing so definite." Snape's hair swayed as he shook his head in denial. "But he did suspect.
Perhaps because the 'information' I would bring him was carefully tailored to cause as little
damage as possible to our side. Perhaps because the Order, for I was a member by then, seemed to
have one too many fortunate turns. I informed Albus at once that more caution was necessary, but
only once I could be sure that my phantom would not observe the communication."

Harry nodded, his hands clenched together with the tension. "And this is probably when you
started to get so paranoid--"

Snape didn't look amused. "I took appropriate steps," he corrected, "redoubling my cautions,
making sure that I outwardly appeared loyal, that everything I said or did could be explained in that
light. I also reported to Voldemort that the 'old fool running Hogwarts' must not trust me
completely despite my best efforts to ingratiate myself, since it appeared that he was having me
followed. He chuckled and congratulated me for being so perceptive, then commanded me to do
nothing to interfere with the efforts of 'Dumbledore's spy' to observe me. For then, he explained,
Dumbledore would know that I had something to hide."

"But that meant that you had to put up with being spied on, by Voldemort!"

"A clever bit of twisted logic, to be sure," murmured Snape. "And too, I could not risk giving the
impression that I might have something to hide from Voldemort himself. He probably knew that I
wondered if the spy could be his, instead."

"It's a good thing you gave me that potion," said Harry suddenly. "I think my head is probably
spinning. You were right about this being complicated."

"We've yet to reach the truly complex part. The worst part, Harry." Snape rubbed the side of his
nose. "I finally spotted a chameleon lurking in a corner, then scurrying after me when I walked on.
Almost the very shade of the stone itself, and clinging to dark corners besides, but once I knew
what to look for, I could tell when I was being followed."

"An Animagus?" asked Harry, thinking of Rita Skeeter. "But who has the form of a chameleon . . .
oh."

"I see that you have put it together," said Snape gruffly. "As did I. I was aware at once that the
chameleon was most likely a Death Eater, probably one of my close acquaintance, hence the need
for the alternate-form potion. Voldemort would not want me to be aware of the identity of the spy
he'd set upon me. I told Albus everything, of course, and we decided that the only course of action
to be followed was to make ever more sure that this chameleon could see me play the part of loyal
Death Eater myself. And that decision . . ." Snape shuddered.

"I don't understand."

"I'm not at all certain that I want you to understand." The man closed his eyes. "Though I know it is
necessary. You should have understood long since."

Harry reached across the distance separating them and patted Snape's knee, just once. "It'll be all
right, Severus. It's probably like . . . uh, sucking up, you know? You'll feel a lot better once this is
out, whatever it is."
"I doubt it." Snape looked at him again. "But this is not about making myself feel better. It is about what I think you must need to heal. So then . . . I continued to see the chameleon and ignore him, other than to put on a show of spying on Albus myself so that my 'loyalty' could be documented. Some time later, Albus let me know that he would be interviewing a prospective teacher in Hogsmeade, and that it would be an excellent opportunity for me to be seen lurking at keyholes, so to speak." Snape's voice broke. "The candidate in question had never done anything noteworthy in her life, so even though she was the great-great-granddaughter of a famous Seer, neither Albus nor I had any reason to suppose that the interview would be anything but a courtesy."

It all snapped together so fiercely inside Harry's head that he could hear the pieces clanging.
"Trelawney!"

"Yes," said Snape simply, and waited as though expecting an explosion.

"You were outside the door--"

"As was that thrice-be-damned chameleon."

Oh. Right. So there was more to the story, obviously. "So when Trelawney started to spout off the prophecy . . ."

"We both heard." Snape's fingers tightened on the arm of his chair. "The moment Albus realized that the woman might actually be giving forth an authentic prophecy, he jumped leapt across the room to 'interrupt' my spying. This was a signal for me to leave at once so that I could be freed of hearing anything further. Because of course, with the chameleon spying on me, there could be no question of keeping what I had heard to myself."

No question . . . no question . . . no question . . .

"You told Voldemort the prophecy," said Harry, his voice as dull as he had ever heard it. "You . . . you were in the Order. And you told him anyway. You're the reason my Mum died. And my Dad. And why I had to grow up with people who--" Harry turned his face away. He couldn't bear it that Snape might see him cry. Snape, who had done this to him.

And then adopted him.

Harry wiped furiously at his eyes, trying to cram the wetness back inside. It was stupid to cry, wasn't it? He'd known for forever that his mum and dad were dead, and he'd known for almost that long that Vernon and Petunia weren't ever going to try to take their place.

"Yes," rasped Snape. "I did tell him. I did this to you."

Harry sniffled, then thought with annoyance that if his nose was running, he wouldn't know. He wiped it on his sleeve just in case, since he wasn't about to ask Snape for a handkerchief. Or anything else.

"How could you?"

"Because," said Snape, sighing heavily, "he was going to hear it in any case."

Harry looked at Snape then, suddenly uncaring if his face was wet or his eyes were red. "The chameleon."

"Yes." Snape swallowed. "Had I been thinking faster, I would have killed the chameleon at that point. But in the confusion of Albus 'discovering' me at the door, it scurried away from both of us
and blended into nothingness. Albus went back in to hear the rest of the prophecy and then came to find me at once.

"Harry . . . we both agreed that I had to report the part the chameleon had overheard. To do otherwise would cost the Order its spy, since if Voldemort knew me to withhold information, he would never trust me with his secrets again. And it would cost the Order its spy for no real benefit, since he was fated to hear the prophecy regardless."

"Yeah," said Harry, swallowing back something foul that had surged up into his mouth. "But . . . what if . . ." He slumped in defeat. "Yeah. I can see that. It just seems . . . I don't know. It's hard not to just . . . call you a bastard and be done with it."

Snape nodded, his face almost without expression, for all his eyes were bleak. "I understand."

Harry sighed. "Even I can see that there wouldn't have been much point in trying to hide the information. Not considering the chameleon."

"And the Order did all it could to safeguard your family." Snape clicked his teeth together. "The Fidelius should have been an end to the matter."

"Yeah, if only my parents hadn't swapped Secret Keepers at the last minute like that. Sirius would never, ever have betrayed them, but that rat--" A terrible look swept over Snape's face, the emotion all the more vivid after his lack of expression the moment before.

Another noise seemed to clang in Harry's head. "The rat," he said, narrowing his eyes. "Pettigrew is an Animagus! That's why you said you didn't know who it was for, why I had to believe you that you didn't know who it was for--"

"I learned the truth only long after it could no longer matter," said Snape, head thrown back against his chair. "Shortly after the disastrous end of the Tournament, in fact. Pettigrew was being praised for some dastardly service he'd performed. Voldemort patted his head and softly called him his "little chameleon" . . . and then, I knew."

Harry gritted his teeth, but got no relief from the non-existent sensation. "All that time, he'd been Voldemort's man."

"Had we known he was the chameleon, it would all have been different."

"Well, you should have known," said Harry. "You should have!"

"I did not even know that Pettigrew was an Animagus, let alone the one for whom Voldemort had procured the potion. I did not know he was a Death Eater, Harry. Not then."

Of course he hadn't. Nobody had known. Dumbledore hadn't even known that Sirius was an Animagus back then, let alone Pettigrew. So there'd been no reason to suspect him of being the chameleon, none at all.

If only, thought Harry bleakly. If only Snape or Dumbledore had known that Pettigrew was an Animagus. Maybe then it would have occurred to one of them that he might be the chameleon too. Maybe they'd have put him under some kind of a closer watch. Maybe they'd have noticed something suspicious, and been able to warn others in the Order to be careful what they said around him.
Maybe Harry's parents would have thought twice before switching Secret Keepers.

Maybe . . . maybe . . . maybe . . .

Harry stood up and swayed a little. He wasn't sure if it was from the shock of all this or if it was the fact that he couldn't feel his head sitting on his shoulders. Probably both, not that it mattered.

"I have to think," he said, glancing at Snape for one second. He couldn't hold that glance for long, though. It was too difficult to look at him, knowing all this.

Even knowing that the man hadn't really had much of a choice, it was still difficult.

Impossible, actually.

Harry looked at the stone wall instead, though he didn't really see it. The images playing inside his mind were too strong to let him see past them. A dark haired man, crouched outside a door, peering through the keyhole. A red-haired woman, refusing to stand aside.

And another man, lying dead already, green light still surrounding him like a phantom halo, though Harry had no idea if things had really looked that way at all. What had James Potter looked like as he'd died in a futile effort to protect his family?

And what would he think of Severus Snape adopting his son, when it was Snape who had told Voldemort the prophecy?

But . . . Harry did know what his father thought of the adoption. Sirius had told him, and he trusted Sirius. James was fine with it, Sirius had said. James had even sat on Sirius to stop him from being stupid about it. Now, not even Sirius was angry about it, as Harry had learned once he'd used those Parseltongue candies to make the mirror work again. Those Parseltongue candies that Snape had provided. Which could only mean one thing, as far as Harry could tell.

"My parents don't know, do they?" he challenged, still staring at the wall. "They don't know that you were the one, that they're dead because of you."

"I think not," admitted Snape in a harsh whisper. "Though I did once fear that very thing. I have no idea what Voldemort might have told Lucius, for example. And since Lucius is dead . . . but it seems he either doesn't know or hasn't encountered your parents to taunt them."

Harry thought about that for a moment. "And you still let me use the mirror to talk to the dead. Why? You didn't know at first that my parents wouldn't be able to come, did you? And you didn't know if they might be able to denounce you."

Snape made an odd noise that might have meant he had swallowed wrong, but when Harry flicked a glance his way, the man's face was like stone. "You wanted to speak with them so much that--and too, I believed you needed closure regarding your godfather. There had been no body, no funeral, and you felt such guilt for what had happened, though truly, it was Bellatrix who was to blame. You spoke of it sometimes, and more often, I could see it in your eyes . . ."

The way that Snape was rambling said a lot, thought Harry. He wondered if he'd ever seen the man like this before. But of course, he didn't really know. "And just for that, you took such a risk?"

"I thought the risk was minimal," admitted Snape. "Almost certainly, Lucius would have taunted you with this information, had he known it. And too, I suspected that the afterworld would enforce some separation between the good and evil. But still, ever since you swayed the mirror to obey your magic, I have lived with the fear that this truth would somehow come between us."
"Then why didn't you tell me?" shouted Harry, his anger suddenly boiling over as he rounded on Snape and stomped towards him to shout down at him as the man sat tensed in his chair. "Didn't you think I had a right to know? Didn't you think it was something I should know about? Before I was adopted, maybe?"

Those last two words were screamed so loudly that they seemed to echo, but Snape didn't even wince. He glanced up at Harry, his dark eyes somber, and shook his head. "It seemed so long ago, so very remote. Almost like it had been something someone else had done. And when would I have told you, Harry? When you were reeling from losing your magic, and not yet my son in any case? When you were dealing with blindness? When I came to understand that an adult to depend on was the one thing you had never had?" Snape closed his eyes. "By the time I felt that we were settled, you and I, it seemed too late. For then you could never forgive the fact that I had waited so long."

"You did wait too long," said Harry coldly. "You could have trusted me, you know. It's not like you told him because you were still a Death Eater, or because you trying to get my parents killed. You were loyal to the Order by then and the circumstances meant you didn't have much choice. Did you think I was too stupid to understand a bit of nuance?"

Snape leaned his head back against the chair as if his neck could barely hold it up any longer. "I hardly think it should surprise you to hear that trust does not come easily to me."

"Even with your supposed son?"

A definite wince that time. "Even so."

"You should have trusted me."

Snape opened his eyes. "I should have, yes. But that is hindsight. At the time . . . I don't think you can possibly understand, and no, not because I think you stupid. But you have never been a father. It is all too easy to be lulled into believing that one's decisions must be right."

"Yeah, well it wasn't right," said Harry, crossing his arms. "It wasn't right at all. And Dumbledore knew all this. If you wouldn't tell me, he sure as fuck should have."

"I thought he would, at times," Snape shifted in his chair like he might get up. No wonder, the way Harry was looming over him. Harry thought about that for a moment and took a step back. "His influence with you had waned after that difficult year when Voldemort was sending you visions and dreams, and that information might have helped to restore it. At my expense, but I could almost imagine him telling me it was for the greater good . . ."

Snape shook his head suddenly. "But I misjudged him as I have misjudged so much else. He valued you more highly than a bit of advantage. You suddenly had the family you had craved for so very long--"

"Not the family," retorted Harry. "I wanted my mum and dad there for me, or maybe the Weasleys! Not someone who hated my mum for things she couldn't help and hated me the same way, hated my dad and probably wished him dead more times than he could count--"

"I did not--" Snape abruptly stopped speaking, his throat muscles snapping taut as he swallowed. "There were times when that was true. I will not deny it. But not after I had switched allegiances, Harry. The Order could not afford to lose any more wizards. For that reason alone I would not have wished him dead. But I was placed in the position of having to work with him at times. I grew to respect him--"
"Oh, you did not! Don't lie to me on top of everything else!"

Snape's eyes blazed. "That is the truth. A truth I told you once before. Is it not there, now, lurking in your memory?"

"I have amnesia, in case you forgot!"

"I thought that hearing the story of that night would cue your memories forth!" Snape stared at him, eyes blazing just as much but somehow tightly focused, now. "Think, Harry. Is your missing year still just as lost, or can you call forth an image of the two of us in the Slytherin changing rooms just before your match?"

_The two of them?_

Harry did think, clenching his eyes tightly, but nothing came to him.

"I don't know why I'd see myself, anyway," he finally said, twisting a lip. "If I could remember it, I'd just see you. And why would I be in the Slytherin changing room before _my_ match, anyway? I know I never played for Slytherin, just like I know you must be lying about respecting my father. The only thing I don't know is why you think, after hiding the truth for all this time, that you can gain my trust by spewing out these stupid lies--"

Snape shot to his feet and drew his wand in a motion so violent it was a wonder it didn't fly from his hand. "**Accio Veritaserum!**"

The door to the potions lab flew open and a small bottle came sailing out to slap into Snape's free hand.

"Three drops," snarled Snape. "On the tongue. Shall I dose myself or would you prefer to do the honours?"

"You're going to let me truth-potion you, _right_," drawled Harry. "You're going to let me ask you anything I please? You, the head of Slytherin? I don't think so."

"You imbecile!" roared Snape. "I offered to take a vow that would _kill_ me if I broke it, and I did it for love of you. I can certainly stand to answer a few blunt questions!"

The reminder of the vow made Harry want to cringe. It almost made him change his mind. _Almost_. In the end, he stayed fixed on what he'd decided the instant he'd heard the word "Veritaserum."

This was too important. Snape should have told him all about the prophecy, about that night, a long time ago. And he hadn't. Harry wanted answers, and he wasn't in the mood to wonder what Snape might be leaving out this time.

So yeah, he was going to follow through. It wasn't even wrong, was it? Snape was the one who had brought it up!

"I didn't mean that," said Harry. "I meant that you're a Slytherin, and you're good at hiding things. I wouldn't put it past you to have some fake Veritaserum on hand, some you'd charmed to respond to a Summoning charm, even. If you're really willing to take truth serum, you'll have to use some that I have reason to trust."

Snape clenched his teeth and spoke through them. "The bottle that Draco stole from me, then."

Harry shrugged. "I have some left, but I don't want to leave to go and get it. You might do something in the meantime."

"You imbecile!" roared Snape. "I offered to take a vow that would _kill_ me if I broke it, and I did it for love of you. I can certainly stand to answer a few blunt questions!"
"Such as brew and swallow a non-existent counter?"

"Somehow I think you might have some tricks up your sleeve."

"As if I would deign to imitate a Muggle magician."

"It's an expression."

Snape's expression was sour by then. "I am aware."

Harry tilted his head to the side. "Yeah, but are you game?"

"I am not game; I am a wizard," said Snape haughtily. "However, yes. I am willing to answer your questions while under the influence of Veritaserum."

"Really," said Harry doubtfully. "Even knowing the potion's authentic?"

"This potion is also authentic, you idiot child."

Harry was starting to think by then that it probably was. But he still wanted to be sure. Completely sure.

And he wanted to know some things without wondering how much Snape was shading the truth toward bright, Slytherin green.

He drew his own wand, a lot more moderately than Snape had done, and said the words in a firm, commanding voice. "Accio Veritaserum in my sock drawer!"

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Map

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

--------------------------------------------------------------------------
The Map

Harry's hand shook as he tipped the bottle to make three drops fall onto Snape's outstretched tongue, but he managed not to spill the potion. He watched as the drops dissolved on the man's tongue, then cleared his throat. "You can . . . you can close your mouth now."

Snape did so, his throat muscles bobbing a little as he swallowed.

Harry sat down and waited. He didn't feel like making small talk, and he sure wasn't going to start asking questions until he could be sure the Veritaserum had taken effect. Snape seemed to understand that; he made no effort to get Harry started.

When about five minutes had gone by, Harry thought he could begin; it had never taken Draco longer than two minutes to come fully under the potion's sway. All the same, he tried a test question first -- something Snape wouldn't want to be truthful about, and even better, something that would remind him about how much he'd always hated James Potter.

"Why didn't you use some laundry charms on the underpants you were wearing that day? The day my father tipped you upside down?"

Snape bared his teeth, his eyes glinting dangerously.

A look like that had always made Harry gulp in the past. At the very least. Now, it was strange to recognise that he wasn't even nervous about it. He knew -- somehow he knew -- that even when furious, Snape wouldn't do him any harm.

Not intentionally, at any rate.

"Because my mother had died long before I was of an age to learn such things," said Snape. "And because my father was not the sort to teach me anything so mundane. And because I was not expecting it to matter, on that day or any other whilst I resided at school." He gritted his teeth so viciously that they sounded like they might crack, and then words came shooting out from between them like rapid-fire bullets. "And because poor personal hygiene can be a sort of defence, not that it worked, but by then it had become a habit, and if it gained me five seconds' respite it would be worth it, and--"

"Stop," said Harry, gulping a little after all, though not from fear. He just . . . felt strange hearing that. The beginning had made sense, but the end, not so much. Of course, the potion had made Draco ramble too, but not in a way that seemed so . . . Harry didn't even know.

"Gladly," muttered Snape. "Of all the inane questions you could ask, you had to start with my father?"

But Harry hadn't. He'd started with underpants.

Which had been stupid, of course. Snape's idea was actually much better.

"Why shouldn't I?" challenged Harry. "If you're my father, why shouldn't I ask about your own?"

"Because we have spoken of him before at length," said Snape, slumping back against his chair back as if resigned.

"You know I can't remember."
"I have never found that fact less amenable."

Harry bristled. "There you go again, thinking I can't understand the slightest bit of nuance. I already know he wasn't the nicest bloke on the block -- it's not like I was going to ask if you learned how to be a father from him!"

"Merlin forbid," said Snape under his breath.

If Harry had been thinking more quickly, he'd have reined the question in before it could slip past his lips. "What do you mean?"

Snape gritted his teeth again, his lips looking chiseled from stone as he pressed them tightly together, but of course the potion was more powerful than his will not to answer. "He raped me time after time. He experimented on me to enhance his own artistic talent, degrading me sexually, feeding on my physical and emotional pain, channelling it into dark rituals that he assured me would most certainly make it all worthwhile. I was more his tool than his son! The mere sight of him was enough to make me shudder with dread, and--"

"Stop!" shouted Harry again, much more loudly than before. His face felt like it was on fire. Yes, he'd seen Snape's father acting like an absolute arse in that Pensieve memory, but he'd never imagined, never once thought--

Oh, God. Suddenly, his childhood with the Dursleys didn't seem very terrible at all.

Snape had turned his face away and was staring at the wall, and Harry could hardly blame him. "I'm sorry. I-- I didn't know any of that."

"Some part of you does. We have spoken of it."

"I wasn't trying to get you to talk about it, though. I-- I know I asked what you meant, but it was more like a reflex than a real question--"

"Veritaserum," rasped Snape without looking at him, "does not know the difference. If you do not wish to know, then do not ask!"

"I didn't mean I didn't-- well, not like that. I mean--" Harry gave it up. "I don't know what I mean."

"That is exceedingly obvious."

"Right," said Harry, clearing his throat. He wished he'd never started this. What had made him think he had a right to interrogate Snape? He hadn't even done that to Draco. He'd just used the Veritaserum so he could be sure he was getting a truthful story about his missing year. And he'd stopped using it as soon as it was clear that he could trust Draco.

The way he could trust Snape--

Except, Snape had lied to him. By omission, at the very least. He should have told Harry the whole truth sooner. A lot sooner. Instead, it was clear that Snape had waited until his hand was forced.

By what, though? By his belief that Harry wouldn't recover his memories until he learned these things again. By his desire to do what was right by Harry this time, even if he hadn't done it the time before.

But then, why shouldn't Snape learn and grow like anyone else? He couldn't have known how to be a perfect father from the start. What mattered was that Snape was obviously a better father now
than he'd been back when he'd decided not to mention the chameleon and the rest of it.

And he'd had to figure things out on his own, hadn't he? It wasn't like he could think back to his own father to know how to deal with a son.

Harry shuddered, but did his best to stop as soon as he'd registered the motion. He didn't want Severus to think he was disgusted. Well, not that way. He was actually worse than disgusted, but not with the man sitting just a few feet from him, still staring at the wall, his features carved from granite.

No, Harry was disgusted with . . . whatever the hell Snape's father's name was.

At least this time, he had enough brains not to ask the question out loud.

Harry breathed in through his nose, trying to think of what to say now. "Um, how about-- would you like a cup of tea or, um, some wine, or--"

"No."

Since that had to be true, Harry dropped it, wincing a little at the way the single word had been ground out.

For a few moments, there was no noise in the room save the crackling of embers in the grate. Then Snape said three gruff words. "Ask your questions."

"No, I think I'll just keep you company until--"

"Ask your questions!"

Harry gulped. He didn't want to any longer, but he also didn't want to be a disrespectful son. Snape didn't deserve that. Not even because of his mistakes. Not when he'd done his best to make them right . . . when he thought it was what Harry needed.

Though he'd been wrong, there. Harry had no real memory of any conversation in the Slytherin changing room. Not even now.

"Um--" For a second, he couldn't even remember what he'd wanted to ask. What had been so important that he'd demanded his father take Veritaserum, for God's sake? Then it came to him, and he felt ten times worse. In retrospect, the issue that had pushed him over the edge just seemed . . . trivial.

"Did you come to respect James Potter?"

"Yes," said Snape without hesitation, though he still wasn't looking at Harry. "I did. As we worked together in the Order, I came to see that he had grown up. He was no longer the same arrogant, unthinking bully I had known. Those traits remained a part of him, of course, but he had muted them, expressing his flaws more through practical jokes than through true malice."

When Snape's lips twisted ever so slightly, Harry thought he knew the reason. "He played some on you?" An image leapt into his mind, one that made him want to smack his father hard. His . . . his other father, actually. "James didn't turn you upside down again, did he?"

"Not that." Snape shook his head. "He favoured idiotic stunts such as water buckets perched atop doors. Largely harmless, and negated through a simple drying charm."
"All right, then."

"No, it is not all right!" erupted Snape. "I would have you know whatever truth you seek! Ask your questions!"

"But that was what I wanted to know--"

"You have more!"

"No, I don't!"

Snape glanced at him then, one swift look accompanied by a sneer twisting his lips. "Have you remembered your missing months, then? Ask me something else!"

Harry wrinkled his forehead. "So you can fill in all the gaps, you mean?"

"No," said Snape, sounding like he was rolling his eyes. "So that you can overcome whatever hesitation it is that you have about remembering! I thought that learning of my role in your parents' death would-- there must be something else you need to know for certain, and since I doubt that I will ever again subject myself to--" His voice almost died, then, emerging as nothing more than a hoarse whisper. "Ask, Harry. Whatever you need."

Harry didn't think there was anything, not really. Not the way Snape meant.

He also didn't think that refusing would be a very good idea, so he searched his mind for something to ask. Not something trivial, either. Snape wouldn't appreciate that.

When it came to him, it felt like a lock that had been waiting for a key for years. "Why were you so horrible to me, Severus? That first day, and every class afterwards, for years and years? I know you've apologised for all of it, and . . . I accept your apology, I really do. But I don't understand! If you didn't really hate James Potter any longer, then . . ."

"I did hate him," said Snape flatly. "I did. I hated him far more than I ever had while he was alive."

Harry blinked. "But you just said you didn't!"

"I didn't indeed, not when we worked in the Order together. But afterwards, after he had died, and Lily with him--" Snape sighed, tipping his head back against his chair, his eyes closing. "I understand more about myself now than I did then, Harry. Once they were dead and gone, I hated them both. I began to dwell on James' bad traits alone -- and you may believe me that those were legion, particularly when he was younger. He was everything I ever told you. Vain, spoiled, arrogant. I told myself that he had changed less than I'd thought, that sooner or later his vicious nature would surely have reasserted itself. In retrospect, I can see what I was doing."

"Which was?"

Snape's nostrils flared as he opened his eyes and stared at Harry. "Making him deserve his death, of course. Because then, my guilt would be less."

"But you didn't have a choice!" exclaimed Harry. "The chameleon -- Voldemort was going to find out the prophecy anyway!"

"My choice was months earlier when I began to brew his evil potions," breathed Snape. "That there could be a chameleon was my doing to begin with. I . . . I had only been able to bury what I'd done to my father by telling myself that he was a terrible person who deserved it. Death by proxy, and I
had done it again, but by then the pattern was set. James Potter must deserve his fate, and thus I made it so inside my mind. And when you arrived--" Snape bared his teeth and fell silent.

"When I arrived, Severus?" prompted Harry gently. He hadn't missed the part about Snape doing something to his father, but the context made that clear enough, didn't it? Snape must have killed him.

Harry wasn't going to ask about it. Not now, and not ever. He wished he'd never touched that subject at all. "What happened when I arrived?"

"You were the living image of him," whispered Snape. "So very like him, and yet with Lily's eyes. The both of them rising from the grave as one, come forth to condemn me. But by then it was so simple for me to deflect my guilt. I had been doing it for years, after all. When I saw you, I merely had to call up my own image of James as he was within this halls. A bully who deserved every bit of torment I could heap on him. Except, he wasn't here any longer."

"But I was."

"Yes," said Snape simply. "I sought to hurt him through you, because otherwise, I might see you and begin to remember the other James. And I'd spent years denying him so that I could ignore--" Snape cleared his throat. "To kill a bad man is difficult enough, Harry. But to have killed a good man? That is . . . almost unendurable."

So much made sense now. Not just Snape's attitude when Harry had arrived, but also the scale of his verbal attacks. The sheer viciousness of his remarks. All of that had had less to do with Harry and James than with Snape's own state of mind.

"You didn't kill him," he said, hoping that his calm tone would get through where exclamations hadn't. "You didn't, Severus. When you brewed that potion, you didn't know what it would lead to."

A twisted sort of smile inched one corner of Snape's mouth up. "So true, and yet so very meaningless. For when you went one night to the Ministry to rescue your godfather, you didn't know what that would lead to, did you?"

"That's different," said Harry at once, recoiling a little. "I should have known better--"

"Than to brew potions for a madman?" Snape's smile grew even more twisted. "I can't even claim I did it in a good cause, Harry. It wasn't a part of my cover, not then. I was a Death Eater in absolute truth when I scattered henbane into an infusion of willow bark, hoping to achieve the impossible for my master."

"It's still not the same--"

"Certainly it is not the same. I willingly concocted brews that I knew would be put to terrible use, while you were interested only in helping someone very dear to you."

Harry opened his mouth, but closed it without saying anything. He could see what Snape was doing, could even appreciate it, but . . . it was different, what had happened at the Ministry. "I was--I was stupid," he said finally. "Hermione even told me that it was probably a trap!"

"You were young," said Snape gently.

"So were you!" snapped back Harry. "Not much older than me, were you?"
"Old enough to know better, certainly--"

"Well then, me too," said Harry, crossing his arms.

The man shook his head slightly. "Sirius Black does not blame you, Harry. This, we know for absolute fact."

"Well, I doubt that James blames you either! Or would, if he knew the whole story." Harry swallowed. "Severus . . . I understand what you mean about the potion, about how you shouldn't have joined him to begin with, but . . . er, with the way your father . . . so you were messed up by the things you'd gone through! I know what that's like. And you made a bad mistake, yeah. But I know what that's like too. You have to stop blaming yourself! You did everything you could to make up for that night."

Snape inclined his head, very slightly, in acknowledgement. "And yet my guilt persists."


"Or able to help one another heal."

Harry sighed. Some part of him objected to even the idea of not feeling guilty any longer. Another part of him recognised how irrational that was. It left him feeling like he wanted to think about something else, and also like it had been too long since he'd talked to Sirius.

"When did you start to not hate James again?" he asked. "Because you don't -- I can see that now."

"First caring for you, and then caring about you . . ." Snape shrugged. "Actually, it was you who forced me to acknowledge what sort of man the adult James had truly been. Early on in our relationship, we spoke of him. Without rancour."

"Early on?" asked Harry, smiling, just a little.

"A relative term, to be sure," Snape acknowledged. "But when we finally did speak, it ripped aside some sort of veil inside me. I began to face my own guilt, instead of allowing hatred for James to subsume it. And afterwards, the more I came to know you, the more clearly I could see the good in you that came from your father."

"And did you really never consider telling me about the chameleon?"

"How can you still not understand?" asked Snape, though not harshly. "Apart from all the reasons I recounted before, I could not speak the truth about why your parents died. To do so would be to fully acknowledge all I had spent years denying. It is little wonder I was so adept at finding reasons why I should not broach the subject."

"But you told me when you thought it was the thing holding my memory hostage."

Snape inclined his head. "My own reasons for silence seemed paltry if that very silence was harming you in such a way."

Harry mentally nodded. Then he physically nodded, though he might as well not have, since he could only feel it in his neck. Somehow that was really unsatisfying. "I still think you should have- - yeah. All right."

Snape pinned him with a glance. "Is it?"
"It has to be," said Harry, shrugging a little.

"And have you remembered nothing at all?"

Harry swallowed. "Er... no. Nothing from before. I do remember something from since, though. We were clearing the air about that Snape goblet on the mantle--" Harry pointed. "I asked you if there was anything else I should know, and you shook your head. Which strikes me as... look, I sort of understand, but it's a bit much for you to lie to me right away again just after we'd cleared up your lie about when you'd got that goblet."

"I wasn't lying."

"And now you're doing it again!" exclaimed Harry, waving his arms a bit wildly. "Right away, just like before!"

"No," said Snape, leaning forward. "Listen. Please."

The last word made Harry drop his arms. He wasn't sure how many times he'd ever heard Snape say that, but it wasn't many.

"I was not answering your question."

"Come again?"

"I was not answering. You had asked if there was anything else you should know, and of course there was. I shook my head, but not to say no. Rather, that was my way of admitting that I could not bear to speak, not of that." Snape's gaze pierced him. "And too, I was still convinced at that point that to tell you too much would be to lock your memory away forever, as the good-- as Dr. Goode had said. Which... which may be the case now, I suppose," he finished on a whisper.

"Were you convinced, though?" pressed Harry. "Because now it seems to me that harping on about the doctor's advice was a way for you to tell yourself that you didn't have to tell me about the chameleon."

"I was convinced."

"Because you wanted to be."

Snape stared at him.

"No more lies between us, Severus," said Harry, staring right back. "Please."

Maybe that word meant something significant to Snape as well, because he seemed to crumple a little bit as he leaned forward in his chair. "Because I wanted to be," he admitted, voice gruff as he looked away.

"I didn't think it was because you were a memory expert," said Harry, smiling a little to lighten the situation.

"I do respect your therapist's view of the matter, however. That was no lie."

"I know. Are you really worried that she was right? Because the few things I have remembered only popped into my head once Draco gave me some context, you know."

"How long has it been since you remembered something new?"
"Not long," said Harry, trying to sound like he believed that, when it seemed like forever. "Since before Christmas, is all."

"But before that you were remembering new things quite often, I think."

"Did I say that?"

"Your brother did."

Harry bit his lip a little. "Yeah, I guess he would have mentioned it. You . . . uh, you two talk a lot about me, then? When I'm not around?"

"You used to complain about the opposite," said Snape, looking . . . almost like the memory was a fond one. "You said that our own conversations always degenerated into talking about Draco."

"Oh." Harry didn't know what to say to that. In fact, the whole conversation was making him feel . . . he didn't know. Maybe it was all the stress of the night. First Luna, and then all this news about- -Luna! "Can we check with Flitwick again? Please?"

Snape gave a brusque nod and stood to fetch a pinch of Floo powder.

Harry held his breath.

"There is still no news," said Snape when he got off his knees.

"No news at all?"

"No."

"He didn't have any information?"

Snape slanted him a glance. "No."

"Nothing?" asked Harry desperately.

"Just a question about my somewhat 'dotty' behaviour," said Snape dryly.

"Oh."

"She is most likely simply delayed," he added soothingly. "Searching for tulip-nosed Tibetan grandingles, I suspect."

"Is there such a thing?"

"No. Hence the delay."

Harry tried to smile. "Yeah. I just . . . yeah."

"I would offer you something for the anxiety but it would not be wise atop the draught of Lillehammer." Snape paused. "You will let me know if your headache returns in the morning?"

Right. After the six hours of sleep.

"I don't think I'll sleep, but yeah, I'll let you know. Well . . . good night, then."

"I did not mean to imply that you needed to leave. In fact, if you would like to stay here while we wait for any news, your room is of course at your disposal. Perhaps we could play Wizard's
Scrabble until you feel more tired--"

"No, that's all right," said Harry quickly. The cottage in Devon had worked out fine, but sleeping in his room here was a little . . . he wasn't sure. He just knew that the idea of Draco and Snape talking about him . . . he didn't know how to feel about that. "I should get going."

Snape's expression seemed to close itself off. "I will contact you at once, of course, if I receive word of Miss Lovegood."

"Thanks." Harry wanted to say more, but that feeling was swamping him again. The one he didn't understand. "I . . . well, I really better get going, then."

"Good night."

Harry nodded once and almost ran out the door, he was so unnerved.

And the worst part was, he didn't understand why he should be.

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Harry did finally sleep, but only because utter exhaustion caught up with him around three in the morning. When he woke up, he didn't have a headache, but then, he didn't think he'd slept the six hours Snape had specified.

Luna wasn't at the Ravenclaw table at breakfast, and when Harry went over there to find out if anybody had heard from her, he ended up getting cornered by Orla Quirke, who was blinking more than ever. She wanted to know what Harry had got for Christmas. And then she wanted to know what his favourite colour was. When she said that she could charm her eyes that colour, Harry got out of there fast.

He ended up paired with Draco during Defence, but he couldn't concentrate for worrying about Luna.

"I know I used to fantasise about knocking you on your arse," said Draco as he extended a hand to help Harry up, "but I'd rather not be able to duel you into the ground now that we're on the same side."

"Luna's missing," said Harry baldly. "She wasn't on the Express with the others and she wasn't at breakfast, either."

"Is that why you were late to class?"

Harry nodded. "I popped over to Ravenclaw just to check, but the seventh years who didn't have a class--" Harry clenched his fists. "They hadn't even noticed she was missing until I told them!"

"And now you can't block a curse to save your life."

"Go on, make fun!"

"I'm not," retorted Draco. "I've been there."
"Oh, you mean--"

"Yes. She wasn't missing in the same sense, but I still couldn't think about anything else."

Harry tried harder then, to focus on his spell work, but it didn't do much good.

"You need a much larger distraction than duelling," said Draco lightly as they were packing up to head to Charms. "Why don't you have lunch with Slytherin today?"

"I don't think so."

"You used to eat with us quite a bit," wheedled Draco. "Oh, come on, Harry. I know you can't properly remember, but we're your house too. You even slept in Slytherin from time to time--"

"That was then and this is now."

"S.E. Hinton."

"Pardon?"

"That's a novel. It's on the list of alternate readings for Muggle Studies."

Oh. Harry had never heard of it. "I don't have any reason to sleep in Slytherin. Now, if you don't mind, I want to get to Charms so I can talk to Flitwick."

Draco stepped aside with a sarcastic flourish.

Harry ignored that to rush past him.

"No luck, eh?" asked Ron over dinner that evening.

Harry shook his head and mushed his fork into his already mushy peas.

"He'll be lucky if he gets a T on his Charms essay," added Hermione. "Really, Harry, turning in a parchment covered in doodles!"

". . . knew I shouldn't have told you," mumbled Harry. "I wrote some words, too. Don't start again."

Hermione pursed her lips and looked about to say something scathing, but just then, Harry jumped up from his bench. "Luna!"

He was never sure afterwards how he made it to the doors at the entrance to the Great Hall. If not for the wards, he would have suspected he'd Apparated without realizing. All he knew was the one second he was staring at her across what seemed like a vast distance, and the next, he was swinging her into his arms and kissing her like there was no tomorrow.

He didn't even hear the wolf whistles and cat-calls until sheer physical need made him come up for air.
"Hallo, Harry," said Luna brightly, stretching up on tip-toe to peck him on the cheek. "How was your Yule?"

"Lonely." Harry hugged her close again, the cat-calls fading into the background. "I missed you."

"I missed you too." Luna's little peck landed against his ear, that time.

"Why are you so late?"

Luna pushed back from him a little, her voice lilting even more than usual. "Late?"

"You missed a whole day of classes and I've been worried sick!"

"I should owl Daddy about that at once so he can change the headline--"

"Don't be mean!"

Luna blinked. "Well, Harry, if the Muggle Date Line is broken I really do think that people ought to know. We came the long way 'round on purpose, you know, after we got lost chasing Sherpas, but it seems it hasn't worked."

It took Harry a moment to follow that. When he got it, he decided that her confusion was just like her: adorable. "The Date Line doesn't work like a time-turner."

"No?"

"No." Harry grinned. "Are you hungry?" When she shook her head he tugged on her hand. "Come on, then. Let's find somewhere we can talk."

Except, talking wasn't what he had in mind at all.

"Mmm," said Luna, stretching out her neck. "That's nice."

It was almost too nice, as far as Harry was concerned. If he had his way, he'd kiss her all night long.

Unfortunately, if he never went back to Gryffindor Tower, Ron would be sure to ask questions. Ha. Knowing Ron, he'd ask them at an embarassing time, too, and word would get around, and even Draco would probably be winking at him between classes--

Wait. Wait. Harry's thoughts were whirling so fast that he could hardly snatch hold of the one that had just sailed past.

Draco . . . Draco.

Oh, it was too perfect. Tailor made, in fact.

But . . . could it really work? After all, he wasn't in this alone.
"Luna," he whispered against her nape, nuzzling it a little before he went on. "Suppose we stayed here in this cozy corner all night. Slept a little, maybe, tucked up against each other. Would anybody in Ravenclaw say anything?"

Luna slipped a hand up inside Harry's cloak, her fingers trailing up the sleeve that covered his arm. "I imagine so. Good morning when I went to breakfast, most likely, or possibly just hallo . . ."

Harry shivered, wishing he could vanish his sleeve. "Yeah, of course. I meant, would they get you in trouble for not going to your bed?"

Luna giggled. "Oh, Harry. Don't you know I'm out all night lots of times? When else do you think I have time to find my shoes?"

Harry dragged in a ragged breath, the tight feeling in his chest almost leaping with anticipation. "They wouldn't worry, then."

"They might not even notice," said Luna cheerfully. "Shall I conjure us some pillows?"

"Not tonight," said Harry, turning her in his arms to kiss her on the lips again. Mmmmm. It wasn't like kissing Cho at all, and not just because he could think of better descriptions than "wet." Cho hadn't made him feel like he was standing inside a sunbeam, savouring the warmth and light that could only come from true goodness. Cho hadn't been lovely on the inside.

But Luna . . . just thinking about her could make Harry's heart almost feel like it was bursting.

"We'll stay here all night some other time," whispered Harry, nuzzling her again. "I promise."

"I shall hold you to that." She used her free hand to stroke the side of Harry's face. "You were silly to worry, you know. The Prenglies could have told you where I was."

"I don't know how to find them. Or talk to them, remember?"

"I'll have to show you."

"I shall hold you to that," said Harry. Then, reluctantly, he untangled himself from her and helped her do up the buttons that had come undone. She giggled and did his own up using her wand, which made Harry smile a little ruefully.

He walked her to Ravenclaw, the way a gentleman should, and then made his way back to the Tower, his mind buzzing with plans, plans, and more plans.

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It was a little while before he could begin to put those plans into action, since the first few times he tried to go eat with Draco he ended up getting glared at for interrupting a Quidditch team strategy session. The third time it happened, a stinging hex even came his way, which was truly ridiculous. With the wards that paranoid lot had up, there was no question that Harry could hear anything useful. And Slytherin wasn't even playing Griffindor this Saturday, anyway! Did they think he was a spy for Ravenclaw, now?
Maybe they did, considering the amount of time he was spending with Luna these days.

Draco stopped him outside the Great Hall as he was leaving. "Sorry about that," he said, his tone suggesting he wasn't so very sorry at all. "Did you need something?"

Harry decided it would be a mistake to look too eager. He didn't want to give Draco any reason to be suspicious of Harry's sudden change of heart. "Never mind."

Draco put a hand out to stop him. "You didn't try to talk to me at dinner for no reason at all."

"It doesn't matter."

That got him a bit of a mock glare. "Of course it matters, you prat. I'd think you'd understand about Quidditch, of all things. But since we're brothers, I'll just take pity on you and tell you, how's that? Galliano."

Harry stared. He remembered the tall bottles he'd seen in Snape's liquor cabinet that time he'd gone down and found the man's quarters unoccupied, but he didn't understand the reference.

"But absolutely no chocolate cauldrons."

"Maybe you need to see Marsha," said Harry doubtfully. "I'm not sure if you're babbling or raving."

"Fine, then," huffed Draco. "Get him shampoo like we once joked about, and see how well that goes over. Though his hair is looking much better these days in any case, so I guess the joke will be on you!"

Get him shampoo?

"Are you talking about Snape?"

"I'm talking about Dad, yes. Why, what were you talking about?"

Harry couldn't have asked for a better opening, but he didn't want to snap at it like a rabid dog, so he lowered his voice as if unsure. Which, of course, he wasn't at all. "Um . . . well, see, I've been thinking . . ."

"A first."

"Shut up."

Draco went conspicuously silent, waving for Harry to get on with it.

"So I thought maybe you were right, that's all. Maybe. Well, I thought I'd try it, at any rate, and see how it went. Eating with Slytherin, I mean."

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"No, I just popped over for dinner three nights in a row for my health!" Harry rubbed his cheek where the stinging hex had hit home. "Didn't do me much good, though."

"That's at least ten times better than Galliano," said Draco in approving terms. "I can't think of anything Severus would like better for his birthday."

Harry frowned. "Birthday? Er . . . when--"
"Tomorrow." Understanding dawned in Draco's eyes. "Oh. You really didn't know. You weren't wanting advice about something nice for him?"

"No, I just thought I should . . . you know, be a little more accepting of . . . er, the bizarre fact that I'm apparently really in Slytherin . . ."

"At the risk of sounding like a Hufflepuff, I have to tell you that that's probably a hundred times better than a bottle of Galliano. Forcing yourself for his sake is one thing, but . . ." Draco shook his head. "Well then, I am quite sorry that you were interrupting a team meeting. Things are a bit tense, you know, with the Ravenclaw match coming up. I'm afraid the other players are still aghast that I called a halt after you plunged to the ground. Never mind that Snape would have cursed the lot of us if I'd let points take precedence over my brother."

Draco looked him over appraisingly. "Tomorrow, then? Breakfast? The team never meets then since the upper forms wander down late when they don't have morning classes. What do you think?"

Harry had been wolfing down his food in the morning so that he could hop up to Ravenclaw and walk Luna to whichever class she felt like wandering around in that day. He didn't want to give that up, or miss out on the smile she gave him whenever he floated her books along beside them. But this was like saving up for a rainy day. It would pay off.

"Yeah. Don't let them kill me, is all I ask."

"Don't be daft. Snape would kill them."

He probably would. The idea made Harry feel a bit warm inside, though he was sure that it shouldn't, since that made him kind of bloodthirsty. "He didn't do anything about the stinging hex."

"He doesn't think you want him fighting trivial battles like that for you."

Not this again. "You two were talking about me," said Harry, something inside him squirming uncomfortably. "You . . . you do that a lot, don't you?"

"Wouldn't you expect us to?"

Harry gulped a little, that squirming feeling getting even worse. "How would I know?"

"Harry," said Draco, waiting until he looked up. His voice was very quiet when he continued. "We're a family."

A family . . .

"I have to go," said Harry, quickly turning away. "But, uh, yeah. Breakfast, I mean. Tomorrow."

He got away before Draco could say anything to drag him back.

Draco's words kept ringing through his head, all through that evening as Harry sat in the common
It was strange even to think about things that way. It shouldn't be, he knew. He'd accepted that Draco really was his brother, and he'd realised that yes, Snape really had adopted him, and out of love, too. Not from any war effort. But somehow, he hadn't even thought about what those things added up to.

The big picture.

A family.

Harry shivered a little, wondering what it said about him that even the word made him feel a bit jittery. After all, it wasn't like he'd never had a family before. He knew all about them.

Or maybe he didn't, and that was the problem, and now he was in the middle of one and he felt like he'd just been thrown from a thousand-foot tower and he didn't know where he was going to land -- or even if he'd survive the landing.

"Harry?"

Harry dragged himself out of his thoughts and glanced across the table at Hermione.

"You look a bit haunted."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "I just . . . Draco said something that I . . ." It didn't take Harry long to decide he needed an out. "Never mind. You're an only child, so you probably couldn't . . . er, relate, anyway."

"I can, though," said Ron in a hard voice as he sank down into the chair next to Harry. "Was it Draco who threw that stinging jinx at you, then? And sure, yeah, he's been a pretty good brother, but that doesn't mean he can't also be a pain in the arse."

"He didn't jinx me."

"What did he do, then?"

Harry threw his quill onto the table. "He and Snape talk about me when I'm not there."

"Oh, yeah. That gets old," said Ron. "If I had a Galleon for every time Fred or George or Charlie or Bill had to chat up Mum or Dad about me-- Then again, I wish Percy were here to do it, don't I?"

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. The oozy feeling he got picturing Snape and Draco talking about him turned to something like despair when he suddenly imagined one of them gone, those conversations extinguished forever. "Draco said . . ." He had to clear his throat before he could go on. "Draco said that we were a family."

"Sounds like a real one to me," Ron said, grinning a little. "Right down to the gossip."

"You don't hate the idea? Snape and Draco and . . . me?"

"Naw. I got past all that last year. I told Hermione here that Snape was giving you what you needed and it was wrong of us to want to cheat you of it just because he was involved." Ron stopped grinning. "Why do you look so shocked? I've been telling you since you woke up in hospital that I'm fine with all of it."

"It's not that," whispered Harry, the pieces coming together in his mind until they formed an
unbroken whole that seemed to reach down into his heart and tug on it. "It's just-- I feel so stupid. I mean, I didn't know. I thought -- I don't know what I thought. That it wasn't really real, even if it was true. Or that I could split Draco off from the rest of it and just be friends with Severus. But . . . I can't, really."

"Harry?" prompted Hermione.

He smiled, feeling freer than he had in months, for all he felt kind of uncertain, too. It was still like being flung off a tower, but now, he was floating more than plunging. Maybe because he finally understood.

"I have a family," he said in tones of wonder. "A family. I sort of knew it, but not like this. I guess . . . I really am his son."

"Took you long enough!"

"Oh, Ron," said Hermione.

Ron punched Harry lightly on the arm. "Just don't get too Slytherin, eh?"

"Um, I'm eating breakfast there tomorrow."

Ron sighed, but Harry could tell it was at least half faked. "Yeah, all right."

"But Severus!" gasped Harry. "It's his birthday tomorrow, and I just found out and I don't have anything to give him, and I'm not sure he really needs more Galliano, and-- oh, God. If I don't get him anything he's going to think I don't care, and I do, and I should have thought of this sooner. I mean, what's wrong with me? He was bound to have a birthday sooner or later!"

"Calm down, Harry," said Hermione, reaching across to pat his hand. "I'm sure that Snape doesn't set such store by presents. Just telling him that you . . . er, care, is bound to mean the world to him."

"Not after I made him drink Veritaserum--"

"You made him . . . oh, Harry!"

He deserved every bit of her disappointment.

Every last bit.

And Snape deserved better, starting right now. Which meant a present for his birthday. A really good one.

"I'm such crap at presents," moaned Harry. "Such utter crap. I gave him my vault key last Christmas, did you know that? And then I asked for it back!"

"You gave him your--" Ron looked like he was choking.

"Not the money, just the key. He showed me the letter," said Harry miserably. "What am I going to do, Hermione? I don't know how to be in a family!"

"You did just fine with Draco's well wish last year," said Hermione soothingly. "For his adoption. You had me duplicate the Snape family crest onto the vase. We could do something like that for your father's birthday."

"I know!" exclaimed Harry. He wasn't sure where the idea had come from, though probably it was Hermione's mention of duplicating charms that had made it pop into his head. "Hermione . . . do you have some nice parchment? I mean really nice parchment? We need to bring it to the library. Um, we need to sneak into the library--"

"What's in the library?" Hermione asked, perking up straight away.

"Books," said Ron.

"Maps," corrected Harry.

"See?" said Draco in a bit of a taunting tone the next morning halfway through breakfast. He cast a privacy charm before he continued. "I told you that nobody would kill you."

"Right," said Harry, distracted because he was watching for Snape to get up and leave the head table. He hadn't wanted the present delivered by school owl during the meal. That didn't seem right at all.

Harry was doubly glad of his decision when he did see a package arrive at the head table. Snape scowled deeply at it and ignored for several long minutes, but when the wrapping erupted into a series of dancing marionettes leaping back and forth over his plate, he relented and opened the box.

"If the headmaster gave him another chocolate cauldron I shall have something to say," muttered Draco darkly.

The box, however, turned out to contain a whimsical tea pot.

"Dumbo," said Harry, grinning.

"Spot on," murmured Draco, shrugging when Harry gave him a look. "Professor Burbage read us the book during our unit on Muggle children. Huh. I wonder if that's actually from her. Bit twee for Severus, if you ask me."

Harry chuckled. "More than a bit. I think you pour the tea out through his trunk. See there?"

"Ewww."

Back at the head table, Snape was glowering at Dumbledore, who peered over his spectacles at the teapot, clearly bemused.

"I think it is from her! That dance at the Yule Ball must have given her ideas." Draco's grin grew wider. "Should we encourage it, do you think? Severus can be rather dashing in his own way, and a
"A bit of female companionship . . ."

"No," said Harry shortly.

"It could be good for him!"

"I just got used to the idea of having the two of you around!"

"Well, yes, but you don't want Severus to be lonely, do you? If you ask me, he's been far too lonely for far too long already."

Harry put down his fork. "But now he has us."

"It's good that you know that," said Draco warmly, before shaking his head. "But he probably does need more, you know. The way you need Luna, and I . . ." Draco's gaze seemed to focus on something very far away.

Harry waited until Draco looked at him again. Then, he shook his head. "I don't think I can cope with anything . . . anyone else, just now."

Draco chuckled. "I wasn't suggesting he get married, Harry. But an evening out in pleasant company would be a nice change for him. And the rest can come when the time is right--"

"He's leaving," said Harry quickly. He wasn't sure what it meant that Snape had scooped up the teapot before he strode out. "I want to talk to him. No, you stay here."

Draco sank back down into his seat, one eyebrow raised.

Harry ignored that and rushed out of the Great Hall to catch up with Snape.

He wasn't easy to catch. In fact, it almost seemed that the man was trying to get away from him, but that was plainly ridiculous, so Harry dismissed it as paranoid. Still, he was almost running by then, trying to match Snape's long strides, so he called out "Sir!" to get the man's attention.

A minute later, he could have kicked himself. Sir. What a way to begin. At least it had got the man to halt, though.

"Severus," panted Harry as he caught up. He carefully avoided looking at the teapot that Snape was holding by the trunk. "I wanted to wish you a happy birthday."

Snape inclined his head, very slightly. "Thank you, Harry."

He seemed . . . almost distant. Like they hadn't spoken in years, when it had only been a few days. But that made sense, didn't it?

"I'm sorry," blurted Harry. "About, you know. The Veritaserum?"
"I accept your apology."

The few words were stilted, making Harry feel ten times worse.

"I sat with Slytherin this morning--"

"Yes, I did see that." Finally, a smile began to glimmer at the back of those deep, dark eyes. "A most thoughtful gift indeed."

"No, that wasn't your present," Harry rushed to say. "I mean, I wanted to do that anyway. I-- I-- I just thought . . . it was time."

"Even better."

"I did get you a present, though," added Harry. When he thought of what it was, he was so nervous he could hardly think straight. Maybe that was why he started babbling. "Well, I made it, I mean. Except, I didn't, 'cause Hermione was the one who made it. But that was just because her Duplicato is so good. The whole thing was my idea."

Snape waited, and when Harry said nothing more, prompted, "I hope you don't mean teacups to go with this monstrosity."

"No." Harry would have laughed, but he was too on edge. Trying not to gulp, he reached inside his robes and pulled out a tightly rolled scroll. "It's this."

Snape waited until Harry nodded, and then cast a spell to flatten the parchment into a sheet two feet long and half as wide. He stared at it for a long moment, saying nothing at all while Harry shifted from foot to foot.

"It's the British Empire," Harry finally explained. "See all the red? Those are lands belonging to Britain. In, uh, the twenties."

The man glanced up. "1921, I do believe. Thank you, Harry."

Harry almost gave it up, then. This was too difficult!

But Snape hadn't given up, had he? Not once, not even when Harry was being horrible to him. So Harry had to try to explain.

"I told you that me being adopted was like Britain having an empire. That it could be true without being real, remember? But . . . it is real now, Severus. We are a family, which I guess was always so, but now, I know it. So . . . so I thought I'd make the empire real too, to . . . uh, show you."

Harry could tell from the heat under his collar that his face must be flaming. Stupid face.

"Anyway, happy birthday."

Snape inclined his head again. "A very welcome present and an even more welcome sentiment."

"I thought you'd be happier!" blurted Harry. "Did I not explain well enough? I know we're a family now, you and me and Draco! You're supposed to . . . I don't know, this is all new to me! But you can remember how this all worked before. Shouldn't you invite me down for tea or something?"

"I am quite delighted, I do assure you," said Snape, but he still seemed awfully solemn to Harry. "I don't think I can stomach the thought of tea for weeks, at least, not after this morning, but perhaps you would consider sitting with me tomorrow when Slytherin soundly trounces Ravenclaw."
Harry couldn't say no, but he could feel a little bit guilty to be relieved that he wouldn't have to break a date with Luna.

"I'd like that," he answered, smiling a little. "I want to try to get along better with Slytherin, anyway."

"Your petite amie will be helping to comment on the match, I take it?" Snape slanted him a look. "Otherwise, I imagine you would wish to sit with Ravenclaw."

True, but it was a moot point. "I'll sit with you and we'll cheer on Draco together. Like a family."

Snape looked almost startled by the last word, which made Harry wonder if the man hadn't really believed him. Well, time would take care of that. And in the meantime . . .

Harry couldn't resist asking. "The teapot. Is that from Professor Burbage?"

"Yes. Quite hideous, isn't it?"

"It's just not . . . you," he said faintly, wondering if he wanted to ask the rest. "Er . . . I think she's angling for you to ask her out. Are you going to?"

Snape shook his head. "She is most decidedly not my type."

"Oh, you have a type," teased Harry.

"Yes," said Snape, though he shook his head again as though to dismiss the topic. "You, however, have a Defense lesson to attend."

"Right." Harry laid a hand on Snape's arm. "I'll meet you at the Slytherin stands tomorrow, then. And happy birthday again."

"A very happy birthday," echoed Snape, his hand covering Harry's for a moment before Harry turned to go to class.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Thirty-Nine: Stolen Kisses

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

--------------------------------------------------------------------------
"That was a good one," said Harry, trying hard not to look as unnerved as he felt. It was difficult, though. He'd never in a million years have predicted that he'd someday find himself sitting in the Slytherin stands so he could cheer their team on against Ravenclaw.

He didn't mind cheering for Draco, of course. That part was actually easy, since Harry knew what to look for in a Seeker, and Draco was rather good. But clapping when the Quaffle flew through one of the Slytherin rings and ten more points registered for the "house of the snake," as Ginny kept calling it during her commentary . . . it made Harry want to wince.

He couldn't let that show, though. How was he going to convince people that he was comfortable enough with Slytherin to start sleeping there if he looked upset that they were doing well in the Quidditch match?

"Mmm," said Snape, rather non-committally. But then, he'd been sort of . . . well, just strange, all morning. Not exactly standoffish, and certainly not anything as strong as rude . . . and he'd seemed happy to see Harry in a Snapeish sort of way, but for all that, something was off. Harry could tell.

A fact which alarmed him a little, when he thought about it.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked in exasperation when Snape barely replied to the fifth thing in a row.

Snape just looked at him, his black eyes so blank that Harry couldn't read a thing there.

And that was all it took. Harry suddenly knew, he just knew. "You're Occluding!"

"And you have no discretion whatsoever," growled Snape as he twitched his wand.

Right. Harry probably didn't. The comment still hurt, somehow.

"But why are you doing it?" he pressed, careful not to use the word again, even though the privacy charm would take care of eavesdroppers.

"I find it a useful technique."

"For?"

"Various things."

"Such as?"

"I would prefer not to discuss the matter."

"Look," said Harry, exasperated. "If we're really a family, then--"
"If?"

Harry swallowed. "Right. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I just meant, _since_ we're really a family, you shouldn't be acting like you think I'm going to try to read your mind. I don't even know how, and anyway, I wouldn't invade your privacy like that--"

"Harry," said Snape quietly. "You Occlude as a matter of course. Why should it bother you if I feel the need for a calm space inside my mind this morning?"

Put like that, Harry's objection seemed unreasonable, he supposed. On the other hand, he had the feeling that Snape's Occluding had something to do with Harry in particular. But maybe that feeling was really about something else. "Look . . . you're acting like you can barely stand to talk to me, that's all."

Snape cleared his throat. "I don't mean to do that--"

"Ha!" shouted Draco as he whizzed past, the Snitch in his hand. He executed a tight circle and came to hover before them. "Did you see? Did you _see_? Slytherin wins with two hundred and forty, thank you very much!"

He practically bowed.

"Good job, Draco," said Harry.

"Quite good." Snape's robes billowed as he rose to his feet. "If you'll both excuse me, I do believe I have some essays to mark."

"Wait--"

But he didn't. Harry stared after him, his eyes feeling oddly dry.

"What did you do to Dad?" asked Draco, his own eyes narrowed to a thin line.

"I didn't do anything! He's the one, he wouldn't even . . ." Harry gave it up. If he went on he'd probably say something he shouldn't mention in front of the other Slytherins. Then again, they were probably used to Snape being . . . well, like his usual moody self with them.

Harry should be used to it too, but he had a feeling that he'd got used to something very different.

"And Slytherin takes the day!" said Luna in a voice that carried across the entire pitch. "Though I would like to point out that the scoreboard must be charmed wrong since it should only say twelve--"

"Twelve!" Draco practically growled, turning his glare on the high stand where Luna and Ginny had been announcing. "There ought to be some standards for attending Hogwarts, if you ask me! Basic numeracy, for a start, and--"

"Pure blood?" Harry shot to his feet.

"I wasn't going to say that! It wouldn't even make sense in this case--"

"In this case?"

"Oh, shut _up,_" said Draco. "I don't think like that any longer and it's more than a bit annoying that you can't seem to believe me! It's not my fault if your girlfriend has a bat in her belfry--"
"You shut up!" shouted Harry. "She's . . . she's unique. There's nothing wrong with that."

Draco gave a studied wave of his arm and spoke as though he hadn't a single care in the world. "Fine, fine. Unique it is. Bring her along to the party if you like."

"Party?"

"Gryffindors really are thick. Don't you have a party in the tower whenever you win-- oh." He gave a little shudder. "I forgot."

It took Harry a second to make the connection. When he did, he felt a bit better about the belfry comment. "About the lion?"

"Time for my victory lap," said Draco quickly. "But yeah, bring her along."

"I can't go to a-- oh."

"Yes, we all have our crosses to bear. You are indeed a Slytherin."

With that, Draco sped off to the left, his Quidditch robes soaring out behind him like a silvery green river, leaving Harry to wonder if the seventh year Muggle Studies class was doing lessons on religion.

Harry ended up having to take Luna to Snape's quarters later on since nobody answered the door to Slytherin when he banged on it. Bit embarrassing, really, that he'd shown up to a party with his girlfriend and couldn't even get in. But of course there was no question of skipping the party, even if Draco was a rude git who deserved to have a lion statue roar at him. Slytherin had to get used to him being around, it was as simple as that.

Not that Harry liked it, but Luna was worth every bit of inconvenience.

He strolled straight into Snape's living room with Luna on his arm, though part of him was pretty nervous, and not just because this was sort of like bringing a date home. It was more because Snape had been so brooding earlier. Harry didn't like it.

"Hallo, Severus," he said, trying for aplomb.

Luna giggled. "Oh, Harry. Don't ask him to sever us!"

Snape glanced up from his potions journal and then rose to his feet in one smooth motion as he gave what looked like a very slight bow. "Miss Lovegood. Good evening." His dark gaze flicked to Harry's face but didn't linger. "Harry."

Damned if Harry didn't get the feeling that the man was Occluding again. Which was just completely stupid. He knew Harry couldn't Legilimize him even if he wanted to, and he ought to know that Harry would never do a thing like that anyway--

Except, Harry would use Veritaserum on him, wouldn't he?
Harry could have kicked himself. And there went his aplomb, sinking right through the dungeon floor.

"Um, we were going to the party in Slytherin, and, um--"

"An excellent notion. I'm due there myself . . . shall we have a drink together, first?"

Harry almost goggled. He wasn't used to Snape being . . . well, he'd actually seen him be polite on a couple of occasions, he supposed, but now he was acting like something . . .

Then it came to him: like something out of a Victorian novel. Apparently more than the mode of speech had worn off on him, though Snape didn't seem to have very many occasions when he wanted to pull out his "company" manners. That he would pull them out now said a lot, since Harry pretty much assumed that Snape must share Draco's opinion of Luna.

Like Draco should be criticizing other people, when he'd spent practically his whole life being the worst sort of racist arsewipe--

"Are you not thirsty?" drawled Snape in a low, sardonic tone.

Huh. Once Harry would have taken that for cruel wit, making fun of Harry for standing there like a deaf-mute. Now, though, it sounded different.

It sounded like Snape was defensive that Harry didn't want to socialize and was covering up his reaction to that.

Knowing that made Harry ten times more ashamed of the whole Veritaserum thing.

"Dying of it," he said brightly, trying for a little cover-up of his own so he wouldn't seem nervous. Damn it, he wanted Snape to think he was comfortable here. Even more, he wanted to be comfortable here, though that would probably take longer. "Butterbeer?"

"And you, Miss Lovegood?"

"Oh. Water with a drop of pumpkin juice. Just one drop, mind."

Snape didn't appear to react to that at all. He was gone for a moment, and then the drinks were sparkling into existence on the low coffee table. Harry gestured until Luna sat down and then took a seat right alongside her. Snape appeared to hesitate for a moment and then sank down into a chair angled to face the couch.

Luna glanced left, right, up, and down. "The Prenglies didn't mention that there would be so many doors."

Snape drew himself up in his chair. "The Prenglies have been discussing my private quarters with a student?"

Luna gave Snape what Harry could only think of as a pitying look. "Well, no. I just told you that."

"I beg your pardon?"

Harry felt a bit like an interpreter. "The Prenglies didn't mention the doors because they didn't mention your home at all, Severus."

"Harry, he might actually do it if you keep asking," whispered Luna.
"Severus is his name."

"Oh." Luna brightened. "That's all right, then. I'm quite relieved, you know. For a moment there I thought Harry'd had a few too many cucumbers."

Harry had to admire the way that Snape managed to look dignified while trying not to snort wine out his nose. "See, the thing about Luna is that you never know what she's going to say next."

"Indeed," said Snape, still sounding like he was half-choking on liquid.

"Like Howard Stern," chimed Luna.

"Who?" asked Harry and Snape at the same time.

"Oh, he's simply . . . I suppose speechless isn't the right word. The opposite, in fact. Daddy and I heard him once on the Wizarding Wireless. No idea how he got on as he's apparently a Muggle. Daddy was quite disappointed. He thought he'd make an absolutely smashing cover story--"

"The Prenglies, Miss Lovegood." Snape leaned forward in his chair. "What are they?"

"Oh, I've no idea at all."

"But what do they look like?"

Luna lapsed into thought. "Hmm. A bit like crisps, actually. Though rather fuzzy at the edges and invisible all over."

"If they are invisible all over, how can you know what they look like?"

Luna shrugged. "I just do."

Snape looked slightly exasperated, but soldiered on. "And these Prenglies, they apparently give you accurate information about what is happening in other parts of the castle? As when Harry was forcibly Apparated away from the Yule Ball?"

"Shouldn't they?"

"Indeed they should," drawled Snape. "I think they could prove quite useful. Will they talk to anyone?"

"I suppose that's up to them."

Snape inclined his head. "Perhaps you could find out."

Harry put down his drink. "We wanted to go to the party in Slytherin but I don't know the password." He frowned slightly, trying hard not to overdo it. "Bit difficult to think of it as my other house when I'm locked out like this."

"I feel quite certain Draco will tell you the current password. He sets a new one each week."

"Oh. Prefect, right."

"As are you."

Harry almost bristled, but remembered it would be out of character, considering his plans. "That's right, I am," he said slowly. "Ron said he saved my prefect's badge. I . . . er, wasn't too careful with
it when I was, well, you know. I was pretty upset to find out I was in Slytherin. I guess I can get used to it, though. Trying, at any rate. So, the password?"

Snape's hands tightened slightly on the stem of his wine glass. "This is not the best time."

"When, then?"

Snape looked pointedly at Luna.

Oh. Well, Harry hadn't forgotten that she was a Ravenclaw. He just knew that something like a password wouldn't matter to Luna. She probably wouldn't even remember it five seconds later. "All right. Then you come and let us in. Though I still don't know why they wouldn't open the door for me. I was invited, you know."

"And you are a Slytherin."

"Right. That too," said Harry quickly.

Snape gave him a darkly amused look and stood up. "By the way, Miss Lovegood. Twelve in no way equals two hundred and forty."

With that, he was striding out the door, leading the way to Slytherin.

Luna leaned over to whisper to Harry as they walked along behind him. "I didn't know your father was such a talented mathematician."

"I'll explain later."

As it turned out, though, Harry didn't have to. Draco was one of the first people they saw inside. He made a beeline for them and, shouting to be heard over the pounding music, demanded to know why Luna had claimed that Slytherin's score was only twelve.

"But it was twelve," said Luna in a patient voice, completely ignoring the fact that only Harry, standing close, could probably hear her. "Twelve score exactly."

"What?" shouted Draco.

"Twelve score." Luna didn't raise her voice.

"Oh, honestly," said Hermione loudly. Harry goggled; he wasn't sure where she'd come from. Or why she'd be here, for that matter. "A score is another word for twenty, Draco!"

Draco stared at Luna for one second more, then rolled his eyes like it wasn't worth an argument. "I'll get you that drink, Hermione."

He melted back into the crowd, heading toward the far end of the room where the music was even louder. Snape gave them all a solemn nod and vanished as well. Harry wondered if he was going to corner Draco about Hermione being there.

Grabbing at her sleeve, he pulled her down the first hallway he spotted; anything to get further away from the racket in the common room.

As usual, Hermione had an even better idea. She waved her wand in a tight semi-circle, pointing it at herself, Harry, and Luna in turn. The music faded down to the noise of a buzzing bee. "Are their parties always so loud?"
Harry shrugged. "Would I know?"

"Oh, Harry. Still not remembering anything new? You know, you might not, now that people are filling in all the gaps for you--"

Harry didn't want to listen to one of her I-told-you-so lectures. "What are you doing here?"

"Having a good time?"

"With Slytherins?"

"Well, it's not like they just trounced Gryffindor." Hermione's smile was a bit pointed as she flashed it at Harry's date. "Hallo, Luna."

So maybe it was a little strange for a Ravenclaw to be at the party, considering that they'd just lost to Slytherin by more than 200 points. It was even stranger for a Muggleborn to show up at a Slytherin party!

"Hallo," said Luna, a dreamy expression on her face as she reached out to tap her index finger against one of Hermione's cheekbones.

"Draco shouldn't invite you and then leave you alone. They're Slytherins, and you're not exactly one of their favourite people, if you know what I mean--"

"He didn't leave me alone. He left me with you." Hermione gave his wand hand a pointed glance. "Hmm?"

"All right," Harry conceded the point. "But still--"

"Draco said he wanted to ask me something," interrupted Hermione. "And the look on his face... well, I don't mind admitting I was a bit intrigued. So I came."

"What did he want to ask you?"

"All I know is that he said it was personal and he could only discuss it in his bedroom."

Harry drew in a sharp breath, the comment hitting him on some kind of visceral level. Maybe because of all the time he'd spent lately thinking of how to get Luna alone in a dark corner for an entire night. And Draco actually did like Hermione these days, and if the way he'd been flirting with Ginny at the Burrow was any indication, he wasn't still as stuck on Rhiannon as he always liked to claim...

Which led to only one conclusion, didn't it? A conclusion that Hermione Granger should have come to on her own in about five seconds flat! "Oh, come on, Hermione. It's personal and he can only discuss it in his bedroom?"

"Maybe it's about his pillows," said Luna, beaming at them both like she'd just solved the riddle of the Sphinx.

"Maybe it's about his... something else!"

"I think you're jumping to some rather wild conclusions," retorted Hermione. "We're just friends. And I happen to be one of the few people he can discuss certain things with. I'm not just talking about Muggle Studies here."

She laid more emphasis than necessary on the word Muggle.
So . . . Draco was talking to her about missing Rhiannon. That had to be the lowest type of sweet-talk ever -- it meant Draco was being a real toerag. It also meant he was pretty damned clever. After all, Draco being heartbroken because he was such a changed man that he'd actually fallen for a Muggle . . . that was the one appeal that Hermione, quick as she was, might actually fall for.

He felt a great gulp welling up inside his throat, and he knew what it meant. He couldn't let this go on. He had to save her -- even if she was the one who had annoyed him so much by claiming he had a "saving people" thing.

"He's trying to get you into bed," he said bluntly.

Hermione glanced once at Luna and then back at him. "I think you've got sex on the brain, Harry."

"No, he has a skull on his brain," Luna said, reaching up to pat Harry's hair. "A good thing, too. Kersnipples lack them, you know, and my goodness do they make a mess of themselves when it's time to dig for Silk-stranded Cloisons . . ."

Harry soldiered on, wishing Luna wasn't here to hear this. Then again, she wasn't likely to misunderstand. She might not even understand at all, since she was gazing about like she could see through the walls to a wonderland beyond. But for Hermione's sake, he had to say the rest. "You happen to be . . . uh, beautiful, and Draco gets kind of a look sometimes when he says your name, and anyway, he's . . . you know he's on the rebound, and did I mention, he's a Slytherin?"

"Why, so I am," said Draco, his wand out like he'd just that moment cut into Hermione's privacy spell. "So are you, Harry."

"Harry thinks you want to speak to me in your bedroom because there's a bed in there," Hermione said, smiling in a saccharine way.

"Ah. Well, I suppose we must forgive my brother," drawled Draco. "He's a bit of a dolt at times, but he's a well-meaning dolt, concerned for your maidenly virtue and all that rot. Very laudable, I'm sure."

"I'm not," retorted Hermione.

"Not a maiden? Do tell!"

"Not sure it's any of his business. Or yours," corrected Hermione, lightly punching Draco once on the shoulder.

Draco dropped his teasing manner and turned to face Harry. "I just need to ask her for a favour. And no, I don't mean that. But if I did, it's hardly a fate worse than death."

"I just don't like you trying to trick her!"

"Please. I've no intention of doing any such thing. Besides, Hermione hardly needs your protection. The girl's a hellcat! Cross the line just once and I bet she'd kick you where you live--"

"Hellcat?" Hermione smiled. "You deserved that slap over Buckbeak and you know it."

"I'm sure our Defence professor would agree. So, shall we?" He held out his arm in a manner that looked like gallantry and a smirk combined.

"With pleasure." Hermione winked at Harry as she let herself be squired away.
"I still don't like it," muttered Harry.

"Oh, don't be a goose," chided Luna. "Draco's quite sweet, really. Did you know that he keeps a plushie dragon under his bed?"

"And you would know that how?"

"The Prenglies, silly!"

Harry started. "Oh, the Prenglies . . . say, could you ask some of them to pop over to Draco's room and--"

"No."

"I just want to find out what--"

"No."

"Why not?"

Luna stretched up and dropped a kiss on his lips. "It would be wrong. You know that. Now, come on. Let's dance."

That meant going back into the common room, but Harry soon found himself distracted from the loud music by the sight of Luna spinning on one heel as she shook her long hair to and fro. They were into their third dance when Hermione suddenly came charging down a staircase into the common room, practically leaping across it to reach the door. Harry got there first. "What happened?"

She swiped a long lock of hair away from her face and glared at him like it was his fault, whatever it was. "That-- that Slytherin arse . . . ooh!"

With that, she yanked open the common room door, thrust herself through it, and slammed it in his face before he could step out after her. Luna put a hand on his arm when he tried to follow, but Harry couldn't have run after her in any case. He was too transfixed by the sight of Draco rushing through the dancing throng.

His pale face looked whiter than ever due to the brilliant crimson splotch across his right cheek.

A splotch just about the size of Hermione's hand . . .

Harry jumped in front of the door to block it and glared as Draco skidded to a halt in front of him.

"Out of my way!"

"What did you do to Hermione?"

Draco bared his teeth. "Oh, that's nice, Harry. Take her side! I was right to call her a hellion--"

"Gentlemen," said Snape in a low tone as he suddenly swept forward from an alcove to one side. "Do be good enough to continue your discussion away from prying ears. This is unseemly for two Slytherin prefects."

Harry almost yelled that he wasn't. He managed to quell the impulse in time. "I have to go after Hermione."
"I imagine Miss Granger needs a feminine ear. A friend in Gryffindor, perhaps?"

Draco sighed, all the anger seeming to drain out of him. "Harry, all I did was ask if she'd--"

"Upstairs, gentlemen."

Draco gave a curt nod and turned on his heel. Harry didn't really want to go anywhere near the other boy's room, but damn it, he wanted to get started with his "sleep in Slytherin" plan. He couldn't pull that off if he wasn't getting along with Draco, or at least pretending to.

"I'll just walk Luna back to Ravenclaw and come back, then." Could he help it if his voice was a bit stiff? He didn't know what Draco had done to Hermione, not exactly, but whatever it was, he didn't appreciate it.

"That is hardly necessary," said Snape.

Luna nodded very solemnly. "The Prenglies will be there the whole way, Harry."

"A gentleman walks his lady home," said Harry, adding for good measure, "Severus."

The Potions Master seemed to peer at him a bit and then shrug, very slightly.

Harry yanked open the door and got out of there. He didn't care what Snape had to say about this -- he was going to talk to Hermione.

That was his intention, at any rate.

"No," she said for about the sixth time. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But if it was bad enough that you had to hit him--"

"Trust me, he deserved it. And that's all I'm going to say."

A brilliant idea occurred to Harry then. He'd been wondering how to introduce his abrupt about-face on the issue of sleeping in Slytherin. This was probably the perfect excuse.

"Well, I don't care if it takes all night, I'm going to get the truth from Draco!" Harry gulped a little. He didn't like lying to his friends, but this wasn't really lying, was it? Well, it sort of was, but . . .

Shite. He probably was a tad manipulative for a Gryffindor, just like Draco had told him.

"Pin on your prefect's badge in that case," said Hermione dryly. "It's past curfew."

"I'll get it from Ron. Might as well tell him the plan, anyway. I wouldn't want him starting a search party when I don't come home tonight."

"Don't tell him about what happened. I don't need another lecture."

Harry managed not to point out that she didn't mind giving them. "What did happen?"
"More than enough."

"How come when I actually want you to explain something you won't?"

Hermione laughed a little, but it sounded strained. "Maybe I'm just now learning that I don't know it all, Harry. Go on, then. I'll be fine."

Harry gave her one last doubtful look, but then he went up to his own room to talk to Ron and get his prefect's badge back.

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"She objected to my plans regarding the redecoration of Grimmauld Place," said Draco as he calmly turned a page in his potions text.

Harry gaped. "Hermione did not slap you over a thing like that!"

"I quite assure you, she most certainly did."

"She did not!"

"Shall I take some Veritaserum to prove it?" Draco laid the book aside and glanced down at Harry's feet. "Or did you forget to tuck some away?"

"Oh, shut up. I'm not going to truth serum you every time we have an argument."

"Thank Merlin for that at least."

"But really . . . redecorating?"

"I had a certain scheme in mind and all I can say is that she didn't appreciate it at all." Draco sat up straighter on his bed, crossing his legs one over the other. "I really didn't think she'd mind helping me. She knows . . . a lot. But I suppose I misjudged her. Do you suppose that perhaps her problem has to do with the moon cycle?"

"The what?"

He got a condescending glance for that. "Her time of the month?"

Oh. Harry looked away. "How would I know?"

"I was just wondering if I should wait a week and ask again."

"Maybe you should just handle it yourself."

"No," said Draco distantly, his eyes seeming to focus on a location hundreds of miles away. Harry had a feeling he knew where, too. Not Grimmauld Place, but wherever it was that Rhiannon lived. "I need Hermione. I can't possibly do this alone."

A horrible sinking feeling catapulted through Harry. He still didn't know how Hermione could
have got so irate over being asked to help redecorate Grimmauld Place, but it was hard to be upset with Draco when he was clearly in such a painful place.

"She's not . . ." Harry cleared his throat and started over. "I understand, I think. But Draco, redoing the house with some Muggle styles or something . . . it's not going to make Rhiannon change her mind."

"I know. I'm not still in denial. But . . . I did want to do this." Draco suddenly thrust his wand out and undid the complex locking, warding, and silencing spells he'd applied when Harry had joined him in the seventh year dormitory. Loud music suddenly poured into the room. "Enough. Go home."

It would probably be a bit much to claim that he was home. "I . . . er, actually I thought I'd try sleeping here tonight."

"To interrogate me?"

"I'd thought of it even before you and Hermione--" Draco gave him a sceptical look. "Really I had!"

"Fine. I think you know which bed is yours."

"I know, but I don't remember. Maybe because . . ."

"Because of what?" Draco leaned forward, almost closing the distance between his bed and the chair Harry had pulled up earlier.

"Well . . ." Harry winced, wondering if his comments about Sirius were going to hurt Draco somehow. "I really wanted to remember. But that was so I could um . . . talk to someone. I think you know who."

Draco wrinkled his brow.

Harry glanced at the door, unwarded now, and lowered his voice. "He gave you a house?"

"Oh."

"Yeah. And so I was trying hard to remember so I could, you know, make that work. But then I took that shortcut at Christmas, and I can talk to him all I like, and well . . . I wonder if that's why, that's all. I guess I just don't have such a pressing need to remember any longer."

"Maybe you just need to relax, Harry. About all of it."

"Maybe . . ."

"So why the change of heart about sleeping here?"

Harry shrugged. "It seemed like it was time." More than that he wasn't going to say, but he needed a way to keep Draco from pressing him. Luckily, it wasn't too hard to think of one. "Um . . . was Hermione wearing a sharp ring when she slapped you? Because you've got a bit of a scratch, just there."

"She just picked my injured cheek. Your fault, you damned . . . fuck, I can't even insult you properly. If I do, I'll just get bit again!"

"The lion's not supposed to bite you!"
"You warned me that it would!"

"I made that up!" Harry held out his hands when it looked like Draco would launch himself at him. "I said I wasn't sure about it. I just wanted you to take me seriously, Draco, and I didn't want you to bin it."

"Why, you sneaky, conniving little bastard!"

Draco sounded more approving than critical.

"But it really did bite you?" Harry winced. "Look, I didn't want things to go that far. I just hate listening to you go on about Gryffindor!"

"It didn't bother you--"

"I think it did," said Harry fiercely, remembering what Snape had said at Christmas. "I think it bothered me a lot but I didn't want to alienate my new family. That actually makes sense to me, now that I've accepted how things stand. But it goes both ways, you know. You ought to care about not alienating me."

Draco had gone very still. "What does that mean, that you've accepted how things stand?"

Oh, right. Harry had only told Severus. "What you said. We're a family. Actually, it was you telling me that made it click. I don't remember, really . . . but I do understand."

"You understood before. You knew what an adoption was."

Harry shrugged. "Yeah, but now it's more than a word. I can feel it's real. But shut up about Gryffindor. Would you like it if I went on all the time about how much I can't stand pure-bloods?"

"You can't," said Draco with a smirk. "Your girlfriend is one."

"Shut up anyway."

"Oh, all right," said Draco, with extremely bad grace. He made up for it, though, by grinning.

"There's a password to break the binding on the lion," Harry admitted. "So you can banish it without having to want me gone as well. Want it?"

"Definitely."

"Artichoke hearts."

"Ah. So nothing to do with your lady love, then."

Actually, it was. Well, sort of, considering the corsage Harry had given her for the Yule Ball. He still wanted to pay Draco back a bit for the teasing, though. "Maybe I should cue the reveal spell first and see just what you said that got you bit."

Or maybe not, considering he'd chosen *cucumber* for that password.

Harry promptly blushed, ignoring Draco's stare as the other boy fetched the lion, tapped it with his wand and uttered "artichoke hearts" in a tone of complete and total relief.
Sleeping in Slytherin wasn't the trial Harry had expected. Zabini never even showed up, for one thing. Harry didn't ask what that might mean.

Crabbe came in, lumbered over to his bed, and promptly fell onto it fully dressed. Before a minute had elapsed he was snoring to wake the dead. Draco sighed and cast a spell that yanked his curtains closed and muffled the sound.

That just left Goyle, who gave Harry a casual nod before bundling up a few things and padding off to use the loo.

"He's been pretty well disposed to you since Hermione started helping him with his dyslexia," explained Draco.

It had been a while since Harry had got that up-is-down feeling, like he didn't know his own life. He wondered how long it would be until he relearned every last detail . . . assuming that he never did end up remembering on his own.

When Harry woke up, Crabbe was still snoring away, his curtains open again. Goyle was asleep as well, but Draco was nowhere to be seen.

Just as well, really. It had been bad enough the night before when Harry had gone fishing through Snape's old school trunk with Draco watching. Thankfully there'd been some pyjamas in there. Now, he also found what he was looking for: a robe that still had the dual crest attached. Trying not to feel like a total fraud, Harry cast a hasty cleaning spell over the clothes he'd tossed to the floor the night before, then got ready to go down to breakfast.

To go up to breakfast, he reminded himself. When he reached the Great Hall, he almost headed over to the Gryffindor table, but decided at the last moment that he might as well get Ron and his other friends used to him spending time with Slytherin.

Draco wasn't there, but arrived just a few minutes later. By then, Harry had fended off three hexes, but none of them had been particularly mean-spirited. Oddly enough, being messed about had given him the feeling that the Slytherins didn't mind him being around so very much.

Of course, maybe that was due to the Prefect's badge he'd pinned on, just underneath the dual crest.

Or maybe it was more due to a younger Slytherin named Larissa, who had come over and introduced herself, then promptly launched into a running monologue about her snake and how it was a boy and would Harry lend her Sals so they could mate and could any kind of snake mate with any other kind and did Harry know that she thought she could almost talk to her snake now,
well, and have it understand her, and--

"Off with you," said Draco as he sat down opposite Harry. "I need a private word with my brother."

Larissa looked as disappointed as a puppy denied a treat. "But I haven't talked to Harry in ages--"

"Larissa," said Draco, very sternly.

Her expression fell still further. "Yes, Drakey."

The pet name reminded Harry, but remembering Snape's words on discretion, he leaned forward and cast the series of privacy spells that seemed to be required fifty times a day for a Slytherin. "Do you really keep a plushie dragon under your bed?"

Draco stared. "That's completely absurd."

"Oh, yeah? I happen to know it's true."

"It is not."

"Is so."

They were just bantering, so Harry didn't see why Draco suddenly looked so strained. "Could you drop it? We have more important things to discuss."

Harry snatched up another piece of toast as it came floating past. "All right. What is it?"

"Dad asked me to let you know that there's a meeting tonight. The old crowd. But the story is we'll be spending the evening in his quarters."

"Is this the usual way things work in . . . uh, our family?" asked Harry, a little peeved. "Snape tells you the important things and then you tell me?"

"It seems the other way around to me, most of the time," said Draco sharply. "As for this morning, I was with him when he got the message. He wanted to lecture me on proper Slytherin decorum."

Harry narrowed his gaze. "Did you give him the same load of rubbish you gave me? About redecorating houses?"

"In the first place, it wasn't rubbish. In the second, he didn't even pry. A strategy you might try sometime."

"Look, I dropped it last night but I know Hermione wouldn't hit you because you wanted advice on curtains!"

Draco suddenly looked furious. "I shouldn't have bothered to ask her in advance. If I'd just waited for a meeting, I wouldn't even have had long to wait, and then I could have just sprung it on her. Then it would be done, and if I got slapped, so what? I got slapped just for asking!"

"You sound like a nutter. What on earth are you even talking about?"

"Redecorating! With Hermione! Tonight!"

Harry drew in a sharp breath. "Wait. Hermione's going to be there tonight? With the old crowd? Is she a member? She didn't mention that!"
"Of course not," said Draco scathingly. "She couldn't, because you might have let it slip to Weasely, and he hasn't been allowed to join yet. She didn't want an argument. Well, now I'm in a mood to wish one on her, so have at it. Tell Weasely everything."

That was rather petty and mean-spirited. And a large overreaction for Hermione's supposed crime of not wanting to choose wallpaper and paint. But Harry had better fish to fry at the moment.

"How come Ron can't join?"

Draco shot him a vicious smile. "Oh, now there's a story. Did you know that your over-intelligent little friend was rushing madly to and fro third year, using a Time Turner to take extra classes?"

"Yeah, I knew that--"

"All that extra time has made her so much older that technically, she's already completed seven full years here! And that's Dumbledore's standard, it seems, to let you join without a parent's consent. Being of age is apparently beside the point."

Harry spooned up some eggs. "So you and Hermione must have been getting on really well, then, if she spilled about all of that. She trusted you not to tell Ron?"

"Eh, probably not, but she just had to win an argument on the temporal effects of Time Turners, so then she had to convince me that she'd used one and it had aged her." Draco cleared his throat. "Though, I should admit that I'd already let slip about my own involvement with the old crowd."

When Harry stared, Draco grew defensive. "I have that impulse control problem... and at any rate, I knew she could be trusted."

"Yeah, she can." Harry nodded. "And so can I, and so can you. Neither one of us is going to tell Ron. Right?"

"I don't know about that. I'm rather annoyed at the moment."

Harry sighed. "Whatever you meant about redecorating, it can't possibly be so important."

"Oh, yes, it can. I have half a mind just to go ahead... though if she's not willing, I don't suppose that will really work..."

Harry glanced at the head table, wondering if Snape hadn't pried because he already knew what was going on with Draco. What he saw drove the question straight out of his head, though. Snape was sitting next to Maura Morrighan, their heads bowed close together. Her hands were on the table, twisting a cloth napkin tighter and tighter. His were resting close alongside her forearm.

Harry wasn't sure what was giving him this impression, but he could swear that Snape was repressing an urge to fold his hands over hers to still them.

"What's wrong?" Draco followed his gaze, stared for a moment, and then gave a long, low whistle. "Well, well. You can't blame him, really. Dad's a man like any other, and with the way Morrighan dresses, poor Professor Burbage really didn't stand a chance."

"Maybe they're just talking about... Defence," Harry said feebly.

"Look at his body language," drawled Draco. "He's practically wrapped around her. Protective, almost, and since we know she can take care of herself, he must be guarding her from an emotional danger... I'd say there's something of a highly personal nature under discussion."
Harry swallowed. He knew it was wrong to let this bother him. He had Luna, and Snape was entitled to have somebody too, if he wanted. But still--

"Breathe, you idiot child," said Draco dryly. "For all you know she's worried about getting sacked. She does deserve it for the way she treated me."

"If teachers here got sacked for mistreating students Snape would be long gone," retorted Harry. "Besides, he has . . . that look."

"What look?"

Harry tore his eyes away, suddenly feeling like he was prying. "The one that upset me so much when I first had amnesia. Maybe it wouldn't stand out to anyone else, but I was so used to something else that . . . trust me. They aren't talking about Hogwarts."

He gulped down what remained of his pumpkin juice. Draco's teasing about Snape and a woman friend had been bad enough, and that was when the whole thing was hypothetical. Now, it felt real. Just as real as the British Empire itself.

He had to choke down a hysterical laugh. Couldn't his life ever be simple? Couldn't he have a few years, or even months, to settle into his newly rediscovered family before it got shaken up again?

"I meant it about the breathing," said Draco. "Really, I'm the one who should mind, considering how that harridan treated me. And I don't. I think Dad's been alone for a long time."

Harry shoved off the bench and stood up. He couldn't think about this anymore. "I'm going to find Luna."

"Harry--"

"See you later."

Morrighan was at the Order meeting. Apparently she'd been a member years ago, before she'd gone off to North America. Harry did his best to act like he hadn't noticed anything at breakfast, but he thought he was probably failing miserably. The more he tried to act like everything was normal, the less normal he felt.

It didn't help that Snape had taken a seat near hers. At least he'd taken a chair; he wasn't sharing her love seat--

Ugh. Love seat. Harry felt kind of sick, and what made it worse was that he knew he was being unfair. How would he feel if Draco or Snape tried to keep him from seeing Luna?

Not even that thought, however, could make him happy for Snape.

"Stop. Being. Ridiculous," murmured Draco. Whatever else he might have said was forestalled by the arrival of Hermione, who whooshed out of the large living room Floo just ahead of
Dumbledore.

She glanced around, clearly looking for something, then made a beeline straight to Draco, a brittle smile pasted on her face. "Well. I think you have a point. The area rugs in here are simply atrocious, and the rest of the house is worse, as I recall."

"I didn't think you'd be the type to rub it in," said Draco sourly.

"I meant that I'd changed my mind."

She sounded angry, though. Draco must have thought the same.

"With that attitude? I need you calm and contented or there's no point."

Hermione glared, then plunked herself down right next to him. "Oh, there's a point, all right. We'll take care of it straight away once the meeting has ended."

"We'll take care of it when the house has cleared," corrected Draco, more than a little snootily. "If I decide to proceed, that is. I haven't forgotten your absolutely atrocious acting at the Yule Ball. If you can't do any better than that--"

"Yes, you can simply ask the other five hundred Muggleborns you're on such excellent terms with--"

"What are you squabbling about?" interrupted Harry. "It's not redecorating. The last time I checked there wasn't a lot of acting involved."

"Ehem," said Dumbledore in a way that had all eyes turning to him as he stepped away from Moody and McGonagall, who'd taken up opposite ends of a short couch. "I have called this meeting to discuss an important, though by no means urgent matter. Our main operative inside the ranks of the Voldemort's inner circle has reported that Voldemort is now amassing considerable quantities of diatomaceous earth. As yet, he has no idea what this might mean. Nor do I."

He said the last in a manner that clearly solicited opinions.

Snape was the first to speak, leaning forward slightly in his chair as he addressed the group. "For those who do not know, diatomaceous earth is an obscure ingredient used in potions that largely fell from favour in the 1500s. In appearance it strongly resembles powdered chalk, but it is comprised of the ancient remains of plankton. It is used in no potion that I know of that brings harm to witches or wizards."

"And you'd know, wouldn't you?" asked Moody, the glare in his magical eye making him look maniacal.

Harry tried not to gape when McGonagall thrust an elbow sharply against Moody's side.

"Ach, woman!"

"That will be enough, Alastair," said Dumbledore in a firm tone.

"Yeah, Snape saved Harry from a fate worse than death!" exclaimed the twins almost in unison.

"And he could have been a much bigger git about some of the pranks we pulled in class," added George alone. "So stop using every meeting as an excuse to insult him."

"Yeah," echoed Fred. "Leave it to those of us that can do it with more style!"
"And that will be quite enough!"

*Every meeting?* thought Harry. He wondered how many he'd missed.

Draco flicked him a glance that said he was thinking the same thing.

"What about potions to harm Muggles?" asked Hermione.

At that, Draco jerked in place slightly, though his face took on a cold, distant look that reminded Harry of Lucius Malfoy.

"Diatomaceous earth is not harmful to human beings at all," Snape clarified, shaking his head. "Nor to mammals in general. In point of fact, its primary use in antiquity was in dry potions intended to eradicate bed bug infestations."

Dumbledore stroked his beard, clearly thinking that one over.

Was it Harry's imagination, or did Snape wince, just a tiny bit? "This is most likely so trivial as to be not worth mentioning--"

"Ah no, my dear boy. How can we know how to proceed unless we hear all views?"

Snape folded his hands together. "Truly, it is trivial, but it occurs to me to mention that diatomaceous earth is most often called by a moniker rather familiar to Voldemort: D.E."

"A rather tenuous connection, I will admit," murmured Dumbledore.

"Yes."

When Snape said nothing else, Dumbledore swept his eyes around the room. "Who can add to what Severus has told us?"

For a long moment, nobody said anything at all. Then Hermione spoke again, her voice hesitant for once. "Muggles still do use it to kill insects. Not just bed bugs, either. I think I read that it works against ants and fleas as well. It . . . uh, it gets beneath their exoskeleton and punctures them so they dehydrate."

"What the bloody hell does any of this have to do with the war?" demanded Moody.

"That is what we are here to discover, Alastair," said Dumbledore sharply.

"By telling the whole world what he's up to?" roared the old ex-Auror. "What happened to segmenting information, I'd like to know!"

Personally, Harry thought that Moody must be getting a little senile, talking to Dumbledore like that. True, Harry had done it too, but he'd only been fifteen and besides, he'd been provoked for a whole year.

Then again, how would Harry know what Dumbledore might have done to Moody in the last year?

"This is a case when I thought that synergy might serve us better," said the headmaster mildly. "I believe the Muggles call it brainstorming. I've seen it used in classes this year to amazing effect, as part of the new Muggle-tolerance curriculum."

Moody grumbled a bit as he waved a gnarled hand for the rest of them to get on with it.
There wasn't much left to say though, as almost nobody else had even heard of diatomaceous earth. McGonagall asked if Dumbledore had a sample that she could examine. She sprinkled a tiny amount of it onto a side table in the room and rapidly transfigured the whitish powder into things that looked like pale tennis balls with huge spikes all over them. Really, they looked like they'd kill anything when they were enlarged like that, but Harry trusted that Snape knew what he was talking about.

People bounced ideas around for a while after McGonagall's demonstration, bringing up everything from the London water system to bizarre theories about Apparition, but really, it was just a bunch of guesswork. The longer it went on the stupider the discussion got, at least as far as Harry could tell. After a while it seemed like other people must think so too; talk kind of petered out. Then Mrs Weasley said that it was high time they continued the discussion over the meal she'd prepared in case anyone hadn't yet eaten.

The meeting moved to the kitchen, spilling over into the dining room, but that was the end of any real brainstorming. Just as well -- Harry was starving by then and Mrs Weasley's cheese sauce was as good as ever. By the time Harry had had his fill, most of the others had said their good-byes and flooed away.

"A little more dessert, Harry dear?" asked Mrs Weasley, flicking her wand to hover a half-eaten cake within serving distance.

Harry was tempted, but by then he thought he might burst his zip.

"Severus?" Her voice was considerably less effusive when she continued. "Miss Morrighan?"

Harry wondered if she thought Snape had no business getting involved with someone, and then he wondered how Mrs Weasley would even know about it. Snape and Morrighan certainly hadn't been obvious during the meeting. In fact, if Harry hadn't seen them practically holding hands over breakfast, he wouldn't have noticed anything amiss.

It was more likely, he decided, that she simply didn't appreciate the way Morrighan's bizarre leather pantsuits looked almost painted on. Harry had heard enough comments by then -- it seemed like females in general were almost uniformly scandalised by the woman. On the other hand, males were almost uniformly approving.

Snape and Luna were the odd ones out. Harry wasn't sure she'd ever even noticed that Morrighan seemed allergic to normal teaching robes, and as for Snape . . . well, Harry didn't really know, did he? The man might have drooled when he first saw her.

Harry seriously doubted it.

They both declined more cake. Not long after, Mrs and Mrs Weasley bundled up all the remaining food and flooed away.

Maura Morrighan stood up, her hands fluttering a little as she dusted them against her hips and thighs as though to brush away crumbs. Harry wondered if he was being too cynical, but he couldn't help but suspect she was calling attention to the fact that she was as slender and trim as Molly Weasley was plump. Rather rude of her, really. Harry almost wanted to say something.

Draco beat him to it, though he certainly didn't say what Harry had in mind.

"Those opera tickets are for this coming Friday, Dad." He turned his head as though to include Morrighan in the conversation. "I gave Severus a pair of tickets to La Traviata for Christmas."
It was a good thing Harry didn't still have his cake plate. He might have thumped Draco over the head. As it was, he glared.

And held his breath, because Morrighan was going to hint now, wasn't she? She'd say that she just loved the opera and had wanted to see the new London production of La . . . whatever it was. Or maybe she'd be more subtle and ask who Snape was taking--

"I don't think Snape can get away from Hogwarts," Harry suddenly blurted, the tension inside him sort of snapping. "It's the busy season, you know, with students just back from holiday, and . . . um, and . . . well, it wouldn't be appropriate, would it, in his situation, and . . ."

Draco kicked him under the table.

Snape pinned Harry with a gaze that looked blacker than ever, his features hard and chiselled.

Harry almost flinched back in his chair. All right, all right, so he shouldn't have interfered! But Draco had interfered too, and Snape certainly wasn't objecting to that, was he?

"Why would it not be appropriate?" asked Snape, pronouncing each syllable so distinctly that he sounded like a judge pronouncing sentence on a prisoner bound for the gallows.

"Uh . . ." Harry scrambled like mad for something to say, some excuse. He certainly wasn't going to admit the real reason, which was that he'd never had a father before and he wasn't ready to share. That would make him sound about three years old, and he didn't need everybody else in the room to tell him that he shouldn't feel that way. He already knew that!

But he felt that way, all the same.

"Yes?" asked Snape, his voice even more ominous.

"Well, um . . ." Something finally came to him. It was feeble, but at least it was a reason that didn't point right back to him. "You're both teachers. At the same school. So . . . you know . . ."

Snape's slight sneer said he knew that Harry was lying and that he didn't appreciate it. Worse, it said that he was going to do something about it. Worse, it said that he was going to do something about it. He suddenly turned back to the woman sitting on his left, his expression clearing of rancour. "Would you do me the honour, Maura? We could enjoy a late supper afterwards and discuss the merits of the performance."

Harry thought she'd jump at the chance.

Instead, she flicked a glance his way and said in a low voice. "Severus, really. Harry is very clearly uncomfortable with--"

"I know precisely what he is uncomfortable with," said Snape, not bothering to look at Harry at all that time.

Harry's mouth dropped open. He knew? He knew and he was asking her out on a date anyway? And right in front of Harry!

"You know and you don't care!" he accused, hurt roiling through him in a way that was as surprising as it was painful. Was this what it was like to have a real family? Maybe he'd been better off without! "How can you--"

"Because I am a normal man with all that implies," said Snape in a voice that could freeze a river.
For a moment, Harry felt lost at sea. What the hell did it imply? The answer hit him a second later, feeling like a strong blow somewhere below his heart. Oh, God. Was he talking about--

Harry felt sort of sick at the thought.

"Stop looking like you need an anti-emetic," snapped Draco, snapping his fingers in front of Harry's face for good measure. "I say good for Dad, and if you don't say the same you're a hypocrite. We've all seen the way you look at Luna!"

"That's different--"

"Really, Severus," said Morrighan, sounding somewhere between distressed and amused. "I've no wish to cause family discord."

"I insist," retorted Snape in a hard tone.

"Perhaps this summer would be a better time--"

Snape rose to his feet, his hand extended toward her. "Perhaps we should discuss the matter in private. I'll see you back to Hogwarts." He turned a rather distant look on Harry and Draco. "The two of you can return on your own, I trust?"

"Oh, yes," said Draco blithely. "In fact, I'd planned to ask if I could stay here a bit later. Hermione's going to tour the house with me and give me a few ideas on redecorating. Don't worry about us. We'll all floo back together."

"Miss Granger is still here?"

Draco waved a hand. "She's already started looking around."

"Very well, then." Snape focussed his gaze on Harry. "We'll talk later."

"Why bother?" spat Harry, so furious that he shot to his feet.

Snape stared at him for a moment more, his features closing off still further.

A moment later the whoosh of the Floo announced their departure.

Harry groaned, fell back into his chair, and plonked his head straight down onto the hard wooden surface of the table.

"I must say, you didn't handle that at all well," said Draco. "Perhaps you're not as Slytherin as I thought. You do realise, I hope, that it was your ridiculous reaction that just shoved Dad straight at her."

"Shut up."

"If you don't want to egg him on in future I suggest you take it a little more calmly when they're headed out on a date--"

Harry lifted his head just enough to glare. "Shut up."

Draco, of course, didn't. "If I'd known he was this easy to manipulate, I'd have pretended to be upset about him having a romance months ago. Of course, months ago I would actually have been upset as Morrighan was still being an absolute bitch to me." His voice grew thoughtful, then. "Bit odd that he'd be so easy, though, don't you think? It's not like him. Perhaps he's more stuck on her
than we realise and he needed an excuse . . . hmm."

"I heard the Floo," said Hermione, looking left and right as she came into the dining room. "Is everybody else gone?"

"Dad and Morrighan just left. Together," added Draco. "It seems there may be a romance brewing. Harry's rather upset about it."

"Oh, Harry." Hermione gave him a bit of a wan smile. "Bit tough to take, eh?"

Harry didn't want to talk about it. He sat up straight again. "Why are you really here, Hermione?"

"She'd tell you," quipped Draco, "but then she'd have to kill you."

"What?"

Draco grinned. "Sorry. Miss Burbage has started reading us a spy novel where people are constantly saying that. You just wait here, Harry. Hermione and I are going to have a look around together and see to this little project of mine."

Harry didn't like the feeling that he was being steered to stay put. "I'll come too--"

"No, no, this requires a woman's touch. Literally."

Hermione rolled her eyes.

"And I need her able to concentrate. I think you'd be a rather significant distraction."

Harry sighed. There was obviously something fishy going on but he suddenly didn't care what "redecorating" might really mean. He couldn't even be arsed to care that Draco and Hermione clearly didn't want him around. "Fine, whatever," he said, slouching in his chair and waving for them to go.

Hermione looked a little reluctant, maybe because of Harry's reaction, but then she lifted her chin like she was spoiling for a fight and stomped out of the room.

"We might be a while--"

"Fuck off."

Draco put a hand on his shoulder. "I am sorry that the prospect of Severus having a social life distresses you so much--"

"Just go and redecorate," snapped Harry. "And take your time. I don't want to floo back through Snape's rooms and see the two of them snogging on the couch or something. Or can we floo to the Slytherin common room instead?"

"Best not. The cover story, remember."

Right. They were supposedly having dinner with Snape in his quarters. A family dinner.

_Ugh_. Harry wondered if Morrighan was going to be invited to those in future.

"Then take your time like I said."
Harry sat at the table for a while, morosely wondering if Snape had said good-night to Morrighan yet. Then that got too boring for words so he wandered upstairs to Sirius' old room.

It didn't affect him the way it had before, probably because Sirius didn't seem quite dead any longer. Not the way he had been, anyway. Harry could talk to him anytime he liked. He just had to pop a ribbon candy into his mouth so his spells would come out in Parseltongue.

At any rate, the room was just a room now.

Harry wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. He sat down on the bed to think about it, his thoughts wandering along twisted paths. Sirius had wanted Harry to live with him. That had never worked out, of course, but Harry was pretty sure that Sirius would have wanted to adopt him if it could have been done. What if he had? What if he'd never died, and he'd met a woman he liked? Would that have given Harry the same gnawing feeling in the gut that he was getting now?

Questions like that weren't very helpful since Harry just didn't have the answers.

Sighing, he wondered where Draco and Hermione were. He knew he'd said for them to take their time, but it must have been an hour at least. Well, if Harry wasn't welcome to participate in their "little project" then they could just come back here on their own sometime. Harry wasn't going to wait around all night!

He took the stairs two at a time and started shouting for them when he reached the ground floor.

Nobody answered, which left him going room to room. The search proved useless until he reached the library. Even before he could put his hand on the doorknob he knew that they must be in there -- and doing something a little more intense than redecorating, since the walls themselves were shaking. Harry took the last few steps at a run and tried to yank open the door, but it wouldn't budge.

As before, nobody answered his calls.

Then the door suddenly flew open and Hermione came tumbling out, panting. Her hair was mussed and her robes looked like they weren't hanging right, but Harry hardly had time to think about what that might mean. He was too busy staring at the screaming, frothing portrait propped up against the far wall.

Lucius Malfoy.

"Share my bloodline with a Mudblood harlot, will you?" the image railed, so loudly Harry was surprised the whole house hadn't been shaking. "Pollute what little pure blood remains with the filth of Muggle cesspools? Swim in a tide of sewage until she spawns and ruins the Malfoy line forever?"

"You're the one who ruined the bloodline," said Draco fiercely as he picked up the portrait with two hands, ignoring the way Lucius was bracing himself against the edges of the frame and trying to vault forwards out of it. "I'll be the one who restores it to a decent standing by making sure that your descendants can never again subscribe to the kind of idiocy that could destroy our whole world! From now on the Malfoy heirs will be no more than half-blooded, every single one!"
"Why, you--"

Draco's voice boomed with the kind of volume that can only come from magic as he spoke right over Lucius' words. "Yes, half-blooded children, and there's not a single thing you can do about it! And why is that, Father? Because you're dead, killed by a half-blood! That should show you how wrong you always were, but of course it won't! Your sheer idiocy knows no boundaries!"

The portrait screamed through most of that, but fell silent before Draco did.

"Nothing to say?" Draco taunted after a moment.

The image of Lucius was breathing hard, its eyes wild, but when it spoke it managed to remain surprisingly calm. "You don't know as much as you think, Draco."

"About?"

"Yourself." The portrait smiled, its expression settling into a kind of malicious glee that gave Harry chills. "But you will learn. And when you do, you'll know how very, very foolish you have been . . ." Lucius chuckled, his gaze reaching beyond Draco to settle on Harry. "Ah. Harry Potter. No glasses this time? My, my, your eyes must be quite recovered. My compliments to Severus. I suppose that next time I shall have to ply more than needles. A permanent shredding charm--"

Draco abruptly flipped the portrait around and slammed it up to face the wall, his wand moving rapidly as he murmured a series of sticking and silencing charms. Then he turned back to face Harry, his wand hand falling to his side.

He didn't say anything, though. It was left to Harry to step further into the room. "Are you all right?"

Draco ran a hand through his hair, mussing instead of smoothing it. "Yeah. I . . . fuck. That wasn't quite what I expected. And . . . I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to see him."

"You wanted to, though?"

"Not like that," said Draco, shaking his head as he sank down into the nearest chair. "I wanted to make him choke on his own bile. Could-- could you go and check on Hermione for me? I don't think I can move, but somebody ought to make sure she's all right. Though I don't know why she wouldn't be," he added in a wandering tone. "She . . . she was magnificent."

"Come away from the portrait."

Draco more or less staggered to the hallway, practically falling into the first chair he saw.

Harry locked the library with the strongest charms he knew and then set out in search of Hermione. She was sitting at the foot of the stairs, leaning against the wall with eyes closed, still as mussed as before. Now that Harry had time to really look at her though, the truth came to him at once -- helped along a little, maybe, by what the portrait had been screaming about. In other circumstances, he would probably have been annoyed with Draco. But he'd seen for himself that Hermione had agreed to the whole thing, so . . .

"Redecorating these days means a good long snog, I take it," he said casually as he sat down facing her, his legs stretched out in front of him.

She opened one eye, then the other. "Something like that."
"Bit twisted, though, with the portrait and all."

"You think?" Hermione made a face. "Draco wanted to throw Rhiannon in his father's face. I was the next best thing."

Harry had figured that much out for himself. "And the lies about redecorating?"

"That was his idea of an excuse so we could stay behind." She gave him a rueful glance. "I stuck to it with you because I was so annoyed he'd asked me for such an insulting favour. I didn't want to talk about it. The whole topic was just... humiliating."

"Humiliating?"

"To want to kiss me not for me, but just because I have one thing in common with his real love?" asked Hermione, staring at him like he'd grown two heads. "Of course it was humiliating! Just thinking about it makes me want to slap him again!"

Harry blinked. Maybe this was why he liked Luna so much. As strange as her pronouncements could sometimes be, they never left him feeling like girls were another species entirely. "If it was so humiliating, why'd you change your mind and agree?"

Hermione gave a strangled laugh, the sound caught somewhere between despair and reluctant amusement. "Well, after I'd thought about it for a while, I decided that what he really deserved was to be humiliated right back. I was going to kiss him until he saw stars and forgot there ever was a Rhiannon. Until he wished he'd never approached me this way and lost his chance!"

Oh. Wounded pride. Harry could understand that. It reminded him of the way he'd tried so hard not to let his bruises show after Dudley had pummelled him.

Hermione's face crumpled. "But it all went wrong. I was the one who forgot about Rhiannon. I even forgot about the portrait. About... everything. I'm not even sure how long it took, but then those shrill screams finally penetrated, and I realised his hand was on my... er..."

All right, maybe Harry would have to talk to Draco. A snog was one thing, especially if Hermione had agreed. But it didn't sound like she'd agreed to a grope!

Harry could deal with that later, though. Right now, Hermione was what mattered. "He told me to make sure you were all right," said Harry. "Are you?"

"No," said Hermione in a low voice.

"You can't let the vicious things a dead man has to say upset you--"

"Not that." Hermione turned her face away. "It's nothing. I'll be all right."

That wasn't like her. Hermione was a fighter. "Come on, what's wrong? Did he-- did he do more than just put his hand somewhere?"

"I'll be all right, I said!"

Harry held up his hands in mock surrender. "None of my business, got it. I only asked because the two of you were gone so long. I mean, just how much of a show did Draco think the portrait deserved?"

Another wave of colour washed into Hermione's face. "Oh, that. Well, first we had to practice. So
it wouldn't look like we were just friends. I should have known from that alone . . . never mind. But then anyway, when we went into the library, the frame was empty so we kept practicing while we waited--" Her hand suddenly gripped Harry's arm. "Oh. Oh, no. I should have -- well, I would have realised earlier if I hadn't been so distracted!"

"Realised what?"

"The frame was empty, Harry!"

"So?"

"Oh, that's right. You don't remember. But he hasn't got another portrait, Harry! Draco told me that ages ago when he first started moaning about not being able to fling Rhiannon in his face. So where was he?"

Harry shrugged. How should he know?

"What if he visited the only other artwork that portrays him?"

"You just said he doesn't have another portrait--"

"The statue," she said, shaking the arm she was still holding. "The statue at Hogwarts! What if he's popping into it all the time and listening to see what he can find out? What if he's seen himself crossing the grounds on the way to a Board of Governor's meeting?"

"Remus," gulped Harry.

"Remus," echoed Hermione, nodding.

For a moment that seemed to stretch out endlessly, the two of them stared at one another, horrified. Then they were both on their feet, running.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Forty: ????

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
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Revelations

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters or this fictional universe. JK Rowling, some publishers, and some film companies own everything. I'm not making anything from this except a hobby.

Snape was alone when they flooed into his quarters, the three of them tumbling over one another as they fell out of his large fireplace . . . except, it wasn't the three of them, Harry noticed at once. Hermione was missing.

"The wards," said Draco in the next moment.

"The wards on Grimmauld Place?" asked Snape sharply, his black eyes looking as though he were assessing them both for damage.

"No, here. You'll need to adjust them to admit Hermione."

"Miss Granger had instructions to floo back to the Headmaster's Office--""

"Well, she tried to come with us," snapped Draco. "And she's probably stuck in there spinning still! And so?"

Snape's nostrils flared, but then he went ahead and waved his wand, muttering something long in Latin.

Hermione came tumbling out, making such a hash of her entrance that it made Harry's early Floo efforts look graceful. Covered in ash from head to toe, she more-or-less somersaulted halfway across the living room floor before she managed to come to a halt and sit up, dust billowing from her as she wheezed.

Draco rushed to her side and knelt down, his hands hovering here and there like he wanted to check her for injuries but wasn't sure where. "Are you all right? Can I--"

She knocked his hands away and struggled to her feet.

"Aguamenti" said Snape calmly, water pouring from his wand into a teacup he'd transfigured the moment before. He extended it to Hermione without a word, and then turned to the side and began casting spells toward the Floo.

"More?" asked Draco when Hermione lowered the cup. "Perhaps a freshening charm?"

"Nothing from you," she retorted, though she must have thought it a good idea since she proceeded to cast one on herself. Then she cleared her throat. "I'm sorry to intrude, Professor Snape, but this is urgent. It seems that--"

"We have to get Remus out of Malfoy Manor, now," said Harry. "He could be in terrible danger!"

"Along with my mother, Severus," added Draco. "If the Dark Lord has found out about this masquerade he'll think her an accomplice--"

Snape held up a hand. "What has happened?"

Draco suddenly shoved his hands deep into his robe pockets. "I broke the enchantments you had placed on Lucius' portrait."
Snape rounded on him, but before the man could say anything, Draco kept right on. "When I
turned it around, the frame was empty, Severus! But he doesn't have another portrait, so where has
he been going? Into his statue, conveniently located right here on the grounds where he can see
himself coming and going?"

"Ah." Snape was still glowering, but he nodded brusquely and motioned for them all to take a seat.
"I can understand Harry and Miss Granger's concerns, Draco. But you were raised your whole life
in the wizarding world. You should know as well as anyone that statues and portraits are entirely
different things. Statues cannot host the spirits of the dead."

"The statues in the Ministry Atrium came to life right in front of me--"

"Because the headmaster animated them. Those figures do not even represent individuals, Harry.
They are merely idealisations."

"Oh," said Hermione, flushing a little as she fidgeted on the sofa. "I didn't know. They're both art,
so I thought that surely--" She gave a strained little laugh.

Draco wasn't laughing, though. "No, you don't understand," he said, his hands flashing through the
air in agitation. "That's not a normal statue, is it--"

"No, you don't understand," said Snape, leaning forward in his chair, his black eyes fixed on Draco.
The look on his face was terrible, so much so that Harry reared back on the couch even though it
wasn't directed at him. "You were given express instructions to leave that blasted portrait alone
unless you and Lupin needed to interrogate it, together, to garner information for his mission!"

"No, I wasn't! I was told not to be alone with it, and I wasn't--"

Harry had thought Snape looked frightening the moment before, but that was nothing to the rage
that consumed his features when he heard that. "You've dragged your brother into this, have you?
Your brother with amnesia, no less! I did not think you could be any more selfish, Draco, but you
have managed to prove me wrong--"

"Shut up!" shouted Harry. "He's a good brother! He didn't drag me into it, told me to keep me
away, in fact!"

Snape went still and swivelled his head to look at Harry, his dark eyes still just as black, but
somehow less dark, suddenly. "You didn't see the portrait?"

"Well, I did, but that wasn't Draco's fault--"

The man's eyes narrowed. "Did it speak to you?"

Harry huffed. "It's Malfoy, so what do you think?" When Snape just kept staring, Harry shrugged.
"Threatened a permanent shredding charm on my eyes for the next time--"

"Draco!" roared Snape, baring his teeth that time, looking like he was just an inch away from the
Unforgivables.

"None of this fucking matters!" screamed Draco as he shot to his feet. "Don't you understand?
That's not a normal statue, it's Lucius' own dead body turned to stone! Is it so hard to believe he has
a special affinity for it? He was leaving his portrait and he hasn't got another! He's been going
somewhere, and my mother could be dying under the Dark Lord's wand as we speak, and you want
to yell at me because I broke your rules! I'll do the ten million lines later, all right? For now we
have to get off our arses and do something!"
The fire in the hearth abruptly flared hotter, flames soaring up to lick at the mantle above, the line of goblets standing there suddenly appearing to glow orange from within.

As Snape stood up and lunged toward Draco, Harry tried to jump up to put himself between them. He wasn't going to let Snape hurt his brother, he just wasn't. Hermione's hand, though, shot out to grab the edge of his robe. She yanked him back down and gave a quick shake of her head.

Oh.

Snape wasn't attacking Draco at all. He'd dragged him into an embrace, folding Draco so closely against him that Draco's robes and his seemed to merge into an endless sea of fluttering black, with only a shock of pale blond hair to interrupt the tableau. Draco was struggling, but Snape just held him tighter. After a moment more, the roaring flames settled down to something approaching normal.

And then, Harry understood.

Accidental magic. By seventh year, of course, wizards were supposed to have that well under control. It should erupt only in the most extreme of circumstances . . . which these clearly were. Fear and stress had pushed Draco over the edge, but Snape had known how to pull him back.

"My m- m- mother," Draco was gasping now. "Severus, please--"

"We'll discuss the matter with the headmaster," said Snape, one hand moving in circles along Draco's spine. "This is Order business, after all."

"All-- all right." Draco dragged in a huge breath and stepped back from Snape, who regarded him gravely for a moment before stepping over to the Floo to request the headmaster's presence.

"I see the concern," murmured Dumbledore as he stroked his beard not five minutes later. "An odd idea, to be sure, but then again, your father has several times mentioned your intuitive grasp of magic, Draco my boy. So perhaps . . ." He lapsed into thought again, his wizened old eyes closing behind the half-moon spectacles perched near the end of his nose.

"I'm sure your mother's fine," said Harry quietly after a moment.

Draco turned in his chair. "We can't know that."

"We can know, however, that Lupin hasn't seen your mother for many months," said Snape. "Not since very shortly after he began his masquerade. Her messages indicate she's still on the Continent, which takes her somewhat out of Voldemort's usual sphere of operation."

"Whereas Remus is in direct danger every day," said Harry, glancing anxiously at Dumbledore. He understood why Draco's thoughts had flown straight to worries about his mother, but Remus was the one who really mattered. "Shouldn't we pull him off this mission now that the risks are so
much higher? What if the statue is sending messages to Voldemort by just waiting until a slimy Slytherin stops by to chat? What if Lucius can even charm the owls to--"

"What if we wait until the headmaster has finished thinking?" asked Snape.

"Yes, why not wait for aeons?" added Draco, his eyes glinting. "Seeing as this couldn't possibly be urgent. Why, I don't even remember why we rushed back through the Floo--"

Snape sighed. "You do realise that Narcissa's decision to decamp to the Continent could be fortuitous? Even in this circumstance. She hardly looks like an accomplice to the plot when she's been so conveniently absent from Britain."

"Well, there is that--"

"Ehem." Dumbledore's gaze swept the room. "I think the best course of action at this point is to summon Remus Lupin to speak with us. That may take some time as he is not always . . . accessible, shall we say. In the meantime, Severus and I will discreetly examine whether or not the statue has developed any magical resonance that might suggest a link to the portrait." His voice grew more stern as he continued. "You three will keep entirely away from the statue. If Lucius is indeed able to inhabit it at will, there is no telling what else he may be able to accomplish with it."

Harry gnashed his teeth. "Why not just destroy it? You know, eliminate the possibilities, whatever they are?"

"Because we may be able to turn this to our advantage, of course." Dumbledore beamed. "Allowing the statue to overhear incorrect information, for example. But for that to work, things must continue on as usual. Lucius is bound to become suspicious if Harry Potter and his friends begin lurking about, hmm?"

Yeah, Harry could see that. "But Remus is what matters. If you decide the statue is . . . linked, don't you have to pull him out?"

Dumbledore walked over and patted Harry's shoulder. "That is something to discuss with the man himself, Harry."

"But--"

"The matter is immaterial until such time as Lupin can be reached," said Snape in tones of finality.

Harry wasn't having it. "No, we have to pull him out! Look, the Order has ways to communicate instantly even if there's no Floo nearby. Send him a silver message warning him about all this, even if we don't yet know if it's true--"

Snape's gaze hardened. "Lupin may at this very minute be kneeling at Voldemort's feet, Harry. Should we throw caution to the winds to warn him when that very caution may mean the difference between life and death?"

"No, but--" Harry suddenly slouched. "Shite. I guess you do have to wait for a safe way to get in touch. I just . . . I wish we had a way to reach him, that's all."

"And I wish I had a way to reach my mother," said Draco glumly. "Or that she could at least be bothered to owl me."

"I'm sure she's thinking about you, Draco," said Hermione.
She'd been silent for so long -- probably thinking, Harry surmised -- that he'd almost forgotten she was there. Snape stared at her for a moment and then seemed to come to some sort of a decision. "Why don't you walk Miss Granger home, Draco? Two prefects together should help to quell any rumours that she is wilfully ignoring the curfew rules."

All right, that was just strange, as suggestions went. It was Hermione who pointed out the obvious. "Harry's a prefect too, and he actually lives in Gryffindor, whereas Draco would have to make his way back here--"

Was it Harry's imagination, or did she sound a little bit panicked about the whole thing? Like she didn't want to be alone with Draco after that snog?

"Yeah, I can walk Hermione--"

"But I want to," said Draco.

Harry glared, not sure what to think at this point. "Like you wanted to redecorate? Like that?"

"That's none of your bloody business--"

"Well, walking her home is going to be none of yours, because I'm going to!"

"You," said Snape in a hard tone, "will stay here. I hadn't thought to do this tonight, but as you are here, we may as well hash out a few things."

A few things? Ha. One, more likely. Snape didn't like the way Harry had reacted to the idea of him going to the opera with Morrighan. Well, that was just too bad. It wasn't Harry's fault that things were changing around him so fast he could hardly keep up.

And anyway, if Snape wanted to start prancing off on dates even when he knew full well -- had admitted, even -- that he knew it made Harry feel flayed raw just now . . . well, there wasn't much Harry could do to stop it, was there? He'd tried his best, made it so clear as day that he was uncomfortable that even Morrighan had caught wind of it, and Snape couldn't have been more obvious about his own point of view. He didn't care how Harry felt, full stop.

Huh. Harry knew he didn't know much about how families were supposed to work, but this couldn't be it, could it?

On the other hand, maybe Harry was the one in the wrong here. Snape was entitled to have a romantic interest if he wanted one. Harry knew that, but when he pictured it happening, he just felt cold all over.

"There's nothing to hash out," he said, pulling his robes more tightly about him. "I told you what I think and you don't care."

"Ah, familial discord," said Dumbledore as if the words came from a fond memory. "I see that I have overstayed my welcome. I shall leave you and Harry to make a hash of it."

Harry wondered if the headmaster knew that his phrase didn't mean the same as "hash it out," or if he did know and he was making some kind of point. But then again, Harry still wasn't sure exactly what the man meant by offering sherbet lemons all the time.

"Good night, Albus," said Snape in a long-suffering tone.

Draco turned to Hermione, his posture stiff, but for all that, he offered her his arm in true
gentlemanly fashion. "Shall we?"

Hermione looked at his arm and then looked up into his face.

Then, she snorted rather eloquently and stomped off on her own, slamming the front door behind her.

Draco looked a cross between offended, stunned, and stung. At a motion from Snape, though, he hurried after her, closing the door with nothing more than a gentle thud.

"Do I want to know what all that is about?"

"You'll have to ask Draco," said Harry, crossing his arms. He wasn't about to blab about Draco's reasons for dealing with the portrait, even if they weren't very good ones. Trying to enrage Lucius Malfoy on purpose -- even a dead Lucius Malfoy -- sounded just plain stupid to him, particularly in this case. Draco wasn't even with Rhiannon Miller any longer, for pity's sake.

Besides, Harry knew more now than he had before. Draco had been under strict orders to leave the portrait alone. Harry didn't really want to get him into even more trouble, though he still did plan to find out just what exactly he'd done to Hermione that would have her looking so . . . so . . .

Harry didn't even know.

"Oh, I do believe I shall be asking multiple questions of your brother," said Snape in a silky voice.

"Yeah, well just remember that if it turns out the statue has been in touch with Voldemort, it's only because of Draco that we know about it. So you can't punish him too harshly."

Snape stared at him for a moment, then appeared to dismiss his anger with Draco. For now, at least. "How are your arms?"

"My . . . huh?" It took Harry another moment to put it together. "Oh, the needle thing? Uh, all right. Er . . . you thought what Lucius said might have made me . . ."

"I think it was his poisonous invective last year that first spurred you to that action, yes."

"Maybe just as well that I can't remember things, then."

Another long stare. This time Harry started to feel like something in a jar. Then he started to feel about two feet tall, mostly because he knew that Draco was right. Harry did have Luna, and he didn't think that ought to interfere with also being in a family. So why did he think that Snape couldn't have a love interest and a family both?

Besides, Snape had been alone for a really long time. "Look, I apologize, all right?" he said finally. "I know it's your business if you want to . . . uh, get into something with Professor Morrighan."

Snape abruptly turned away, bending down to pull a bottle from a low cabinet. When he came back to Harry, he was carrying two small glasses of a vivid yellow liquid. "Galliano," he explained, handing one glass to Harry and clinking them together. "Cheers."

Harry tasted it uncertainly. "What are we drinking to?"

Snape sank into a chair and downed the rest of his glass in one go. "Considering the subject matter? I feel a need to relax." He cast Harry a baleful glance. "I prefer Galliano to Veritaserum, at any rate."
The reference to truth serum threw Harry. Really, he could only understand it one way. "You mean you're going to lie to me?"

"I mean nothing of the sort!" snapped Snape. "Sit down and drink your Galliano."

"It's pretty vile--"

"Sit down!"

Harry swallowed back a sharp retort. He'd already apologised, so he wasn't sure what else there was to say. "No, I think I'll just be going--"

"Harry." Snape's voice that time was more moderate. "We need to work this out."

Harry didn't see things that way. "No, it's fine now. It's my problem. I know that--"

Something in the man's bleak gaze got to Harry, then. He took his seat without another word and even sipped at the Galliano, just in case it would help him get through what looked to be a pretty embarrassing conversation.

"You have apologised," said Snape, drawing in a breath as if to fortify himself. "You have also said that we should try for being friends, so I suppose I could do worse than to learn from your example and do the same. I apologise as well. You were clearly distraught that I did not take your . . . attitudes, into account earlier. Inviting Maura to the opera while still in your presence was insensitive, to say the least. At that moment, though, I was rather incensed with you."

"Yeah, I could tell." No wonder, either. How would Harry feel if Snape started trying to keep him from seeing Luna?

Snape gave a brusque nod, his fingers tightening on the arms of his chair. "I should not have allowed myself to grow angry. Not when I know that certain . . . revelations have changed your view of me in . . . fundamental ways."

Harry shook his head. "No. I mean, it's kind of hard for me, Severus, but I do understand about the chameleon. I even understand why you didn't tell me about all that a lot sooner, though I still think you should have. But it hasn't changed the way I view you. I mean, not fundamentally . . . what?"

Snape was staring at him like he had two heads. "I was not referring to the chameleon."

But what, then? Harry thought back. It seemed unlikely, but-- "Oh, you mean how I learned pretty fast after the Quidditch match that you had held me down for the needles? How many times do I have to tell you that there's nothing to forgive? And anyway, I can't see what that could have to do with going out to the opera . . ."

"Are you truly so uncomfortable that you feel you must dissemble in this way?"

"Dissemble in what way? I don't even know what you're talking about!"

Snape suddenly pinched the bridge of his nose as he gave a deep sigh. "What my father did to me, Harry. That is what we are talking about."

Harry blanched. He'd tried not to think of the horrible words that had shot from Snape under Veritaserum. They were just too awful to contemplate, even if sometimes it seemed like they'd been burned into his memory. *He raped me time after time. He experimented on me to enhance his own artistic talent, degrading me sexually, feeding on my physical and emotional pain, channelling it*
into dark rituals that he assured me would most certainly make it all worthwhile. I was more his tool than his son! The mere sight of him was enough to make me shudder with dread--

The man's own father. Own father. Harry couldn't wrap his head around it, or imagine the kind of wasteland that Snape had endured growing up. It made his own time with the Dursleys seem like a cakewalk. Actually, it made Harry really ashamed that he'd spent so much time being angry and resentful. He didn't have much to complain about.

Not thinking about things, though, didn't make them go away. Harry knew that, and if Snape needed to talk . . .

"All right," he said, trying not to look as braced as he felt. "Let's talk about that, then. Uh . . ." He tried to think of what Marsha might say at this point, but he was drawing nothing but blanks. Then it came to him. "Fundamental ways, you said. It changed you in fundamental ways?"

"No, you idiot child. Or . . . yes," Snape said a moment later, grudgingly. "I would be lying if I claimed that those events left no mark at all. I was bitter to my core and enraged with the whole world by the time I arrived at Hogwarts. I was already determined to amass the kind of power that would guarantee I could never be subjected to the like again. I can see that in many ways, those events shaped the man I became. The man I still remain today, at least in part."

"Yeah," said Harry thickly. "I mean--" He stopped, because it was just so wrong to draw any comparisons, but Snape waved for him to continue. "Well, you know about how my relatives treated me, I think? And, well, Hermione says I have a saving-people thing, and I wonder if I'd have it quite the same way if I hadn't been stuck with people that made me wish I could be saved. Except, I feel bad even mentioning it, Severus, since I know I had it really good compared to--"

"Don't say that." Snape spoke in a low, fierce voice, leaning forward to pin Harry with his gaze. "Not ever. Abuse is abuse."

The man seemed to be waiting for a response, so Harry nodded.

"Say it. Abuse is abuse."

Harry swallowed. He agreed in one way, but not in another. He was sure, though, that he didn't want to argue about it. "Abuse is abuse. And . . . uh, for what it's worth, I'm not sure if I said that night . . . I am really sorry about yours."

Snape just looked wry about that, and why not? It wasn't as though Harry's sorries could do much at this point.

"You weren't right, though," he had to add. "You said these revelations changed the way I see you. That's not true, unless you meant that I can understand you better. You know, about why you joined the Death Eaters to begin with? But I don't think that's what you meant."

"No," said Snape in a clipped tone. "I meant the way you almost immediately began to treat me differently. As if -- well, you have made it very obvious that you think of me as . . . as something damaged, perhaps."

Harry blinked. "But I don't think that!"

Snape gave him a glance that could only be interpreted as pitying. "Of course you do. You broadcast it with almost every breath."

"Every breath?"
"Well, perhaps not that often," Snape admitted, snatching up his empty glass and staring down into it. "But when we were done talking that night, I invited you to stay to play Wizard's Scrabble. I invited you to sleep in your own room again. I even bribed you with the promise that staying home would keep you closer to the possibility of news regarding the missing Miss Lovegood. And still, you refused. You had been more than willing to spend time with me in Devon, but once you knew about . . . you could not get away fast enough."

"Oh, no," said Harry, feeling awful. He remembered that night, the confusion that had swamped him at the end. "I had to leave, yeah. But that didn't have anything to do with you. Or not with your childhood, I mean. It was just because I was feeling so messed up. I was beginning to think I really did have a family in you and Draco, but it was all so new that I didn't even know I was thinking it, not until a bit later. I just knew that I'd found out that you and Draco were talking about me when I wasn't around, and it made me really uncomfortable. I had all these emotions that I couldn't even identify, and I didn't know where to put them, so I sort of rushed off so I wouldn't have to decide. That's all. Honestly, it is."

Snape glanced up, but only briefly. "The next day you could not even bear to look at me during meals. Nor very often on the days that followed."

The next day . . . "I was worried about Luna!" exclaimed Harry. "No offense, Severus, but it's a little self-centred, you know, to see me so distracted and assume that you're the cause. And then Luna was back and still, all I could think about was her. If you've ever been in love, you know the feeling--"

"You assume that because of my childhood," interrupted Snape in a harsh whisper, "I dare not ever fall in love."

"No, no, no!" said Harry, as vehemently as he could without shouting. "That's not what I said and not what I meant, either! Of course you can! You're just as deserving as anyone else, just as--"

Harry suddenly stopped talking, feeling like some kind of conclusion was drifting just out of reach. Something . . . Marsha would know what it was . . .

"Oh, my God," said Harry slowly, a terrible sort of understanding blossoming inside him. He suddenly wished that Marsha were here, because she would know the best way to handle this, and Harry was almost guaranteed to muck it up. He couldn't leave things like this, though. Not now that he knew what was probably really going on.

Standing slowly, Harry crossed the room to take a seat much closer to Snape. And then he thought that wasn't good enough at all, so he leaned forward to grasp the man by both forearms. It was an awkward position, since they were seated at an angle rather than straight across from one another, but it would have to do.

"Severus," he said gently. Very gently. "I'm no expert, but you know I've had some therapy lately. And the way you're acting, the way you're talking . . . I think you're doing this thing they call projecting."

He just got a blank look for that, or perhaps a stunned look since Harry didn't reach out and touch him all that often, after all. Either way, Harry tried again. "You know, you expect me to assume that you're somehow . . . unworthy of romance, because somewhere deep down inside, you wonder about it yourself."

Snape ripped his arms from Harry's grasp and turned his face away, his breathing coming fast and hard. "I most certainly do not!"
"But listen to yourself," urged Harry, getting off his chair so he could keep facing Snape. It meant kneeling on the floor, but no matter. "When I wouldn't stay that night, when I didn't notice you in the Great Hall, you expected it to mean something specific. But why *that*? You're an intelligent man. I'm sure you could come up with a hundred reasons for me to act a certain way. But you took that one and ran with it."

Harry smiled a little, then, remembering what had come next. "It was only a few days later, you know, when I figured myself out better and realised that we really are a family, Severus. I gave you the map, and then I tried to get myself invited down for tea and you refused. You were really . . . standoffish. And you were the same way yesterday when I sat with you to cheer on Draco and the Slytherins, and then again last night when I brought Luna 'round before the party." Harry swallowed and looked down. "Um, I actually thought you were probably still pretty annoyed with me for making you take Veritaserum."

A finger on his chin urged his face back up. "I offered that. You did not 'make' me. And if I was standoffish, it was because I was quite uncomfortable to be around you, knowing as I did that you thought . . . somehow less of me."

"But I didn't think that," Harry reminded him. "That came from you. It would have to, right? Why would I have given you the map and told you that I knew we were a family right then if you'd just gone down in my estimation, Severus? You know, I should be really offended that you even thought that. Don't you know me at all?"

"I know you," Snape said gruffly. "My Gryffindor son."

Harry suddenly felt awful. "Not so Gryffindor. I . . . uh, you know with the map? Well, the night before I'd told Ron and Hermione that I knew I was your son. I mean, knew it was real, on my side too. But then, I'm such crap with speeches that when I tried to tell you, I kept saying 'family' instead of the other. And what I'd meant to say was that . . ." He shifted on his knees, just a little. "I can't remember how it all came about, but I really do care about you, Severus. Like a son. No, I mean, *as* a son. And I would never, ever think less of you because of horrible things somebody else did. I just . . . wouldn't."

Snape looked stunned. Reaching out, he very carefully tufted a single finger through Harry's messy hair. And then he sat back, his dark eyes contemplative. "But you did object most strenuously to my plan to take Maura to the opera."

*Maura.* Harry tried not to show how the first name bothered him. Especially now, when there had obviously been so many misunderstandings. Serious ones.

"I thought," said Snape slowly, "that the root of your objection was that you viewed me as . . . tainted. That you thought I had no right to spread that taint to others . . . sexually."

Harry could have done without the last word. He'd known what Snape meant. But maybe Harry wasn't the only one leery of misunderstandings. "That idea never crossed my mind."

"And it did cross mine." Snape's throat bobbed a little. "Very well. I take your point about . . . projection. At the very least I have been oversensitive on certain matters."

"I'm still a little peeved that you could think I'd look at you cross-ways," admitted Harry.

"I never did think that, not the first time it came up. The topic was uncomfortable, but I trusted both you and Draco. This time . . ." Snape lifted his shoulders slightly. "I am much less able to predict what you may do."
Harry could accept that. "All right, then. Friends, again. Or, um, father and son?"

"You sound like you doubt it still."

"Well, I'd understand if you were getting pretty sick of having to deal with all my issues," said Harry, moving back to his seat. *Ouch.* His knees were really sore.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "It rather seems the opposite tonight."

Well, nothing for it, then. Harry wasn't about to turn tail and run, not when he knew what it might do to Snape. The man didn't need to look back on this conversation and realise Harry hadn't cleared up the bit about Snape's upcoming date. "Um, that's only because I haven't yet told you what made me behave so badly tonight. I, er . . ." His face flaming, he quickly looked away. "I didn't want you to date her because . . . oh *God,* I don't want to say this. But I guess I'd better. Um . . . I think I'm a little jealous."

Snape sat stone still for the space of five seconds, and then he cleared his throat. "Ah. That would be awkward, yes. And entirely understandable why you could not say as much in front of her. The two of us being teachers, indeed." When Harry looked up, the man had a look on his face that was . . . gently amused? "Well, she is an extraordinarily beautiful woman, and one who takes no pains to hide her many attractions, so I suppose it is only to be expected that you would have developed . . . will you be offended if I term it a crush?"

Harry gaped. "I'm not jealous like that! Oh, ick, no, that's just completely gross, she's old enough to be my *mother!* And I love Luna, or hadn't you realised that?"

"You've certainly never stated it quite so bluntly," retorted Snape. "Then I must admit myself perplexed. I would expect Draco, not you, to be the one with objections to Maura. What did you mean about being jealous?"

Harry ducked his head again. "It's stupid. It's unbearably stupid, Severus. I-- I-- just this week I finally wrapped my head around the idea that I have a-- a-- a dad now, and I didn't like the idea that you were already running off, that's all. Which you aren't, all right? I get that. But there's this stupid part of me that thinks you are."

"Oh," said Snape, clearly at a loss for words. Harry almost snorted, since it would be such a first.

"Yeah, bet you never expected to hear that--"

"Perhaps I should have. You used to worry quite incessantly about 'unadoption.'"

"Oh, before I begged for it, you mean?" asked Harry, wishing his voice would come out less brittle.

Snape ignored that remark. "I could say that I am most definitely not 'running off,' but your thinking mind already understands that. Which means, I suppose, that I'm not quite sure how to reassure you."

*Easy,* Harry wanted to say. *Break your date.*

He couldn't say that, though. It would be so, so unfair to Severus, and besides, it would make Harry look like a selfish, insecure prat. And, well . . . part of him definitely was one, but he didn't think it was a fantastic way to be, so he didn't really want to indulge that part.

Except, he did.
"Well," Snape said after a moment of silence. "Maura noted your reluctance for herself. I dare say she will understand why La Traviata may be ill-advised at this time."

He didn't even sound annoyed about it, and that only made Harry feel even more ashamed of himself. "No," he managed to croak. "You . . . you go ahead. You sound like you really like her."

And then some. Extraordinarily beautiful . . . many attractions . . . For Snape, that was close to waxing poetic! And anyway, Harry had just said that he cared about Snape, and if he meant that even one-tenth as much as he should, how could Harry be the one to wreck this for him?

"Maura," said Snape firmly, "is an old flame. That much I will admit. But you are my son. I do hope you have at least some inkling as to what that means to me."

Harry swallowed, because this was the hard part. "Yeah. Uh . . . enough to do what's best for me."

"Yes. Absolutely."

Nothing for it, then. Harry steeled himself. "What's best is for you to, uh, keep your date. And not just because you might resent me later if . . . no, I mean, I probably need to see for myself that it will be all right, you know? To build up some trust, which is very obviously lacking if I'm still basically worried about unadoption. You know, it's like how I had to go up on a broom to get rid of my fear of flying."

"You don't have to extend your 'saving-people' thing to my relationship with Maura, Harry," Snape chided.

"Fine, then," snapped Harry. "Break your date and make me a laughingstock. Both Draco and Hermione know how I feel about this, and if you don't go to the opera they're going to know that you decided to coddle me like an infant instead of expecting me to handle it. Just so you know, Draco probably won't ever shut up, not when he knows you're pretty well stuck on her." Harry paused, but only for an instant. "And I know it too, Severus! I see the way you look at her! I really don't want to be responsible for it not working out if she's the one--"

Snape sighed. "What do you want me to do, Harry?"

Was the man deaf? "Go on your date! And go on another one if you like her! And let me learn to live with it!"

Snape stared at him for a moment more, but Harry didn't feel any touch of Legilimency.

"All right, then," the man finally said. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure." Could Harry help it if his tone was surly? He was doing his best, and it wasn't easy.

"As that's settled . . . " Snape reached across and gave his knee a gentle pat. "It's quite late. So will it be Gryffindor or Slytherin tonight?"

Harry had been planning on Slytherin, so much so that when he'd offered to walk Hermione to the Tower, he'd expected to hoof it all the way back to the dungeons. In fact, he wanted to sleep there quite a bit more in future, though of course his motives weren't the ones Draco believed.

For tonight, though, he thought he'd better do something else entirely. After all, he understood now that he wasn't the only one who needed a little reassurance about his place in this family.

"Actually, I was thinking I should just use my room here. You know, since it's so late and I
wouldn't want to wake up everybody else in the dormitory. Either one, I mean." It was an effort, but Harry managed not to ask if his plan was all right. He thought it would probably be better, all around, to simply make himself at home. Snape had been telling him to do that for . . . well, basically ever since he'd woken up with amnesia.

Snape wasn't a Slytherin for nothing, though. He saw straight through him. "You're trying to make up for the times when I felt you were avoiding me."

Harry thought about denying it, but clearly, that would be a waste of time. "Yeah, I am," he retorted. "And you should let me."

Snape smiled, ever so slightly. "Quite right," he agreed. "I should."

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Forty-One: Faculty Affairs

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------------------------
Harry stretched, yawned, and stretched again, bit by bit becoming more aware of his surroundings. His sheets and blankets felt a bit . . . off. They weren't softer or heavier or scratchier; it was nothing he could specifically point to. They just seemed different, somehow.

The moment that fact really made it through to his conscious mind, he sat bolt upright, his right hand shooting out to snatch up his wand even as he scanned and assessed his surroundings, his gaze darting back and forth to seek out danger.

Stone walls looking strangely like they'd been melted at some point. Gleaming brass sconces mounted toward the ceiling. Two imposing wooden doors set into arches. A bed in Slytherin colours, while his own was hung with curtains in crimson and gold--

*Oh.* Memory came rushing back then, making Harry feel simultaneously foolish and relieved that nobody had been around to see his panicked display. Of course, he wasn't in the habit of waking up all alone in Snape's quarters, even if he'd seen this room a few times before.

*This room.* Harry swallowed, wondering why it was so hard to think of it differently. He should be calling it his room, probably. Or maybe even his home--

For some reason, his brain skittered completely away from that phrase. He couldn't even think of the cottage in Devon that way, and he'd spent loads more time there.

A quick rap on the door snapped him out of his thoughts. "Harry? Are you getting ready for your first lesson?"

Right, it was a school day. "Yeah," he called, quickly casting *Tempus*. It didn't surprise him too much to find out that he still had plenty of time to get dressed and make it to the Great Hall for breakfast. Yeah, Snape wouldn't think it was a good idea to sleep in and then have to rush about to avoid being tardy to class. "Out in a bit, Professor," he added, and then could have kicked himself for using the man's title.

Then again, it was Snape's own fault that Harry had been thinking about lessons. He almost yelled that he'd meant "Severus," but decided at the last minute that it would sound too stupid.

Just like it would be stupid to give in to the impulse to check if he could have a shower. He wasn't even sure why he'd want to ask a thing like that. He knew that he was perfectly welcome here, that he was supposed to make himself at home, just like he'd done in Devon.

Somehow, though, this place didn't feel a bit like Devon. Not to Harry.
Harry almost did a double-take when he saw that the table in the dining alcove was laden with food.

"Orange juice?" asked Snape, lifting up a carafe.

"Uh, yeah." Snape wasn't wearing his outer robes yet, Harry noticed, immediately deciding that he'd better shrug his own off. Otherwise it would look pretty obvious that he'd expected to leave without eating. That wouldn't be a very good start to his new determination to act as a son to this man.

Though if Harry were honest, he knew he'd have to admit that he didn't exactly feel like his son all the time. Maybe because he didn't really know what that was supposed to feel like. Then again, that was hardly new. The Harry who had written that letter last Christmas, the one who had given Snape his vault key, had more or less admitted to the same thing.

Harry couldn't help but wince when his robes slipped off his chair and the prefect's pin cracked against the stone floor. Snatching everything up, he stared at the pin for a second before polished the surface of it with one thumb. It didn't seem to be dented, though.

"Sorry, sir," he said, hanging the robes more carefully before sliding into a chair.

"I can't imagine why," murmured Snape, serving himself from the central platter before pushing it slightly toward Harry. "I'd be more concerned if you couldn't be bothered to pick up after yourself."

Harry wasn't sure if he meant the pin or the robes, and he also wasn't sure how to ask. At the same time, he felt a bit guilty about calling any attention at all to his prefect's pin. After all, he hadn't started wearing it because he really wanted to be in Slytherin as well as Gryffindor. He just wanted people mixed-up about where he might sleep from night to night, since that would clear the way for him to spend a lot more time with Luna.

Time alone with Luna.

"So how are your classes going now that the new term is underway?" asked Snape, dark eyes assessing him over the rim of a steaming teacup.

Harry wasn't sure why that question made him feel jumpy inside. He quickly smeared his toast with marmalade to avoid looking at Snape. "Oh, you know. Pretty good."

Snape slowly sipped his tea, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Would you care to elucidate?"

Huh. Harry hadn't minded complaining to Snape about the way the man sounded like a Victorian novel half the time, but now that he was trying to live up to being his son, it didn't seem so appropriate to ask him if he could be less of a walking thesaurus. Didn't fathers usually want respect? And sure, some were more easy-going than others -- Arthur Weasley came to mind -- but Snape seemed like the type to want more respect than average.

Especially after the things he'd admitted the night before, about Harry thinking he was damaged or something.
On the other hand, he didn't want any titles of respect these days, or at least, not here in his own quarters--

Snape's dry voice broke into his thoughts. "I take it you would not care to provide details."

"Oh, no, details are fine." Harry flushed. "Sorry. I just wasn't sure what elucidate might mean."

Snape set down his teacup. "Why didn't you simply ask?"

Harry hung his head. Here he was, trying his best, and he'd already messed up. "Sorry. I told you, I don't know how to be anybody's son--"

"Ah." Snape set down his teacup and steepled his fingers. "Well, in that you are hardly alone. I lack extensive experience in being a father, you understand."

Harry chanced a quick glance up, but couldn't quite manage to hold the man's gaze. "It doesn't much show, sir. I mean, since I decided to give you a chance, you've been . . . uh, pretty decent, actually."

"Before that as well, one would hope."

"Well, yes, but . . ." Harry cleared his throat. "I wasn't in the right frame of mind to appreciate it. And now when I think back, I can sort of see that, but I still remember being so angry--"

"It's all right, Harry. Truly," said Snape, one hand reaching out to lightly pat Harry's forearm.

"Yeah, well . . ." Harry sighed. Snape had apologised to him for his past actions plenty of times by then, so Harry should probably really do the same. He grimaced a little, though, because when he thought back, the way he'd acted after waking up without his memories still made perfect sense. Anyway, though . . . "I'm sorry--"

Snape pursed his lips, but nodded.

Harry almost winced again. "Yeah, you deserve a better apology than that. Uh--"

"Stop this," said Snape in a sharp tone.

"Sir?"

The man stared at him for a moment, then leaned back in his chair. "You used to thank me all the time, Harry. You quite clearly didn't realise that you were -- and are -- perfectly entitled to my time, attention, and resources. Now, you seem to believe that you need to apologise all the time. Are you truly so very worried about displeasing me?"

"Sort of," muttered Harry. "I guess I just don't know what to expect. Or what you expect."

Another long look. "You were much more relaxed with me during our recent holiday."

Harry remembered. He also wished he could get back to that, but he wasn't sure how. "Um, I think having Draco around made everything seem . . . I don't know. More friendly or something. Not that you weren't. I mean, you were really great, especially about helping me to get the mirror working so I could talk to Sirius, and being such a good sport about the way Draco had told me anything I wanted to know."

Snape nodded slightly. "I did enjoy having more time with you than is possible just now."
Because now, thought Harry churlishly, the man was going to be spending his free time with Morrighan. But Harry had decided not to be such a prat about that, so he tried not to let his distaste show. "No, I told you to go ahead and have your date--"

"I was not thinking about Maura."

Maybe not, but he was kind of caressing her name with his voice! Harry wondered why he hadn't noticed that before. Draco clearly had.

"I actually had Potions in mind," added Snape.

"Huh?"

The man cleared his throat. "I would be very happy to welcome you back into class, Harry. It would be a way for us to have more time together even though school is now in session."

Harry drew in a quick breath. "But I can Occlude just fine now. You verified that. You don't still need to have me close in order to shield my mind! You... you aren't still doing that, are you?"

Snape's hair swung as he shook his head. "I simply think that an Auror-bound young man should maximise his relevant learning while at school."

"So then it's not about spending time together."

"That as well."

"Are you thinking about that because of what I told you last night?"

It was a relief when Snape followed that. The last thing Harry really wanted was to admit again how he was having jealousy issues. He wasn't three years old!

Then again, he'd kind of missed out on normal family things growing up. Maybe he was trying to make up for that. Marsha would probably tell him it was possible. At any rate, thinking of it like that at least made him feel a little bit less like a spoiled, selfish Dudley.

Snape shook his head again. "I have been wondering how to broach the matter with you for some time."

Harry cleared his throat. "I said I didn't know what you expected from a son. Is this it, then? Part of it?"

Snape sighed. "I was not trying to put you under an obligation."

"But that would be the Slytherin way to go about this--"

"No," said Snape in a low voice. "The Slytherin way to proceed in this case would be to tell you the stark truth of the matter. Do you know the kind of nightmares I have about your future career in the field? About you lying injured or dead for lack of a potion, one you could have prepared without outside assistance had I not all but driven you from your studies?"

Oh.

Harry couldn't help but shiver. "I don't want to change my schedule around again."

Snape just looked at him.
Yeah, that was pretty weak.

"I'd be behind," said Harry faintly. "After missing class all those times?"

"I would make allowances for that."

Yeah, he probably would. Snape wasn't the problem, really. "It's me," he admitted, looking away. "I don't have a great track record with you since losing my memory. I keep getting so angry. Well, not so much since that time I found you drunk off your-- er, but I still think we're just better off if I'm not in class with you."

He managed, just barely, not to add a "Sorry" at the end of all of that.

"I thought that Ethics was working out rather well," said Snape slowly.

"It is, yeah." Harry swallowed. "But Potions would be different. There's just too much history there. Sooner or later I'm bound to say something really unfortunate. You don't need to be putting up with public disrespect just because you... er, love me."

For a long moment, Snape continued to simply stare at him. Then, very quietly, he said something Harry wasn't expecting. "I do hope you now have faith that you can speak however you please when we are at home."

Harry thought back to the night he'd tested that. Snape, he had to admit, had reacted with perfect calm. Even later that evening, when Harry had lost it completely, the man had kept to his word. There hadn't even been a mention of any punishment.

"Yes. I do believe that," said Harry firmly, happy that he could give Snape this one thing, at least.

"Then... perhaps you would consider an alternate arrangement." For a moment, Snape seemed to hold his breath. "Potions lessons here?"

Harry blinked, even though he wasn't sure why he should be so surprised. It was a pretty logical solution, after all.

"It would provide us with time together, and private tutelage would suit the circumstances, given that you've fallen behind the regular class." Snape rubbed the side of his nose. "Speaking of which, I was supposed to help you recapture the material learnt during sixth year. We have not yet had a chance to do that, you and I."

Harry saw what the man was doing, reasoning out loud like that. It was kind of sweet, in a way. Better than ordering Harry to attend private lessons, anyway.

"Yeah, we don't want you in trouble with Dumbledore," added Harry to help him out. "More trouble, I mean. After all, you're probably still in hot water for fudging your attendance scrolls. That's very bad behaviour, you know."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You needn't sound so gleeful about it."

"Yeah, I know. It's pretty nutty to feel happy about Potions at all--"

"Is this some juvenile way of agreeing to my suggestion?"

"You're kind of dense sometimes." Harry grinned. "I mean, for somebody so brilliant."

"Whelp."
"Is that a good one, like idiot child?" Harry swigged what remained of his juice. "No need to answer that, actually. I got it."

Snape rose from his chair, strode to the door, and swept on a set of outer robes hanging on a hook. "I somehow thought I'd get more argument on the matter." Harry nodded. He could definitely see that.

"I don't suppose you would care to enlighten me as to your reasons for agreeing?"

"Elucidate them, you mean?" Harry grinned again. "Well, I liked that you were giving me a choice. And also, I can't exactly argue about more time together. I can probably get to know you a lot better in a lesson alone than in class, anyway. That'd be good."

"It would be," agreed Snape softly, before straightening slightly and clearing his throat. "So then, shall we say, at three o'clock each Friday?"

"All right." Harry ate one last bite of food before rushing off to Slytherin to grab his Charms book. Before he left, though, he remembered to give Snape . . . Severus, a casual wave good-bye.

Before Charms, of course, came a double session of Defence. With Maura Morrighan. It was all Harry could do not to make a face, even though he knew it would be really bad of him to try to interfere.

Thankfully, it wasn't hard to get his mind off Snape's impending date. All he had to do was watch Draco.

Or Hermione.

Or Draco with Hermione

It started with a dance of the desks, as Draco tried his best to sit next to Hermione while she nimbly wove a path away from him. She ended up in a chair wedged between Ron and the wall.

Draco scowled and whirled away to stalk toward Harry, sliding into a chair with a minimal motion that made him look like he had a broomstick stuck up his arse.

"You can't really blame her," said Harry. "After the way you treated her?"

Draco raised his chin. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know what she looked like when you were through with her!"

Draco glanced at Harry, then. "I'm far from through with her."

"Yeah, well if you think that anybody's going to let you near a certain artwork again, then—"

"I'm not talking about that!"
"Your attention," called Morrighan as she exited the office in front of her classroom. As far as Harry could tell, she was all but posing on the little landing that led to the stairs down. Her leather clothing, of course, was as snug as ever.

"Get over it," said Draco crossly. "Dad's going to see La Traviata with her and that's that."

"I told him I withdrew all objection," snapped Harry. "So shut up."

Morrighan gave them both a critical look, and the last thing Harry needed was Snape thinking he was acting up in class just to interfere with things. Swallowing hard, he took his own advice and shut up. Fifteen minutes later, Morrighan had them clearing the room so they could practice the new blocking spells she'd demonstrated. Draco tried to get himself paired with Hermione, but she was already working with Parvati by the time he reached her. In the meantime, Harry grabbed Ron and started duelling.

Draco ended up stuck with Zabini, which Harry didn't feel a bit bad about, considering.

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Draco tried to talk to Hermione again when class was over, but she cut him a glare that would freeze flames and whisked off without another word.

Harry grabbed his book bag and headed off to Charms without waiting, not that it did him much good. Draco caught up with him before he'd gone a hundred paces.

"I'd think my brother would be a little more sympathetic," he snarled the moment he was within earshot.

"Why would you think that?" Harry shot back. "I've been her friend for seven years and your brother for what, three months?"

"Over a year!"

"It doesn't count if I can't remember."

"But all seven years counts with her?" Draco went still for a moment, then suddenly grabbed Harry by both shoulders and slammed him into the nearest wall. "Is that it, then? You've realised you want to be more than friends! You want her for yourself! Well, you can't have her, Potter!"

Harry tilted his wand just enough to get in a stinging jinx that sent Draco hopping backwards, clutching at one knee. "I have Luna," he said through clenched teeth. "And I wouldn't dream of treating her the way you did Hermione, so if she can't stand your pointy face now, it's your own damned fault!"

"You wouldn't dream of kissing Luna?" Draco scoffed. "Maybe Severus was right about you!"

It took Harry a minute to follow that, and when he did, he saw red. "Yeah? Well, maybe I was wrong about you! Or better yet, maybe I was right all along!"

With that, he stomped off, leaving Draco behind in the corridor.
Harry ate lunch with the Gryffindors, grinning when Ron groused that it must be nice to have a study period for the rest of the day.

"That's only because he dropped Potions," said Hermione, shaking her head as she continued to read her Arithmancy book.

Harry threw a pea at her and waited until she looked up. "You can stop going on about that now. Snape's going to give me private lessons. It's all agreed."

That had her looking up, all right. "Oh, Harry! That's wonderful!"

"Yeah, I figured you'd think so."

"It's also mental," said Ron around the roll he was chewing.

"And I figured you'd think that," said Harry, laughing. "Though I will admit, Potions class does have one huge advantage over private lessons."

"Yeah, the chance to blend into the background while you hope your cauldron doesn't explode!"

Harry laughed again, even though he'd actually been talking about being in class with Luna. He'd looked around for her when lunch had started, but she was nowhere to be seen. Hmm. He wasn't sure if she knew where the kitchens were, and since he had a conveniently free afternoon, he could do worse than to nip down there himself and ask Dobby to whip up a few sandwiches or something.

"Well, you won't be able to hide your mess ups, but at least you won't have to worry about losing points when they happen," added Ron in a philosophical tone.

"Because half the points would come for Slytherin?"

"No, because Snape wouldn't take points during a father-son Potions lesson!"

Harry thought about that for a minute. It seemed such a strange idea that Severus Snape would ever skip taking points over a fouled potion, but he couldn't deny the things that had been slowly but surely dawning on him for weeks. "Yeah, probably he wouldn't. Hard to imagine—"

"Nah, it's not." Ron guffawed. "I can still see him singing you a lullaby, after all!"

"Ron," said Hermione in a warning tone.

"We told you, it's all right now to tell Harry anything!"

"And I told you, I still don't agree with that approach. Just because you won't be in trouble with Harry's father doesn't make it right!"

Harry ignored all that. "When was this, then?"
"Oh, when you ended up knocked out cold down in the dungeons."

"Draco and I were fighting?"

"No, it was when--" Ron leaned forward, then lifted up a hand and wiggled his fingers.

Harry nodded slowly. Something to do with his magic, then. "And Snape sang me a lullaby, really?" He probably wasn't supposed to like that idea quite so much, but he couldn't help it, not when it made him feel like he'd just eaten several warm, fragrant brownies.

Ron guffawed a little. "Well, he claims it was humming, but that's just Snape."

Yeah, that was Snape. Harry couldn't really imagine him singing a lullaby, but he could definitely picture the man denying any such softness. Though, with the way he was these days, throwing out phrases like idiot child in a voice that could only be termed fond... yeah, maybe.

Not that Harry doubted Ron's version of events. He didn't. He quickly finished his lunch and hopped to his feet. "Well, I'm off. Enjoy Potions."

"Not likely," muttered Hermione.

That took Harry by surprise. "What?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's nothing."

Harry could see that it wasn't, and a dark suspicion began churning in his mind. Snape was pretty even-handed in Ethics, and he'd been more or less the same in the one Potions lesson Harry could remember attending this year, but that might only mean...

"Is Snape being his usual gitty self to the Gryffindors when I'm not around?" he suddenly asked, leaning over the table a little so he could look more closely into Hermione's face.

"Of course not, Harry!" she exclaimed. "He hardly wants to alienate you!"

Harry wasn't sure if she was lying, but he was sure that she'd probably try to colour the truth if it would keep Harry and Snape from having another huge conflict. "Oh yeah? Well then, why isn't it likely that you'd enjoy a Potions lesson?"

She gave him a cross look and then neatly swivelled her feet around to the other side of the bench so she could stand up. "Never you mind."

"Hermione--"

She began quickly walking away.

Ron shrugged and kept eating.

Sighing, Harry followed her out of the Great Hall, grabbing at her sleeve to get her attention. He swiftly steered her down a side corridor before stopping, and was more than a little disturbed when she hung her head, refusing to look him in the eye. "What has Snape been doing, Hermione? You can tell me. Even if I can't make him stop, I'd still rather know. I mean, he says he doesn't go out of his way to bait the Gryffindors any longer, and if he's lying to me... I have to know!"

"Oh, no, Harry! It's not that." Hermione raised her face, her expression earnest even if her colour seemed a bit high. "Snape's been good as gold lately, really!"
"Good as gold," drawled Harry. "Really."

"Well, he's still pretty critical and demanding, and I think he does favour Slytherin a bit, but it's not blatant. Really."

"Then what the bloody hell has you upset about going to Potions?"

Hermione pushed off from the wall. "It's nothing, like I said. Less than nothing. It's just that we're working on a long-term brew and I've been paired with Draco for the past few sessions. I'm not exactly in the mood to spend time with him, but I didn't want to say so in case it set Ron off. Again."

Oh.

Oh.

Harry thought it was a good thing he'd followed her, since he'd been meaning to talk to her about Draco anyway. "What did he do to you in that room, Hermione? Because if he put so much as one finger somewhere it doesn't belong, I swear I'll--"

"Don't be daft!" she snapped. "In the first place, I can take care of myself, and in the second, all he did was kiss me, which we can hardly claim was against my will since he bloody well scheduled it, didn't he?"

"Yeah, well your robes looked awfully mussed for somebody that didn't do anything but get kissed!"

"Not that it's any of your business," she retorted, chin lifted high, "but I didn't just get kissed, Harry Potter. I was kissing him just as much, and if you must know, my robes were mussed because the whole thing was magnificent!"

Harry abruptly drew back. "Then why are you so prickly around Draco? It started straight away after we all got back that night--"

She suddenly cast a strong privacy spell, even as she laid her other hand on his sleeve. "That reminds me. Have you had any word about . . . about a certain werewolf?"

And a certain statue.

"No," said Harry sharply. "But don't change the subject. Draco, Hermione?"

Hermione swallowed. "It's just not very pleasant to be kissed because of who I'm not instead of who I am."

Right. Rhiannon.

Harry couldn't ever remember meeting her, but he suddenly hated her guts. First she'd hurt Draco, and now she was hurting Hermione!

Except, he supposed that Draco was really the one doing that. A fierce feeling of protectiveness rose up inside him. Unlike the brownie feeling from before, this sensation was hot and blazing. "Well, then he deserves to be punched in the nose for that!"

"Maybe so, but if there's any punching-in-the-nose to be done, I'll take care of it myself, thank you!" For a moment, Hermione held herself fiercely, like a witch about to do battle, but then she
seemed to slump. "Oh, never mind. I probably shouldn't even be so angry with him. It's not his fault that . . . well, I suppose it is, but that's hardly something you should hold against someone, is it?"

"You're not making any sense." Harry cracked a smile. "Never thought I'd say that to you, you know."

Another wave of pink washed across her cheeks. "Sorry. I just meant . . . well, he's a really good kisser, that's all."

Harry made a face, suddenly feeling like he had soap in his ears or something. He didn't want to know that about his brother!

"But he is," insisted Hermione, evidently misreading his expression. "I forgot every last thing when I was in his arms! And that's what's wrong, don't you see? He's still--" She turned her face away and made a slight sniffling noise. "He's still in love with her. It's the only reason he even kissed me! Well, you know perfectly well that he'd never come within arm's length of me if not for that. And it's . . . it's just perfectly demoralising, isn't it?"

Now Harry felt like he'd been spun around too many times in a row. Her problem wasn't that Draco had taken advantage of her, it was that she'd liked it too well? What was he supposed to say to that?

Well, actually, there was one thing.

"Hermione--"

"I don't want to talk about it," she snapped, abruptly cancelling the privacy spell. "And I don't want to be late to Potions. And don't you dare tell Draco a single word of this, do you hear me? Not a single word, Harry Potter, or I'll never, ever forgive you! I may have to work alongside him in class, but I don't have to feel even more humiliated every second we're brewing!"

With that, she flounced off, her hair streaming out behind her like a banner in a high wind.

"Girls," muttered Harry.

Strange as it might sound to other people, he thought that Luna was the one girl he knew who actually had her head screwed on straight.

Harry was pretty sure he'd say something unfortunate to Draco if he ate with the Slytherins that evening, but eating with the Gryffindors would mean pretending in front of Ron that all was right in the world. And it wasn't. How could it be, when Hermione walked in and sat down, every small movement somehow looking brittle?

It made him wonder what the hell had gone on during Potions class.

In fact, it was all he could do not to ask Draco about it, but after what Hermione had said, that was clearly out. On the other hand . . . she hadn't said a word about not talking to Snape, had she?

And anyway, that would be good on several fronts. Seeking Snape out on his own . . . it would be
another way to show that he really wasn't trying to avoid the man. It would prove, at least a little, that Harry was doing his best, just as he'd said he would, to be a son to him.

As much as he could figure out how to be, anyway.

With both Gryffindor and Slytherin out of the question for dinner, Harry detoured over to the Ravenclaw table and plonked himself down alongside Luna, who beamed at him.

"Thought I'd join my lady love," he quipped, ignoring the way some younger girls down the table began to titter and whisper. "And how are you this fine winter evening?"

Really, he wasn't at all sure why he'd been so tongue-tied when he'd tried to ask Cho to the Yule Ball. Being gallant was easy as pie, and he hadn't had a complaint yet from Luna, had he?

She didn't giggle like the other girls, of course.

"Did you bring me some more sandwiches?" she asked brightly.

Harry leaned over to speak softly against her ear. "I thought it would be a treat tonight if we let the elves magic us up a dinner."

"Oh, that does sound good!"

Harry thought he would have loved her even if she wasn't so easy to please. The fact that she was, though . . . that just made her all the more special.

"And after dinner," he said quietly, lowering his voice still more, "I thought we might take a stroll in the moonlight. Until late, maybe. Can you get away?"

Her face fell, just slightly. "I have to paint my toenails."

From any other girl, that would be a brush-off. From Luna, it was probably anything but. And anyway, the sight of her gleaming golden hair had made him forget, hadn't it? He was going to visit with Snape tonight. But tomorrow was another day. Or night, as the case may be.

"Let me guess," said Harry "Blue?"

"Pumpkin," said Luna, like she was surprised Harry had answered wrong.

"Even though it's not Halloween?"

"Even so. Anyway, purple's the colour for October," she insisted, eyes sparkling enough to rival the candles floating overhead. "Everybody knows that!"

Harry couldn't help himself, he just couldn't. Leaning over a little more, he dropped a soft kiss on Luna's soft hair. "We do have a date for tomorrow, don't we? The moonlight?"

"Oh, yes." She beamed again, looking so lovely that he wanted to pull her into his arms and snog her properly. "Shall we go after breakfast?"

"After dinner, I think. All right?"

"All right."

Their meal arrived in a flash of brilliant spellcasting, but afterwards, Harry couldn't have named a single thing he ate. He could, however, have described in detail the exact lilt of Luna's voice as she
told him all about the plumpies that lived in the river that ran near her house.

Harry's first surprise that evening was that Snape was in his classroom instead of his quarters. His second was that Draco was in there with him, scrubbing cauldrons.

Without magic.

"What did you do?" gasped Harry as he came up alongside. No wonder -- he'd always assumed that it was only the Gryffindors who were given this particular punishment. So much for that theory.

"Mr Snape is in detention, as you can plainly see," announced Snape from the front of the classroom, where he was seated at a desk, apparently reading student essays. "I do believe you are somewhat familiar with my rules during disciplinary measures, Mr Potter. They do not allow for socialising."

Talk about grouchy!

Well, at least his voice had been smooth and even instead of annoyed, or worse yet, deathly quiet.

Draco said nothing to all that, but why would he? Slytherins were probably slick enough not to get themselves into even more trouble.

For all that, though, Draco's scowl was expressive enough in and of itself.

Harry gave him a sympathetic look and then strolled up to Snape's desk. "Hey . . . I thought we had an agreement about names, Severus."

He had to admit, it felt more than a little good to be able to throw that back at the man, after all the times he'd been pressured on the issue lately.

"We also have an agreement about classroom demeanour, do we not?"

Harry blinked. "Weird. Have we had this conversation before? Except, in reverse?"

"Reverse?"

"Not sure," muttered Harry, since he didn't know what he'd meant. Anyway, by then the feeling had passed.

Remembering his resolve, he planted both palms on Snape's desk and leaned forward. "I get it, though. You're supervising detention, so you feel like being teacher-y. I on the other hand, am just a bloke who dropped by to see his--" It took a little bit of a gulp, but Harry got through it. "Father."

Snape's eyes gleamed, but in a totally different way from Luna's. When hers began to shine, it was mainly because her innate happiness had to spill out into the world somehow. Snape, on the other hand, looked a bit like he was doing complex Arithmancy equations without benefit of quill or parchment.
All he said, though, was: "It is good to see you again so soon, Harry."

Harry pulled up a stool and settled in for a chat. Considering the subject matter, though, he kept his voice down. Not that it was likely to help. Draco had confessed under Veritaserum that he was a champion eavesdropper . . . though not in those exact words, of course. "So, what could Draco have done to merit such a harsh punishment?"

Snape scoffed. "Shall I teach you a useful dictionary charm so you gain a better understanding of the term 'harsh'?"

"Shall I remind you how many times I suffered the same way?"

"No," said Snape abruptly. "I would rather we were past all that."

"Me, too," announced Harry, surprising himself and probably Snape. "Why isn't Draco past it, though? That's the question."

"Unfortunately, I am acting as a professor in that matter." Snape glowered at him, just a little."I do not gossip about my students. Not to other students, at any rate."

"So if I was McGonagall, you'd spill the beans?"

"We aren't at home. That will be Professor McGonagall."

Harry rolled his eyes, but let it pass. "Fine, then. I'll just have to ask him."

"Feel free after detention. I would not be surprised, however, if he is less than candid with you."

It didn't take Harry long to put that together with the way Hermione had looked in the Great Hall. "This has something to do with Hermione, doesn't it?"

"Shut it, Potter!" Draco suddenly called out.

Snape sighed. "That will be five additional cauldrons, Mr Snape."

Harry winced. Maybe Slytherins weren't as slick as he'd thought. Not all the time, at any rate.

"If you care at all about your brother, you will drop the topic."

"Consider it dropped." Harry thought for a moment. Since he couldn't really discuss what he'd come down here for, he was at a bit of a loss for what they could talk about. Which was bad, he knew. He didn't think that Ron had trouble talking to his dad.

He started glancing left, right, up, down, trying to think of something they could discuss. It was the down direction that gave him his inspiration, the moment his Prefect's badge caught his eye.

"Um, so I didn't come down here for this, honest," said Harry, "but I suppose I might as well ask now that it's crossed my mind. Do you think there's any way you could get me some more of those two-houses-crests? I . . . I tore every last one of them off my robes and . . . burned them. Sorry."

"Are you?"

"Now, yes." Harry ignored the little niggle of guilt that shot through him. He was definitely sorry. Just probably not for the right reasons -- or the ones Snape assumed, anyway. "But then, you know . . . I wasn't handling things very well."
"Don't disparage yourself on that account. How we move forward is all that matters, truly. In that spirit . . ." Snape's voice took on a more authoritative cast. "Mr Snape, Mr Potter and I will be repairing to my chambers for a few moments. I trust you will remain here and continue your task?"

"Of course, Professor."

"I will remind you that those cauldrons are to be made spotless without a single spell being cast."

"I understand."

Snape nodded and led the way out, his robes furling majestically.

Harry didn't say anything at all about Draco while they were in the corridors, but once he and Snape were in the man's living room, he couldn't resist. "I'm surprised you didn't take his wand."

"Are you?" Snape slanted him a glance. "Draco does have enemies in the castle. You should understand that much even if you can't remember the previous school year."

Right. Pansy and Nott and almost being dragged off the grounds so he could be taken before Voldemort to be tortured. Draco had mentioned all that. More than once.

"Right. Making sure he does his detention without magic is much less important than keeping him safe," murmured Harry. "Of course."

Snape smiled, just slightly. "Oh, he won't use any magic on the cauldrons. He wouldn't dare."

"You have ways of knowing?"

The man's smile turned sardonic. "At the very least, Draco will suspect that I do."

"And do you?"

"What sort of Slytherin would I be if I provided a student with details on such a topic?"

"But here," Harry pointed out, "I'm your son."

"Oh, you may rest assured that there is never a place where you are not my son," said Snape, no hint of humour about him any longer. Instead, his voice rang with sincerity, the echoes of it seeming to pour forth out of his dark eyes.

"Yeah, all right." So Snape wasn't going to tell him. Harry thought he pretty much knew the answer, anyway. "So, the crests. I suppose it takes a while to order them?"

"Not at all. Follow me."

They ended up in what looked like a private office. Snape gestured at a chair before the desk, then seated himself behind it.
Harry fidgeted. He couldn't help it. All of a sudden, it felt like he was the one in detention.

All Snape did, however, was fish about in a drawer until he pulled forth an elaborate line drawing that was clearly a paper version of Harry's special crest. The edge of the paper was signed with Snape's own initials.

"Oh, God." Harry reached out for the drawing. "You designed my crest, didn't you? That's . . . I don't even know what to say."

"You had no way of knowing."

"Fucking amnesia--"

Snape's hand reached out to cover his own for an instant. "No, you literally weren't to know, Harry. I don't believe I ever mentioned it."

"Why wouldn't you, though?"

A long moment passed in silence before the man finally answered. "The subject is . . . difficult. My father was an artist."

"Oh." Part of Harry thought he shouldn't press for more details, but then again, it seemed like Snape was willing to talk, didn't it? And they were supposed to get to know one another. Wasn't that the whole point of Harry's new resolve? "Um, I'm surprised you'd be willing to draw anything at all, in that case."

The pause this time was shorter, and somehow less tense. Snape even shrugged his shoulders as he began to speak. "I did shun all artistic endeavour for a time. But years later, I decided that taking up a brush again could be a way to prove to myself that his character would not define my own. Not that I indulge much. The associations can be . . . troublesome."

Harry swallowed. "Yeah. Not that there's any comparison, but I can't help but I get kind of a shiver whenever I see a cat-flap. Not that I have anything against cats, but, um, the Dursleys put one in my bedroom door so they wouldn't have to let me out for meals. Well, after they let me have a bedroom instead of a cupboard. Oh, er-- do you know about the cupboard?"

"Yes. You might be interested to know that the cupboard was removed entirely by your cousin when the house was reconstructed."

"Draco didn't mention that when he was telling me all about last year."

"Your brother can be a tad self-centred at times, as I believe you may have noticed. I can assure you that he was indeed present when your cousin gave the three of us a guided tour of the new premises." 

"Is there a reason why you keep mentioning Dudley?"

Snape leaned forward in his chair. "You and he were beginning to forge a new relationship when the incident on the Quidditch pitch interfered, Harry."

"Draco did mention something about that."

"I am relieved to hear it." Snape's gaze bored into his own. "You are a young man who has always yearned for family. I would ask you to consider reaching out to your cousin even though you can't remember having a more amicable relationship with him."
Harry nodded, his thoughts flying back to Christmas. Sure enough, there had been a small present from Dudley. The strange thing was, Harry couldn't even remember what it had been. He could recall being startled by it at the time, but then that emotion had got drowned beneath his general depression over Sirius.

And then later, it had been pushed completely from his mind when Snape had helped him get the Mirror of All Souls working again. Nothing had mattered then except the chance to talk with Sirius . . . and Harry's growing understanding of Snape, who, after all, could have pretended that there was no way to wake that mirror up.

Harry would never have known the truth.

"So, Dudley," said Harry slowly, trying to think his way through it. Without memories, it wasn't easy. "Um, he's probably annoyed that I didn't send him anything for Christmas, I guess. He always was pretty fixated on presents--" Harry stopped because Snape was shaking his head. "What?"

"He's not the same young man you remember."

"You mean more than the weight loss Draco mentioned. Removing the cupboard . . . things like that."

"Yes." Snape's eyes glimmered. "I thought of letting Mr. Dursley know about your memory problems, but on balance, decided that our own relationship was already too filled with rancour. More cause for discord hardly seemed a wise idea. Still, if you were to tell him now that you had good reason to forget him at Christmas, I cannot imagine that he would hold it against you."

"That's really hard to imagine."

"More so than . . ." Snape's long fingers encompassed the two of them in a smooth gesture.

"Hard to say." Harry squared his shoulders, remembering the mirror again. "But . . . uh, I do trust you, Severus. Thanks for reminding me about Dudley. I'll see about writing to him straight away. Do you think an owl would do?"

"Admirably."

"And the crest . . . it's really beautiful. I shouldn't have been such a prat about everything. Do you know a duplicating charm that'll make it look made of cloth?"

"Embroidery, I presume you mean. Certainly." A few swishes of the man's wand and several more crests appeared, these ones patches rendered in fine detail. The crest looked even more beautiful that way. "May I?"

It took Harry a moment to follow. "Oh, yeah. All right."

Snape tapped his wand to a crest, swirled it to the left, and then pointed it at Gryffindor crest on the robe Harry was wearing. "Duplicato texam."

Harry trailed his fingers over the transformed crest, smiling a little. It wasn't that he was happy to be in Slytherin, exactly, but like the prefect's badge, this would help him seem a Slytherin to his mates so they'd just assume he was in the dungeons if he didn't show up at night.

Well, they were already doing that, actually, but Harry thought that every little bit probably helped.

"If you need assistance with the charm, I would be more than willing."
Harry did a practice swirl with his wand, but didn't say the incantation. "I think I have it. Thanks, Severus."

"You are most welcome."

Harry's Luna plan didn't go off without a hitch, however. Oh, they had their stroll in the moonlight and a long snog afterwards, but she couldn't stay with him all night because her study group was working late. So strange, to think of Luna hitting the books like any other Hogwarts student, but then, she had been sorted Ravenclaw. Harry tended to overlook that sometimes.

Wednesday was no good either, what with D.A. after dinner; Harry stayed after with Draco to plan the next session, and after that it only seemed sensible to make it one of his Slytherin nights.

Too bad that Draco wasn't willing to talk about what had happened in Potions or about the way he'd been acting during D.A. When he wasn't pointedly ignoring Hermione, he was staring at her. For her part, Hermione had been saying everything in a voice that was too loud and sounded almost shrill.

Ron had been too wrapped up in Lavender to notice any of it.

On Thursday, Luna was nowhere to be found, even though Harry checked his map several times after dinner. That could mean she was in the Room of Requirement, he supposed, but with Luna, it might just as well mean something totally unpredictable. For all Harry knew, she was communing with the Prenglies. They didn't show up on his map, either.

He caught up with Luna at breakfast and asked her if she'd meet him that night by the portrait of Timothy the Timid, thinking that they could get some privacy by sneaking into the secret passageway that connected the fifth floor with the Herbology corridor. He'd have rather met her for dinner so they could leave the Great Hall together, but with his private potions lesson coming up, he wasn't sure that would work.

For all he knew, Snape might want to have dinner with Harry after the lesson. If so, Harry would hardly want to refuse and maybe cause offense.

On the other hand, tonight was Snape's date with Horrible Morrighan. Maybe he had plans to take her out to dinner before the opera. Harry scowled.

When he realized he was doing it, though, he almost kicked himself. Just how immature was he going to be? He knew perfectly well that Snape wasn't really abandoning him! And it was a bit mental to care about that, anyway. After all, he'd got on fine without a decent parent for practically his whole life. He could do it again if he had to.

The trouble was, he didn't want to have to.

Not now that he actually had somebody . . . even if it was practically the least likely person ever.
"I know you achieved an O on your Ordinary Wizarding Level," Snape began the lesson, "so I hope you'll take this in the spirit intended when I tell you that I think we should begin with the basics."

"You mean chopping and stirring techniques?"

"Among other things."

Harry glanced doubtfully around at the ingredients laid out in neat piles. "This look pretty damned basic."

Snape tightened the buttons on his robe sleeves as he spoke. "I'm sure it does, but when I began planning an individualised curriculum for you, it occurred to me that there were some aspects of potion-making that you had likely never mastered properly."

Harry couldn't help but grin. "Well, I had this teacher, you see, and we didn't exactly see eye to eye--"

"You also had at least one friend all too willing to do your thinking -- and sometimes your work -- for you," Snape smoothly cut in.

Well, at least the man hadn't got his huge nose out of joint. Still, Harry couldn't help but point out something. "That friend could tell I was demoralised from day one. But all right, you probably do have a point. I probably do need some . . . er, Remedial Potions."

He held his breath after the last two words, remembering after the fact that they might remind Snape of how angry he'd been about Harry peeking in his Pensieve.

They didn't seem to, though.

Afterwards, Harry was to look back and marvel at how well the lesson had gone. He wouldn't say that Snape had been patient from start to finish, but he hadn't been unreasonable, either. He hadn't once used his wit to slice Harry's self-esteem to ribbons; he hadn't disparaged Harry's father.

Instead, he'd just steadily demonstrated techniques from Harry's first three years, explaining them as he went. He hadn't just explained how to chop versus dice versus mince, either, or how to make sure that stirring didn't turn into sloshing. He'd also told Harry why it was that small errors like that could make a difference to the final brew.

Then, of course, he watched while Harry practiced everything they'd gone over.

Toward the end, he'd set up a series of experiments that demonstrated those differences. Unlike anything Harry had ever done in actual potions class, these experiments were self-correcting: designed to turn clear and calm when Harry got them right -- and do all sorts of unpredictable things when he got them wrong.

It was brilliant, but maybe just a little bit too fun since the "wrong" effects were loads more
Harry stirred wrong on purpose or threw in mashed instead of minced niffler noses more than once, just to find out what would happen. Once, the potion turned the consistency of lava, except in fuchsia, producing fumes that suddenly made him spout wild curls out of his ears. Another time, his feet couldn't stop dancing, but instead of tossing in shredded instead of grated mugwort, Harry threw in cubed in case it would make him hear the music, too.

"I can see that I will have to give this teaching technique more thought," said Snape in a very dry voice after he’d let Harry play around for a while.

Harry laughed. "Make them more fun to get right, you mean?"

"Something like that."

"Oh, very well." Harry stopped messing about and worked steadily then, completing the cauldrons without any more deliberate mistakes -- just accidental ones.

"Well done," pronounced Snape when all the potions were still, quiet, and clear.

Harry grinned. "You should teach like that in class, instead of seeing how much you can scare everybody into learning."

"Ah, but to start this way would only encourage students to treat the discipline with levity."

"Exactly! They'd actually enjoy brewing, Severus! And I bet that way, they'd learn loads more. That's got to be worth something, doesn't it?"

Snape sighed. "I think you underestimate the difficulties of teaching twenty at a time instead of one. I will, however, think on your suggestions."

"You do that."

"And now, I do believe . . ."

Snape never did finish that sentence, but he didn't have to. It was all there in his slightly expectant stance, in the way his gaze had been straying towards the door of his private potions lab.

"You have to get ready, of course. Muggle London. Um, do you have the right clothes?"

"I have a wand."

Huh -- maybe Draco was right. Harry really didn't think like a wizard sometimes.

"All right." Harry cast a cleaning spell over his hands and robe so he wouldn't have to worry about assorted muck dropping into his dinner. Just as well that Snape clearly wasn't going to invite him to stay -- this way, Harry could stop by the Ravenclaw table and chat up Luna a bit.

He forced himself to focus on that and not on how much this whole thing bothered him. Because it shouldn't. He knew it shouldn't. "Have fun, then."

Snape looked like he might say something, but in the end, all he did was nod, his dark eyes trained on Harry as he walked across the potions lab and went out through the door.
Just as well he'd told Luna he'd meet her after dinner, since she wasn't to be found in the Great Hall. Harry sat with his mates in Gryffindor and listened as Ron went on about strategy for the rematch with Slytherin.

"Ginny keeps saying she'll step aside again," said Ron through a mouthful of mushy peas. "Just say the word, Harry."

"Eh, maybe I'll be ready for another match a bit later." Harry wasn't precisely afraid of flying high any longer -- Ron had cured him of that, at least. But a full-out Quidditch match was something else. His gut was telling him that he wasn't ready for that.

Though, come to think of it, he hadn't made any real progress with his memory since before the Yule Ball. Maybe what he needed was another good whack in the head.

Bit mental, though, to try to get in the way of a Bludger.

Meanwhile, Hermione was spending the meal reading . . . except she didn't seem able to pay proper attention to her book. Her gaze kept lifting and snapping down, lifting and snapping down, like she was trying not to look at something.

Or someone.

"Just talk to him, Hermione," Harry said quietly when he couldn't stand it any longer.

"Ha. We talked, all right. We talked plenty during Potions on Monday and he hasn't said a single word to me since, not one single word!"

Harry's ears perked up. "What happened in Potions, then? I know that Draco got detention."

"He deserved it," said Hermione darkly.

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Ron, who hadn't even been there but was clearly a fan of Hermione badmouthing Draco.

Damn. Harry had thought Ron was too caught up in his Quidditch conversation to pay attention to anything else.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Hermione, chin lifted high and book lifted to match.

Exactly what Draco had said when Harry had stayed with him after DA, and every other time Harry had tried, too. Snape had also continued to keep his own counsel.

What had happened in Potions?

Harry supposed he could ask somebody else in the class, but there was no guarantee that they'd know all the details. Besides, it seemed awfully underhanded.

And the two-houses-crest he was wearing was just for show, he told himself, nodding mentally to underline the idea.
He wasn’t a Slytherin, not really.

It was a good thing he'd started carrying the map about, Harry thought later that night as he waited for Luna. He knew she'd turn up; he just didn't know when.

At any rate, sitting on the floor beneath the portrait of Timothy the Timid would have been horribly boring without the map. Scanning the map at least gave him something to do. He'd started off looking for Luna, of course, but just like the night before, her name wasn't anywhere that he could see.

So Harry began browsing through the map bit by bit. Hermione was in her dormitory, where her dot was so completely still that she had to be either sleeping or studying. Ron's was bunched together with several other Gryffindors, like they were still talking Quidditch strategy, while Draco's was alone on top of the Astronomy Tower.

The dots for Severus Snape and Maura Morrighan were missing just like Luna's, but Harry knew perfectly well where they were.

He circled 'round the castle visually several more times, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for Luna. Where was she? He must have been here for a couple of hours at least, by then. It was his own fault, though. He should have been more specific about the time. For all he knew, Luna would show up several hours after midnight.

It was on his tenth, or possibly twelfth circuit through the map that Harry's eyes went wide. He was sweeping his gaze through the dungeons, nothing in particular on his mind, when he saw that Snape's dot had returned to his quarters.

Snape's dot, though, wasn't alone. From what Harry could tell, he and Maura Morrighan were sitting together on the sofa in the living room, and they weren't sitting a good distance apart, either. Their dots were practically overlapping, which had to mean--

Harry turned his head aside and breathed in deeply, trying to make himself grow up.

So they were kissing. So what? The only reason that Harry was lurking in the corridor like this was because he wanted time alone with Luna, and he didn't have just talking in mind, so why should Snape be limited to opera?

None of that mattered, though.

Harry didn't like this. He didn't like it at all.

He couldn't seem to stop himself from staring, though, at those tell-tale dots. Even though he knew it was wrong to pry like this, he kept on doing it.

Go away, Harry thought desperately. It had to be past midnight by then, so surely she should be heading back to her own quarters, wherever they were?
Even though he knew it was useless, Harry took his finger and tried to shove her dot away from Snape's. If he could just herd it towards the Floo . . . no luck, though. Horrible Morrighan wouldn't budge.

Until she did, her dot and Snape's moving in tandem through the living room and down the hallway . . . and through the one doorway in Snape's quarters that Harry had never crossed.

They were in Snape's bedroom, their dots overlapping even more than before.

Harry snapped the map closed and buried his face in his hands.

Then he yanked it open just to check if she was still there, only to see that there was just one dot, now. One dot, with their names interleaved together: Maura Severus Morrighan Snape.

Ugh.

It was almost like the map was predicting something a lot more enduring than . . . whatever was currently going on in Snape's bedroom.

Harry knew what was going on, though. He wasn't stupid.

He sat there in the dark corridor, Lumos lighting up the tip of his wand every time he checked the map, until the palest rays of dawn began to filter through a window set high up in the stone wall.

Luna never did come.

And Morrighan?

She never left.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Forty-Two: ????

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------------------------
When the faintest light of dawn began to seep into the corridor where Harry was sitting, leaning up against the wall, he blinked several times and blearily looked about.

Really, he was lucky that he hadn't been caught by somebody patrolling the halls. The plan, of course, had been to duck into the secret passageway the minute Luna arrived . . . but she'd never shown up at all. Harry clenched his teeth, more than a little annoyed. He usually found her scatter-brained ways fairly adorable, but not if they meant she was going to stand him up like this!

Then again, he wasn't entirely sure that he'd have been good company. The minute he'd seen Morrighan and Snape's names intertwined like that, the minute he'd started imagining them just as intertwined . . .

Maybe Luna would have helped him forget all about it. Maybe, though, he'd have wanted to keep on checking the map, waiting for the woman to finally leave. Hours and hours he'd watched for that, and what had he got for his troubles? Nothing but the disturbing vision of her dot snuggled right up against Snape's, just like the two of them were . . . ugh.

Cuddled close together.

Harry closed his eyes again and lightly banged the back of his skull against the wall. No, no, no. Why couldn't this have happened right after he'd lost his memory, when he'd still hated Snape's guts? Then, he would have been relieved to have something take the man's attention off him!

Now, the same prospect made him feel strangely empty inside.

Harry wasn't sure how long he sat there, his mind somehow blank and bleak all at once, but the next time he cast the spell to activate the map, he saw that Morrighan had gone back to her own quarters.

Was she packing up her things, getting ready to move them down to the dungeons? Or did it mean something completely different? That she and Snape weren't going to arrive together for breakfast, for example. Maybe it was a sign that they weren't ready to make their new relationship public.

Actually, Snape might never want to do that. Yeah, that made sense. He definitely didn't seem the type to want his love life broadcast all over the castle. Of course, he also didn't seem the type to have a love life. Since that theory had been shot straight to hell, all Harry could think was that he didn't know Snape well enough to judge what the man might decide to do.

Not so very long ago, that thought would have cheered Harry. Now, though, it was just depressing.

That was what came of deciding that he actually wanted to know the man who had adopted him.

What chance was there of that happening, now, though? Sure, Harry had encouraged the man to go
on his date, but he hadn't expected this outcome. He and Morrighan were just supposed to go out on the town, not dive into bed together! What had happened to Snape's usual reserve, his air of Victorian formality? Not to mention the caution that came from years and years of spying! Harry might not know Snape as well as he should, but he was damned sure that the man wasn't the type to jump off cliffs like this.

Unfortunately, that could only mean that this was serious. Much more serious than Harry had anticipated.

Damn it, he should have been selfish! He should have told Snape not to go to the fucking opera! But no, he'd tried to be mature about the whole thing, and look where that had landed him! For all he knew, Snape might be serious enough about this "old flame" to marry her, and where would that leave Harry?

*Right where you were before their date,* a little voice whispered in his head. *Snape will still be there for you. Hasn't he proven that? Think about all the times he's shown you that he really does love you, even after the way you've treated him recently!*

Harry told the little voice to shut up. What use was wishful thinking? He could remember reams of it from when he was younger. How many times had he told himself that if he was just good enough, Aunt Petunia would finally hang a photo of him on the wall? How many times had he fooled himself into thinking that everything would turn out all right as long as he tried his very, very best?

Wishful thinking had never worked. Not once, not ever.

Not for Harry.

And now here he was, telling himself another set of comfortable lies. And about Snape, of all people. How irrational could he be? Snape wasn't like Remus, known for his compassion and warm generosity. Remus could probably marry somebody and still have room in his heart for a son, even an adopted one.

Snape, though?

Not bloody likely.

"Mischief managed," said Harry miserably, shoving the map into a cloak pocket. Sighing, he pushed himself up off the floor and trudged his way toward Ravenclaw. Thank God it was Saturday. Sleeping all day sounded pretty good after the night he'd had, but first, he had to find Luna and give her a rather large piece of his mind.

"What's with you, mate?" asked Ron over breakfast less than an hour later.

Harry just shrugged. What was he going to say? That he'd waited all night for a girl who couldn't
be arsed to show up? He definitely wasn't going to bring up Snape. Blabbing about the man's private life sounded like a bad idea all around. Harry would feel like a louse even if word didn't reach the man. And if it did, he'd deserve whatever Snape felt like dishing out.

Even losing the map again. He knew he wasn't supposed to use it the way he had.

Not that he'd meant to use it that way, but still.

Anyway, if he admitted to being jealous, he'd probably just get one of Hermione's lectures. He really wasn't in the mood to listen to blather about how his feelings were completely unfounded. Of course, she might go in the opposite direction and tell him that he had the emotional depth of a teaspoon.

"Didn't sleep much," he finally answered, mostly because Ron was still looking at him.

"It might help if you changed out of your everyday clothes," said Hermione, glancing up from the book in her hand.

Yeah, Harry's stay-out-all-night plan definitely needed some modifications. Though it was anybody's guess if it was going to matter, given Luna's non-appearance the night before.

"I'm surprised Draco let you leave Slytherin looking so rumpled," she went on, eyes narrowed. "Since he puts such emphasis on image. Then again, I don't know why I should expect him to be consistent about anything!"

Harry stared. "What's he been inconsistent about except switching sides?"

"He only goes about snogging girls he doesn't have the slightest feeling for!"

Oh.

"Hermione--"

"Oi!" interrupted Ron. "What's this, then? Who's he been snogging, Hermione? Haven't you told me at least ten thousand times that you and that pointy git are just friends?"

"Ha!" shouted Hermione. "We're not even that, not after what he did!"

"What he did snogging you, you mean?"

"As if you care! You practically devoured another girl right in front of me! I don't know how that's very different from a portrait, now do I?"

"Portrait? What portrait?"

"People are staring," murmured Harry. Thankfully, there weren't many students at breakfast this early. Or teachers. Snape and Morrighan, for example, were noticeably absent. It had been all Harry could do to leave the map in his pocket instead of snatching it out and see what they were up to, this time. Just breakfast together, sitting staring at each other across the small table in Snape's quarters?

Or were they back in the bedroom again?

Harry almost groaned, understanding for the first time how someone could want to scrub their own brain with bleach.
Hermione pushed away from the table without a word and strode off, her hair streaming out behind her.

Ron turned to Harry. "What's she talking about?"

"I think you got the gist of it." Harry cleared his throat. "Look, if you're still with Lavender then you shouldn't mind if Hermione's with someone else."

"Someone else," mocked Ron. "I think we can name names, Harry. And I should mind, you know, if he's not treating her right."

"Like you did?" mocked Harry right back. "I saw her after your stunt with Lavender."

"She wouldn't stop going on and on about Malfoy!"

"Not his name and you know it." Harry paused for a moment. "What's your plan, then? Going to ditch your new girl and go after Hermione again?"

"Like I'd even want a girlfriend who's stuck on Malfoy--" Ron glared.

"So leave her alone and let them work it out! Or is your plan just to make sure she's unhappy, no matter what?"

Ron rolled his eyes. "Oh, now he can make her happy, can he?"

"No idea." Harry's nostrils flared. "But if he's an arse to her, you'll have to wait your turn to hex him. Brother's prerogative."

He almost added that Ron ought to try it sometime with Percy, but remembered in time that Percy was dead. It was still a strange idea, believing in things that he couldn't remember happening.

Ron looked a bit mulish, but that only meant that he was thinking things over and didn't want to admit it.

Harry caught sight of Luna entering the Great Hall just then. He shot to his feet, all thought of other people's problems pushed to the back of his mind. "See you later--"

Ron gave him a knowing look and waved for him to go.

Harry knew that Luna had her own way of looking at the world, but he was still surprised at the cheery greeting she threw his way the moment he reached the far end of the Ravenclaw table.

"Hi, Harry!"

Harry blinked, completely losing track of what he'd meant to say. He wasn't sure if that was due strictly to her cheery disposition or if it also had something to do with the way her hair gleamed
golden in the sunlight streaming down through the high windows.

"Uh--"

She beamed at him and patted the seat next to her, and somehow Harry found himself taking it, even though he'd meant to stay standing while he told her just what he thought of her leaving him waiting like that.

The moment he was seated, she half rose, stretching up enough to give him a little peck on the nose. "You're very sweet, but you could have woken me, you know."

Woken her?

"Well--"

She gave him another little peck, which only made his thoughts scatter farther.

"Your fault, really. It was cold enough in the courtyard that I cast some warming spells on the blanket I'd brought along, and those sent me right to sleep." She giggled then, a sound like tinkling bells. "We'll have to remember that the next time we try for a few hours alone."

Courtyard?

Just that one word, and Harry wanted to whack himself in the forehead. Timothy the Timid had two portraits in the castle, and one of them guarded a secret passage between the Middle Courtyard and the fifth floor. Luna hadn't stood him up at all! She'd just been waiting by the other portrait!

Brilliant move, picking a meeting place like that, Harry thought to himself.

Even more brilliant not to remember about the other portrait when Luna had failed to arrive. Harry could excuse himself for that, though. By then, he'd had a lot on his mind. So much, in fact, that he hadn't even made much effort to use the map to locate Luna. Sure, he'd tried . . . but obviously, he hadn't tried hard enough.

"Next time I'll wake you," he promised, leaning over to capture her lips in a brief kiss. He couldn't believe his luck. If Luna hadn't fallen asleep, she might have thought that he had stood her up.

"Mmm," she murmured, her eyes sparkling as she glanced up at him. "I almost missed breakfast, I slept for so long."

"Outside all night?"

"Mmm," she said again, shifting over to sit closer.

Well, at least that explained why she hadn't been in Ravenclaw when he'd asked for her.

"We'll make up for it today," Harry promised. "No meeting by portraits. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Even though I have to revise a bit?"

"We'll haul our books somewhere private and revise together."

"With hot cocoa," she said, smiling up at him. "I like the idea of sharing hot cocoa with you."

Harry nodded. "Time for cocoa. That sounds . . . well, just about perfect."
Harry forgot his troubles while he spent all that day with Luna, alternately snotting her, sipping at cocoa, and trying to concentrate on Transfiguration theory. They snuck down to the kitchens together for a late lunch, Luna munching on slivers of cheese and pickle while Harry satisfied himself with a ham sandwich. When it was time for dinner, though, Luna kissed him one last time and announced that she had to count flagstones and that of course such a thing could only be done on one's own.

Harry didn't understand, but he didn't need to. He loved Luna, and that was all that mattered.

"Slytherin table tonight," said Draco, catching him at the doors of the Great Hall and steering him that way. "Dad has some concerns about the lower forms. He wants all the Prefects to do a better job at organising study groups for the ones struggling in their classes."

For some reason, that announcement rubbed Harry the wrong way, even as he glanced up at the head table. Snape was sitting in his usual place, but Morrighan was nowhere to be seen. "He didn't mention it to me."

"Well, he mentioned it to me."

"Oh, are you his favourite son now, something like that?"

Draco narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong with you? I was brewing with Dad this afternoon and we got to talking about the House. Is that really such a problem?"

Harry very nearly sniped that he was probably just the bad son in their bizarre little family, but the phrase "this afternoon" brought him up short. He drew in a sharp breath, but tried his best to sound casual when he let it out to speak. "So . . . you saw him today. He . . . er, wasn't at breakfast. Er . . . when you went down, was he alone?"

Draco slanted him a glance. "Yes. Who did you think would be there?"

He wasn't about to admit to his annoyance -- or worse, his deepest fears -- about Morrighan. That left him thinking fast. "The lower forms who were complaining that the Prefects weren't paying them enough attention!"

"It wasn't like that. Dad just thinks that their marks are slipping a bit in the new term, and he expects all the Prefects to do their best to ameliorate the situation."

Ameliorate, honestly.

Harry nodded like that wasn't the most pretentious way to put things that he'd ever heard, and tried again to get the information he wanted. "So, um . . . did Snape seem--"

"Snape?"

"Fine, Severus," snapped Harry. "Did he seem like himself?"
"I don't know why you'd expect me to check him for Polyjuice!"

Only a boy raised a wizard from birth would jump to that conclusion, thought Harry. "I meant, did he seem to be . . . er, sort of emotional or anything?"

Draco just stared at him. Then he suddenly barked out a laugh. "You're remembering things!"

"No, I just--"

"Maybe you don't know that you are," mused Draco. "But last year, Dad was skipping a lot of meals and you used to worry about it. So when he wasn't at breakfast today, you subconsciously assumed it means something."

It meant something, all right.

"That's probably it, then," said Harry weakly, since he wasn't about to admit that he'd been using the map to watch Snape in the throes of . . . Harry shivered a little and tried not to think about it.

"Breathe, you idiot child," said Draco, flashing him a slight smile. "Don't worry about what you can't remember. It'll all come back. Probably when you least expect it."

Harry gave a jerky nod, latching onto the easy explanation for his mood. "Which lower forms, then?" "Why don't you take the first and second years?" Draco vaguely waved toward a largeish group of them assembled fairly near Snape. "I'll have a word with the slightly older ones."

"What's that supposed to mean, that I'm better at the magic taught in first year?"

"You are a prickly one this evening. If you must know, I was thinking of your rapport with Larissa Kent!"

"Oh." Harry swallowed. He wouldn't have used the word rapport, but he could see what Draco meant. "All right."

A few minutes later, however, after hearing Larissa call his brother Drakey more than once, Harry had to wonder if Draco's reason actually had something to do with preserving the dignity that seemed to be so important to him.

---------------------------------------------------

Harry kept to his resolve to leave the map strictly alone, but he couldn't stop himself from keeping track of Snape and Morrighan in other ways. On Monday, they were both missing from breakfast again, and when they came to lunch and dinner, they were in their usual seats, several places away from one another. On Tuesday, the same pattern repeated, leaving Harry with the depressing feeling that Morrighan was sleeping over every night and having breakfast alone with Snape in his quarters.

On Wednesday, though, Morrighan came to breakfast and Snape didn't. Could that mean they'd had a fight?
If so, they made it up rather quickly. At the noon meal, both of them appeared. Worse, they sat together at one end of the long table. They looked to be sharing a stack of parchments, both of them leaning over it, with Morrighan occasionally jotting down notations while Snape merely nodded and pointed.

Harry hoped that Snape was just helping the woman with her marking, but a sinking feeling deep inside him insisted that they were drawing up wedding plans instead.

By the time Ethics rolled around on Thursday, Harry felt like he was a walking basket case. He hated this, just absolutely hated it. Even worse than the developments with Snape and Morrighan, however, was the fact that he knew he shouldn't feel this way! He shouldn't begrudge his adoptive father a chance for some happiness, and he shouldn't worry that he was losing something in the process. He knew that Snape wouldn't stop caring about him just because he'd found a special someone.

But it was like the British Empire all over again. He knew that as a fact alone. In some profound way, it wasn't truly real to him.

That meant he couldn't believe in it, let alone actually trust it.

"And that is where the philosophy of utilitarianism ultimately breaks down," concluded Snape from the front of the class, still nodding at something Ernie had just said. "Have you any questions?"

Hermione's hand shot into the air. "But surely providing the greatest good for the greatest number of people is usually the most moral way to decide these things?"

Snape's nostrils flared. "I take it, then, that you've abandoned your efforts on behalf of house elves? There are decidedly fewer of them than wizards, you understand."

"And they aren't people in any case," said Zabini from the back of the room, his voice a smooth sneer.

"They most certainly are!" retorted Hermione.

"Demonstrating yet another conundrum of utilitarian philosophy, no doubt," said Snape in a hard tone that quelled the argument before it could gather more force. "Until next Tuesday, then. Mr Potter and Mr Snape, remain behind, if you would."

Harry glanced at Draco, who just raised his eyebrows in answer.

Snape waited until the last stragglers had filed out. His face was grave when he approached them. "I have some news, but as the information is . . . sensitive and my quarters are better warded, I suggest we return there."

Sensitive . . . "Oh, God," said Harry thickly.

Snape's glance at him was sharp and swift.

Harry mentally kicked himself for the involuntary reaction and told himself that he was not, not, going to rain on the man's parade. Snape's life had been harsh -- much harsher than Harry had once supposed. Really, Harry's own complaints about his childhood paled in comparison. The last thing the man deserved was to have Harry stomp all over this chance at happiness.

After all, it wasn't like Snape would probably have many chances in his life, Charity Burbage
notwithstanding. He was practically the essence of stand-offish, something that made him pretty hard to get to know. For all Harry knew, this old flame of his was Snape's last chance to have a wife and . . .

Well, he already did have a family, of course, but this would change everything. How could it not?

"Harry?" Snape leaned down a little. "You've had word already?"

Since Harry wasn't about to admit that he'd watched them do that on the map, he shook his head.

"What has upset you, in that case?"

"Uh--"

"I think Harry's having a spot of trouble in the girlfriend department," said Draco.

"I am not! What would even make you think--"

Draco gestured at Harry's book bag. "You might want to be a little less transparent. Your doodles during class were illuminating, to say the least. It's a wonder you didn't snap your quill, the way you were attacking the parchment."

"Harry?" asked Snape again.

"It's nothing." Which wasn't true at all. It was everything! But it was nothing to do with Luna. "And anyway, Draco's the one with girlfriend troubles!"

"I might have those sorted soon," said Draco, crossing his arms.

"Your emerging love lives are hardly the point at issue. My quarters, gentlemen?"

Right, because Snape's love life was the one that mattered, apparently. Harry bit his tongue to avoid saying something rude as he turned on a heel and led the way down to the dungeons.

"Something fortifying, I do believe," murmured Snape as soon as they were ensconced in his quarters. "Draco, would you see to it?"

Harry was a little surprised when three glasses of wine sparkled into existence on the table in the living room. "I think he meant dinner--"

"That can wait." Snape reached down for a glass, drinking about half of it before he sat down and gestured for them to do the same. Harry took a wine glass, but only sipped at the dark red liquid it contained. Draco, he noticed, made no move toward the wine, even though he was the one who had chosen it.

The look on his face said that as far as he was concerned, there was nothing to celebrate. And that
was a bit strange, wasn't it? After all, Draco hadn't seemed to have any real issues about Snape going out on that date. Not any issues like Harry's, at any rate.

As it turned out, though, Draco had something else on his mind.

"It's something to do with my mother, isn't it?"

Snape nodded, lifting his dark gaze from the glass in his hand. Draco gulped. "You can tell me. I can-- I can handle it, whatever it is--"

Harry wondered how true that could be, when it sounded like Draco was ready to break apart already.

Snape drained the rest of his glass and set it aside, shifting so that his legs were angled toward where Draco sat on the sofa. "Narcissa has been spotted in Wales."

"She's all right?"

"We don't know. " Snape met Draco's eyes as he appeared to choose his words with great care. "She was seen by one of our operatives in the company of two prominent Death Eaters. According to our source, she wasn't struggling and appeared unharmed. They Apparated away before anything more concrete could be learned, but there was some mention of taking her before the Dark Lord."

"For questioning? For . . . for torture?"

"It might simply be for a routine report," said Snape calmly. "Bear in mind that we do not know why she has been on the Continent all this while. She could well have been gathering intelligence of some sort for Voldemort."

Harry frowned. "Wouldn't Remus have known, if that was the case? Right-hand man, all that?"

"Lupin would know only if Voldemort had elected to share the information with him, or if he had somehow discovered it on his own. Otherwise, he would have no idea why Narcissa went abroad. As indeed seems to be the case."

"But as far as Voldemort knows, they're married! Wouldn't he tell 'Lucius' what's going on with his own wife?" Now Harry was the gulping. "Oh. Oh no. Does this mean that Remus' cover was blown a long time ago? We have to pull him out, we have to do something!"

Snape, though, was shaking his head. "I quite assure you, the fact that the Lestranges were married had no impact on Voldemort. He often regarded them as separate resources to be utilized at his whim."

"My mother's not his resource," said Draco, eyes narrowed fiercely. "So what if she's been abroad for months? She probably fled the country to get away from the Dark Lord, and now, she's been dragged back to face his wrath!"

That hadn't even occurred to Harry, but of course, he was used to thinking of Narcissa as somebody who couldn't be trusted. The Order must feel the same way, since she'd never been told that her husband had died, let alone that an imposter had taken his place. Draco was clearly in denial about what sort of person she was. That hardly mattered at the moment, though. He needed to know how she was. "So how soon can we contact Remus? Even if he didn't know something before, he might now."

"That brings us to the rest of the news I received today," said Snape, turning his full attention to
Harry. "Lupin arrived by emergency Portkey to a safe house in Paris three days ago. The Portkey was spelled to take him to the nearest such location, but Lupin had not informed the Order of any intent to go abroad."

Harry bristled a little. "I'm sure he has a perfectly good explanation for what he was doing in France. Or wherever. So what did he have to say?"

"I meant no offence," murmured Snape, brushing his hair away from his face. "The problem is that we can't ask him for information. He arrived unconscious and has remained in that state ever since."

"Unconscious! For three days?" Harry leaned forward. "Was he injured? Hexed? Poisoned? Crucioed? Is he going to be all right, is he--"

"Everything that can be done is being done," said Snape, reaching out to cover one of Harry's hands with both of his own. "Lupin is receiving the best of care from a pair of French medi-wizards that have long worked in cooperation with Albus. As far as they can tell, Lupin's condition was caused by crossing strong wards while under my specialised version of Polyjuice."

"But he must have crossed loads of strong wards long before this--"

"Not like these. According to the medi-wizards, they seemed designed to accelerate personal time so as to reveal imposters under ordinary Polyjuice. The altered Polyjuice Lupin was taking produced a somewhat different effect."

"Can I see him?"

"For his own safety, no. We weren't even provided word of his arrival there until today. Every precaution is being taken."

Safe house, right. The last thing Harry wanted to do was compromise it. "Do we at least know why the Portkey activated?"

"It was spelled to do that based on . . . specific health indicators."

Ha. Harry might not know the man as well as he should, but he certainly recognized evasion when he heard it. He slid his hand free in one definite motion, repressing the urge to snarl. "What health indicators?"

Snape actually winced. " Ones presaging imminent death."

"Is he going to die? Is that what you're trying so hard not to tell me?" When Snape hesitated, Harry raised his voice. "Are we trying to build a relationship or aren't we? Because I don't think that lying to me some more is going to help much!"

That brought Draco's head up from its slump. "When did Severus--"

"Shut up and stay out of it," snapped Harry.

Surprisingly enough, Draco did. Quite clearly, he didn't have much energy to spare for anything but thoughts of his mother.

"Well?" challenged Harry.

"You do me a disservice," said Snape quietly. "I don't know if Lupin is going to die, and that is
Merlin's own truth on the matter."

"And all your hesitations?"

"Get back to me on those when you have more experience breaking terrible news to those you love."

Oh. Right. Harry should have thought of that. No wonder he hadn't, though. This new, fatherly version of Snape took some getting used to.

Draco suddenly sat upright and glared at them both. "Are you quite done? Because I think that my mother's safety should take priority at the moment!"

Snape's voice was sympathetic, but firm. "We don't know that she is in danger, Draco. But even if she is, we have no idea where she is."

"With the Dark Lord!"

"Without Lupin, we don't know where he is, either."

"Well, we have to do something!" shouted Draco. "And yes, I know that she's a minor concern to the lofty, moralistic twits running around in the Order. I know the lot of you don't think she rates any sort of rescue, and that she doesn't matter to anybody but me--"

"For that reason alone, she also matters to me. More than you can know, I dare say, until such time as you adopt a boy with a living mother."

All the anger seemed to drain out of him in one fell swoop, leaving Draco looking like a fragile shell of himself. "Then why can't we do something?"

Harry bit his lip, wishing he could.

Snape abruptly stood up and took two strides toward Draco, pulling him up and into his arms. For a long moment, he simply held him close. Draco didn't fight him, but neither did he hug him back. He just stood there, arms hanging limply at his side, and shook.

"Both my sons deserve the truth," Snape finally said, pulling Draco even closer as he spoke. "In your case, it is that any rescue attempt is at present impossible."

"I know what you both think, but she's not all bad, Severus. I know it." Draco's voice broke. "And she's in trouble now because she ran away from the Dark Lord! Why else would she have left the country?"

"You used to say it was because of something Lupin had done," murmured Snape. "Don't you see, Draco? We just don't know."

With magic, though, there might be a way to know one thing, Harry thought. "Does she have a portrait?"

Draco pushed away from Snape and shoved his hands deep into his pockets as he turned to face Harry. "No, thank Merlin. I don't particularly want to verify her death. You can't remember, but . . . it was different with Lucius."

It must have been, since Draco had been eager quite recently to see the portrait of Lucius so he could taunt the man. Harry thought better than to bring that up, though. Best to avoid all mention of
kissing and girlfriends and such. He might have just asked for the truth from Snape, but he knew he wasn't ready to hear that Maura Morrighan was moving in or that Harry would soon have a stepmother, if that was even what you called a woman who married your adoptive father . . .

"I wish there was something I could do," said Draco, his voice scratchy with desperation.

"With your loyalties so well known?" Snape shook his head.

"True." Draco sighed, shoving his hands even more deeply into his robe pockets, though Harry wouldn't have thought it possible. "I almost wish I hadn't . . . well, no, I don't really, but if my mother dies because I couldn't get to her as some sort of double agent . . . I'm never going to forgive myself."

"No part of this is your fault--"

"That doesn't matter!"

"It really doesn't," murmured Harry, thinking of Sirius. "I think you know it doesn't, Severus."

Snape's nostrils flared. "I see your point. Short of a Time Turner, however, there is nothing left to do but move forward." He hesitated, clearly thinking thing over, before adding, "For the moment . . . I do believe that means dinner."

"Dinner?" Draco drooped as he stood there. "I can't eat anything."

"Yeah, I'm not hungry, either," said Harry glumly. Unconscious for three days . . . what if Remus never came out of it?

"Ah. Something to tempt you, then."

Harry was expecting him to order "whatever suits," but perhaps Snape knew that would produce empty plates for his two sons. Instead, the food that appeared on the low table in front of them consisted of tiny cubes that looked almost like miniature wrapped boxes, complete with bright glossy coverings and delicate ribbons.

Draco glanced at them and scoffed. "Do you really think that a few petits fours are going to solve my problems?"

Snape's reply was mild. "I think they won't hurt."

"I'll have one," said Harry, since he didn't want to offend Snape. The man was trying, wasn't he? "Oh . . . it's like a dessert?"

"It is a dessert, you imbecile."

Harry ignored the insult. "But dessert for dinner, Severus? Really?"

Snape shrugged, though the pleased light in his eyes said that he'd noticed the name. "You both usually eat well enough. One night's indulgence will do no harm."

Draco dropped back onto the sofa. "Speaking of eating well enough, Severus . . . why have you been missing so often at breakfast this week?"

Damn it, damn it, damn it, thought Harry. It was all he could do not to kick Draco, but unfortunately, that didn't work nearly so well under a coffee table.
Maybe Snape wouldn't answer, though. Maybe he wouldn't say the words out loud and make things real.

He still did look rather solemn, even sombre, but all the same, there was a certain light in his eyes that Harry didn't like.

"I hadn't thought to mention this quite yet," said Snape, so quietly he was almost murmuring. "But after everything that's been said tonight, I hardly think that I should conceal the truth when you ask." He cast Harry a sidelong glance before continuing. "I've been breakfasting in my quarters more often than not . . . with Maura."

Maura. Ugh. He said the name with something that was a lot more than fondness.

"We don't need to know why she's here so early-- I mean, we don't need to know any more than that," said Harry quickly. "None of our business, right, Draco?"

"Some things certainly are not," replied Snape. "However, you should understand that things between myself and Maura are rapidly becoming what I would term serious."

Draco's brow furrowed. "So soon?"

"Not at all. Almost twenty years in the making, by our reckoning."

The sick feeling that had been creeping up on Harry hit him all at once. He dragged in a breath, trying to quell it, but it didn't help much. His stomach was still roiling like it was out to sea. Still, he tried to do the right thing. He knew it was wrong to interfere with Snape's chance at happiness. Especially considering the obvious -- when Harry had been panicked about Snape going out on his date, the man had drawn some truly terrible conclusions, thinking that Harry believed he was unfit for human companionship or something. Harry certainly didn't want to give that impression again, even if it felt like something inside him was almost dying. "Uh, congratulations, then . . ."

"You needn't look so distraught," said Snape mildly as offered Harry another petit four. He looked a little wry when Harry gulped it down and reached for yet another. "It's a private matter between Maura and myself, and I dare say it won't go any further than that for quite some time."

Harry tried to make his voice casual, but he could tell it was a hopeless case. "Quite some time?"

"Until you are comfortable with the idea," said Snape firmly. "Both of you, I should say."

"The idea?" Harry clenched a fist, accidentally smashing a petit four into a mushy, gooey ball.

"Marriage, of course," said Draco.

"I don't need you to speak for me," said Snape wryly.

"But that's what you mean." Draco offered him a rather wan smile. "I'm sorry I'm not in the best frame of mind to hear your joyous news, Severus. My thoughts are somewhere else."

"I do understand that."

Draco nodded. "I wish you all the best with her. I mean it, truly. But now . . . I'm going to have a shower."

Snape said nothing until the bedroom door clicked closed behind Draco. "I mean it too, Harry. I haven't forgotten your unease regarding Maura." He suddenly cleared his throat. "In fact, if our
private breakfasts are enough to make you . . . jealous, as you termed it, then I will speak with her and--"

"But you have forgotten," interrupted Harry. He still felt sick inside at the idea, but why should that matter when Snape had waited twenty years to be with the woman he . . . oh, God. Loved. "I told you to let me stay on the broom even if I was afraid of heights, remember?"

"You said to let you learn to live with it. Surely some time would help?"

"If you don't need time, then why should I?"

Snape tilted his head slightly to the side and studied Harry as if he was an interesting potions challenge.

Harry couldn't stand it. He should be better than this. He should definitely be more mature. Time to take the wand by the grip, then. Time to face up to reality. He knew he shouldn't be so skittish about it. He knew, damn it, that Snape wouldn't abandon him over this! "So . . . um . . . have you asked her?"

*Say no, say no, say no,* went the chant inside his mind.

A tiny smile lifted the corners of Snape's mouth. "Not in so many words, but we have what you might term an understanding."

"Congratulations, then," Harry said again. "Severus . . . if she's really the . . . the one for you, then I want you to--" Uh-oh, *have her* sounded too blunt, considering what Harry had seen on his map. "I want you to be happy with her," he finished instead, forcing himself to go still further. To say the rest. "I do, really. So, uh . . . maybe you should ask her properly. You know?"

"We're hardly in the first flush of young love when everything seems so urgent," claimed Snape, but he still had that funny little smile playing about his mouth. "We can keep to a private arrangement until you're more at ease."

"I wasn't ever going to get at ease on a broom again until I went up on one. Remember?"

"Why are you pushing this?" asked Snape, clearly exasperated. "I was certain that going slowly was the right thing for you."

*Because I don't want to be the bad son,* Harry thought. He wasn't about to say that, though! It would make him sound even more pathetic than the "jealousy" thing he'd admitted to. Damn it, why couldn't he just be happy for the man, or if not that, manage not to put every last one of his anxieties on display?

"Because you can't base your marriage--" There, he'd said the word, much as it wanted to stick in his throat. "On me. You just can't. I can tell that you want to make things official with her, and I don't want to be the reason why you don't."

Snape considered that for a moment, then crossed his legs at the ankle as he leaned back in his chair. "Maybe you fail to understand because you can't remember, but I didn't need an adoption certificate in order to love you, Harry."

"Maybe not, but isn't marriage a bit different? Sooner or later you're going to resent me over this!"

"Over keeping us apart?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "Trust me, Harry. You aren't doing that."
Yeah, the map was proof enough of that. Not that Harry had consulted it again, but the breakfast thing alone was a clear indication that the woman was probably sleeping over every single night!

Having that thought in the back of his mind turned out to be a mistake, though. It made his mouth go where it shouldn't. "But what if she gets pregnant, Severus? Wouldn't it be better to be married before then?"

Snape stared at him, that single eyebrow still lifted high.

"Sorry if that's too personal, but you really should think about it, you know."

Finally, the man coughed slightly. "This is a rather odd juxtaposition, having you act more like a father than a son."

Harry felt his face growing hot. He hadn't meant to do that, not exactly, and it reminded him, anyway, of the lecture Snape had given him on contraception charms and the like. "Yeah, well, magic isn't foolproof," he muttered. "Not all the time."

Snape suddenly leaned far forward, his hands tightly clenched together. "Is that your real fear, Harry? That Maura and I will have a child? That you will be pushed aside?"

What was Harry supposed to say to that? It wasn't like he'd never had that very thought!

"There really is no need to fear that," said Snape, shaking his head. "You see--"

"I know, I know," interrupted Harry. "You'll never repudiate me. You made it really clear. And you wouldn't push me aside, either. I can't help it if I have these stupid reactions, Severus. At least I know they're stupid. And anyway, I told you that you should just let me deal with them!"

"I wouldn't push you aside, no. Certainly not." Snape cleared his throat again. "But I can guarantee that the question won't arise, Harry. You are quite right that magic cannot do everything. Maura lost a child once, you see. And now, she cannot bear another."

Harry blinked. "She's too heartbroken?"

Snape hesitated, frowning. "That is not what I meant, but I am far from sure that Maura would want me to discuss the particulars with anyone."

_Oh._ Something serious had gone wrong, then. Something not even a medi-wizard could fix.

"You shouldn't tell me anything else about it, then."

"I would prefer you not mention in front of Maura what little I did say," added Snape. "The topic is still a sensitive one."

Harry could imagine. Except, he also knew that he couldn't. Not really. Not completely.

"I'm sorry."

Snape merely inclined his head in answer.

"For you as well, I meant."

"For me?"

"Yeah." Thinking again of the way Snape had taken his awful childhood to heart, Harry added,
"You deserve to have a child of your own as much as anybody, Severus."

Snape suddenly surged to his feet and pulled Harry up into an embrace, clouting him lightly on the shoulder in the process. "You idiot, idiot child! When will you understand? I have a child of my own! I have two!"

Harry thought back over what he'd said and winced a little. "Right. You do. I just meant, you know . . . it's only natural that you might want a child of your bloodline."

Snape leaned down a little to speak against Harry's ear. "Instead, the fates saw fit to give me a son of my choosing, and then another one besides. Believe me, Harry. I have no complaints."

Harry nodded and tried to get them back to what mattered. His own discomfort was hardly the point. "So then, you'll ask her?"

Pulling back, Snape stared down into Harry's face. He must have been satisfied with what he saw, since he gave a sharp nod. "Soon."

Harry tried to picture that and failed. "Um, on bended knee? Is that how wizards go about proposing?"

"Thank Merlin, no." Snape didn't offer any details, but perhaps that was for the best, since Harry found he didn't really want to picture it, after all.

Harry gave him a faint smile, trying his very best to be the kind of son the man deserved. "Um, then why don't you freshen up a bit and then invite her over here for dinner, just the four of us, so she knows you've told us how serious things are getting?"

"I fear your brother is in no mood for company."

That was true enough. In fact, Harry should have thought of that.

"Another night, then, when Draco's feeling more social."

"I shall make it a priority," promised Snape.

"And in the meantime you'll keep me in the loop about Remus?"

Snape took a step backwards. "Of course. I'll request that Albus apprise us of any developments without delay."

"It's hard not knowing." Harry swallowed. "I wish we could do something. I mean, I can understand how Draco feels. If the worst happens and his mother dies . . ."

"He will still have his father," said Snape. "Whatever happens, I will be there for him."

For just a moment, magic seemed to shimmer in the air as a terrible premonition sent a chill sweeping through Harry from head to toe. A premonition of what, though?

==================================================================
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:
Chapter Forty-Three: A Cacophony of Elves

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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--asking for more dual crests
"Still no news of Remus?"

Snape shook his head.

"Yeah, I know. Asking twelve times a day isn't going to produce any. You must be pretty tired of me coming down here to bug you about it."

"Quite the contrary. I enjoy your company."

Harry almost snorted. "I sometimes wonder why you would, considering the way I kept treating you."

"Whereas I, of course always been the soul of compassion towards you."

"Well, there is that," murmured Harry, trying hard not to smile. He shouldn't find a comment like that endearing, should he? Snape had been awful to him, after all. Worse than awful. And yet now, the edge of those memories seemed somehow blunted. "You probably thought that a little payback was well-deserved."

"How Slytherin would that be?" asked Snape, his hair swaying as he shook his head again. "I could understand why you would be so angry, even if you could not properly remember matters."

"Still can't. I'm starting to think that I'll never get my sixth year back. Then again, maybe I don't want to. Could that be it, do you think?"

Snape's whole stance stiffened, his features closing off in a way that was remarkably easy to read, now that Harry knew him better. "I don't mean the adoption, Severus! I mean, Lucius Malfoy and needles, and then needles on myself, and killing him in the end, and God only knows what else. What if my mind just doesn't want to deal with a load of crap like that?"

"Possible, I suppose."

"Possible," echoed Harry morosely. "But that would mean there's never going to be any cure for my amnesia."

"If your mind is truly so averse, then perhaps it is for the best."

"I thought you wanted me to remember!"

"I want whatever is best for you," said Snape firmly. "I was once certain that I knew exactly what would bring your memories roaring back. When that conviction proved unfounded..." He raised his shoulders in a slight shrug. "I have had to accept that I do not have the answer. We may simply have to adjust to the hand that fate has dealt us."
Harry raised an eyebrow, relieved at the chance to move the conversation away from himself. "Determinism, Severus? Didn't you spend most of an Ethics lecture bad-mouthing that philosophy?"

Snape offered him a small smile. "Well, I did say 'may.' Speaking of academics, however, shall we get started on our Potions lesson?"

Harry surprised himself by not even wanting to grimace as he nodded.

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"We don't have an essay due anytime soon, do we?" asked Ron as he plonked himself down next to Harry in the Gryffindor common room.

"Just writing a letter," mumbled Harry, moving his quill up to his mouth so he could chew on the end of it.

Ron leaned over a bit, peering more closely at the parchment. "Oh. That's probably a good idea, but yeah. Bit tough, eh?"

*Bit tough* hardly captured the trouble Harry was having trying to write a letter to Dudley, of all people. He'd told Snape he'd get started on it "straight away," only to put it off and off. And no wonder! It was one thing to accept that Snape actually liked him now; he'd had plenty of evidence to convince him of that. When it came to the idea that *Dudley* actually liked him, Harry found himself at a real loss. On the one hand, he did believe what people had told him; they wouldn't lie about a thing like that. On the other hand, the whole thing seemed hazy and unreal.

But then, a lot of things in his life had seemed hazy and unreal since he'd woken up without his memories.

"I think I just have to figure out the first couple of sentences. Maybe then the rest will just . . . flow out," said Harry, trying to talk himself into it. Nothing for it, right? Harry put quill to parchment directly underneath the *Dear Dudley*, he'd already written and forced his hand to move. He'd start with an explanation of his amnesia and he'd be sure to mention that it was the reason he hadn't sent Dudley a Christmas present. And then he'd . . . actually, he had no idea.

A sudden squeak of high voices had Harry looking up, his mouth dropping open in astonishment as he took in the sight before him. At least a dozen house elves had suddenly popped into the common room. Not only that, but every one of them had their little arms full to overflowing with heaps and heaps of flowers. Yet this didn't look at all like some extravagant flower delivery, since all the elves were weeping and wailing as if their entire world was coming to an end, fat tears pouring down their faces to drip all over the flowers and onto the stone floor beneath.

Ron stepped toward the group, his hands planted on his hips. "What's the meaning of all this?"

"W-- w-- we is to be talking to Miss Gr-- Gr-- Granger, sir," said the frontmost elf in a quavering voice. 
Not what Ron wanted to hear. "I also happen to be a seventh-year Prefect in this house," he retorted. "You can tell me."

"D-- d-- delivery, sir! D-- d-- delivery for Miss H-- H-- H-- Hermione Granger!"

As if the name was some sort of cue, all the little elves started absolutely bawling, at least half of them dropping their bundles of flowers so that they could rub at their faces. The noise was absolutely deafening.

"What on earth is going on?" called Hermione as she came bounding down the stairs.

"Delivery for you!" shouted Ron over the noise the elves were making.

"Delivery?" Hermione stepped over to one of the elves, sliding slightly on the flowers strewn across the floor. Kneeling down in front of a distraught elf, she spoke in what was probably the gentlest voice Harry had ever heard her use. "What's this, then? Tears?"

The tiny elf sniffled as it looked up at her, ears quivering and eyes huge. "No clothes, miss, please. No hats, no scarves. We is being good, we is. We is delivering the flowers to you just like Master Draco Snape is saying!"

Oh. Of course. Harry was a little surprised he hadn't realised the truth sooner.

"So Master Draco sent these, did he?" asked Hermione in a dark tone as she stood up.

Most of the elves nodded, which made them look demented since at least half of them were still making shrill noises of distress.

"Well, you can just take them back to him, then!"

The other girls in the common room gasped at that. Harry had to agree, really. It was probably the best display of flowers he'd ever seen, with hundreds of blossoms releasing their fragrance into the air by then. Mounds of them were dark red roses in full bloom, but the other half were very odd, featuring several hues slowly blending and changing as Harry watched. Really, the effect was a bit like staring at the lava lamp that Dudley had demanded for Christmas one year. That wasn't the only thing, though; the shape of the multicoloured flowers also seemed off. They weren't quite daisies, but neither were they any of the other kinds of blooms he'd had to tend in Aunt Petunia's garden over the years.

"You can't refuse them," exclaimed Parvati. "Don't you have any idea what they must have cost?"

"Cost is hardly the issue!"

"It is in the kind of circles where Draco grew up," insisted Parvati. "And that's significant in and of itself. Purebloods use flowers like these to express how much someone means to them--"

"Rich snot-faced purebloods, that is," muttered Ron. "With their pretentious ever-blooming spell flowers--"

Parvati ignored him. "Each and every one has to be individually created and enchanted. I've never even heard of someone sending more than a dozen, or three at the very most! This is-- this is--"

She gave up and just shook her head.

"Ludicrous," volunteered Ron.
Several girls began whispering to each other, like a rumour mill going crazy. Harry could just see it: before nightfall, word would spread through the whole castle that Draco Snape had declared his undying love for Hermione Granger.

"You should really take them back," said Hermione in a much calmer tone.

The house-elf reaction wasn't what she had wanted, Harry felt sure. They instantly dropped the flowers they were still holding and started rushing about like loons, shrieking that they were bad and needed to be punished. Hermione started chasing after them, but Harry knew from experience how hard it was to stop a house-elf determined to injure himself. In less than ten seconds, the common room was filled not just with loud wailing but also with the awful noise of hands being slammed in doors, tables being dropped on feet, and fireplace pokers connecting with skulls and shins.

Harry, Ron, and several other Gryffindors rushed forward to grab at individual elves. This, of course, only added to the noise and confusion in the common room.

The din was deafening, but Hermione finally managed to make herself heard over it. "All right!" she shouted, both her hands clutching at house-elves frantically trying to free themselves from her grasp. "I'll accept the flowers! No sending them back, all right? Just stop hurting yourselves!"

She had to keep calling out in that vein for almost a full minute before the elves stopped thrashing against their Gryffindor captors. "Is it being true?" asked a big-eared one that Harry personally thought looked about an inch away from passing out. "Miss Hermione will be accepting the fl-- fl-- flowers?"

Hermione let go of the elves and knelt down, putting herself on their level. "Yes, all right? No need to bang yourselves up over it, hmm?"

The elves never did make any reply to that. They just suddenly vanished, leaving behind a common room not only strewn with hundreds of flowers, many of them trampled and smashed, but also with furniture turned topsy-turvy.

"Well, that was abrupt," said Hermione, shaking her head as she rose to her feet. "Just look at this mess. Anybody want some flowers?"

"You can't give them away!" gasped Parvati. "They're special!"

"Oh, stop acting as if they sprouted from the Holy Grail," snapped Hermione. "I don't know what Draco thinks he's playing at, but if he knew me at all, he'd know I'm not the type to be swayed by a few blossoms! Particularly not when they're delivered by house-elf! Honestly!"

"You're a bit ungrateful," retorted Parvati. "Any other girl would be over the moon to receive an honour like this, even if she couldn't stand the boy responsible!"

"That about sums it up!"

That didn't sound good at all. "Hermione," tried Harry.

"Ha, you're his brother, so you can just shut up! And you can tell him from me that-- No, on second thought, I think I'd rather tell him myself!"

With that, she began stomping her way toward the common room door. Any attempt at a dramatic exit, however, was largely ruined by the fact that she slid several times on mashed petals and stems.
Harry knew she didn't want him to interfere, but considering what he knew that she didn't, he thought he'd better. He ran after her, yanked open the portrait door she'd just slammed, and grabbed her by the sleeve. "I have to tell you something before you go down there."

"No, you really don't."

"Yeah, I really do." Harry leaned closer. "Let's go to the Room of Requirement so we can't be overheard. It's . . . it's about the old crowd, all right?"

"The . . ." Hermione stopped striding forward and turned to face him. "You aren't just trying to be a good brother and get him off the hook?"

"No, honest. I even agree that it was daft of him to involve the house-elves. This is about something else."

Hermione sighed, but said nothing more about it as she walked at his side toward the Room of Requirement.

"Oh," said Hermione slowly when Harry had finished telling her what he knew about Narcissa Malfoy. It wasn't much. They hadn't got any new information about her, not since the night when they first found out that she'd been seen in Wales in the company of Death Eaters. There hadn't been anything much about Remus, either, just a few notices detailing no change in his condition. "That's awful, Harry."

"Yeah."

"Even if she's the most terrible person alive, she's still his mum! This must be why he's been so quiet in classes lately."

"Yeah," said Harry, remembering the awful blank look in Draco's eyes. "He can't concentrate. And, you know, I thought you should know about this before you go down to Slytherin. He's not in the best frame of mind to get yelled at."

Hermione chewed her lip. "I'm sure he's not. But if he's so despondent, isn't it a bit weird he would arrange for flowers?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "I bet he set all this up before we'd heard about his mum. He said something about how he might have his 'girlfriend troubles' sorted soon. And if all those fancy flowers had to be individually spelled, he'd have needed some lead time, so--"

"Oh, so I'm his 'girlfriend,' am I?" Hermione snorted. "Not likely, not if he thinks he can buy me off with flowers. After what he did?"

Harry didn't know if she meant Draco's stunt with the portrait or whatever Potions incident had landed Draco with a detention, but he didn't ask. "Maybe he doesn't think that. Um . . . maybe he
was just trying to say sorry, and he did it this way because, you know, it's what he learned growing up?"

"I might be able to swallow that if not for the house-elves. Doesn't he know me at all?"

Harry had to admit, that did show pretty bad judgement.

"And they were crying, too!"

"Well, to be fair, you made them do worse than cry."

Hermione made a face. "I do wish I could get them to see sense. It's just sad and wrong, how wizards treat them! And what did Draco say to them to make them arrive already crying, I'd like to know!"

The way Harry saw things, Draco had a right to explain that for himself. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I will. Tonight, do you think? After what you told me, about his mum . . . "

"There's no telling how long it will be before we know something about that. Probably best not to mention it, though, unless you're behind strong enough wards. The whole thing could be tied into the statue somehow."

That comment, though, meant that he had to explain the news about Remus. Then had had to explain why he'd been keeping that bit to himself. The answer was simple, really; there was nothing that Hermione or Ron could do, so Harry hadn't seen any point in worrying them.

It reminded him, though, of how hard he'd been on Snape for hesitating to tell him the whole truth about Remus. Harry understood that better now . . . just as Snape had said that he someday would.

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After Harry had finished his letter to Dudley, he tried to wait up for Hermione, but he ended up dozing off on in the common room long after everyone else had gone to bed. First, though, he'd had to suffer through Ron's bad mood. It was all he could do not to shout at him that if he'd wanted Hermione for himself, he shouldn't have ditched her for Lavendar. Of course, the way Ron was talking, it seemed like he didn't really want her for himself. He just didn't want Draco to have her, either.

And he particularly didn't want Draco buying her expensive presents that Ron could never afford.

For a while, it seemed like Ron would never shut up about it, not even when Harry tried to distract him with chess. Harry actually beat him twice in a row -- an unheard of feat -- before Ron started paying attention to the match. After that, of course, it was no contest.

Harry wasn't sure quite how late it was when he surfaced to the feeling of someone gently shaking him awake.

"Hey," said Hermione in a soft tone. "Don't you want to sleep in your own bed?"
Harry rubbed at his eyes for a moment and peered around. The common room was lit only by the soft glow of a few dying embers, and there was nobody to be seen but himself and Hermione. The flowers, of course, were long gone. They'd been swept up by Gryffindor girls from first year through seventh before Harry had even returned from the Room of Requirement. According to Ron's grumbling, even Lavender had taken some.

"Rather hear what happened," he said groggily, sitting up and running his hands through his hair. "Draco?"

Sighing a little, Hermione sat down alongside him. "It turns out that he meant well. The elves arrived here crying because Draco had actually paid them to deliver the flowers. He said that he knew I wouldn't want them exploited."

That explained a lot. "Being paid is a huge insult if you're not Dobby."

"It seems so, yes." Hermione paused, and then added in a slightly bitter tone. "Looking back, I think they were also rather upset to have to come near me. That mention of clothes . . . I think they were worried that I might try to free them."

"Well, from their point of view . . ."

"Poor deluded elves."

Harry nodded, since he agreed with the deluded part. He just couldn't see trying to free them when it would make them so very miserable. He was just grateful that Dobby had found a way to break out of that subservient mould, particularly considering the family he'd had to slave for. It was all Harry could do not to gulp, imagining the things that Remus had probably had to do in order to stay in character.

And now Remus himself might not even live! He didn't deserve that, no matter what he'd had to do.

"How was Draco?" asked Harry. "I mean, I'd like to think he's getting a little less depressed about, er, his situation, but--"

"No, you were right. He'd arranged for the flowers before he got that bad news." Hermione sighed. "He put a lot of thought into it, I have to admit. Remember all those red roses? He included them as a mark of respect for my Muggle heritage, he said. And the spell flowers were to show that he has exactly the same regard for me that he'd have for a pure-blooded girl."

"Sounds brilliant--"

Hermione sailed right on. "Personally, though, I don't like the comparison. I'd rather he simply see me as me. Instead, he still has this compulsive need to categorise people, and that can only mean that deep, deep down, he does still have some remnant of those awful attitudes he brayed about for so many years."

"It doesn't mean that--"

"Oh, Harry," said Hermione sadly. "I know you're really happy to have a brother, but you can't remember how it was last year. Draco only joined your side in the war to begin with because he wanted to be on the winning side. It was pragmatic, not moral."

"I can't remember. That's true enough." Harry shifted a little in order to face her better. "I do know one thing, though. Making that very decision started a process of change inside him, and he did end up in a better place when it comes to things like blood. We've talked about it, a lot. I mean, since
the amnesia."

He didn't want to say more in case he accidentally reminded her of the way Draco had been willing to tell him all about last year even when Harry's therapist had said not to. Hermione was still royally peeved about the fact that Snape had lifted that restriction.

Hermione twisted a strand of hair instead of replying.

"Look, he's not perfect, but he's changed a tonne. If not, how could he possibly have fallen in love--" Hmm. Best not to say Rhiannon's name, probably. Even now. "Um, the way he did? I mean, he wanted to marry her! He was dead serious about it! I mean, come on! When I woke up with amnesia and laughed about what a total liar he was, you were the one who convinced me he was sincere!"

Harry couldn't believe she would need the reminder, but maybe that just proved that when emotions got involved, even Hermione's brain power could take a flying leap out the window.

"But that's just the thing, don't you see? If he really, truly did love her, then that has to mean that he's changed deep down at a fundamental level. But if he really, truly did love her, then how can he be in love with me already? It's only been a few months! So logically, you have to admit, the solution must be that he didn't love her that much, in which case, maybe he didn't change all that much either."

"Love's not logical, though."

"Tell me about it. Even knowing all this, even knowing that he practically worships his mother and she'd just hate the thought of him with me . . ." Hermione sighed. "I'm still tempted to see where this might go."

"I'm sure he's changed," said Harry firmly. "He's not his father, and he's not his mother, either. He's his own person. And, you know, maybe you should just see him for him."

"Nothing like having your own advice thrown back at you."

"Well, when it was good advice," said Harry with a lopsided grin.

"I didn't know that late nights made you so cheeky."

"I didn't know until you told me that Draco was such a good--"

He never did get to say "kisser" since Hermione abruptly clapped her hand over his mouth. "Like I want that to get around!"

"What, that you and he had a moment?"

"No, that he's got a lot more to recommend him than just loads of money and good looks!"

"Oooh, good looks, too--"

Hermione cut him off with a glare. "Do I tease you about Luna like this? Would you like me to start?"

"Yeah, all right. Enough said. But, uh, are you going to give Draco a chance? I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you when he planned that stunt with the portrait."

"He did apologise profusely," mused Hermione. "Again tonight, I mean. And then he claimed that I
had 'witchcraft in my lips' and it had brought him to his senses about what had been in front of him the whole time. Rather appropriate, actually."

"Appropriate?"

"The quotation. It's Shakespeare, and for once, Draco didn't try to insist that anybody with great talent must have been a secret wizard. I suppose he's left me with a lot to think about, really. But now, I'm for bed. You should be, too. Sleeping in the tower tonight, I take it?"

"You know me. A night here, a night there . . ."

"I never thought I'd see you so comfortable to be spending time in Slytherin."

"I'm getting there," said Harry. Which was true, actually; his nights in Slytherin hadn't been awful at all, even if Zabini did like to be a royal pain in the arse. "'Night," he said, yawning as he stood up and stretched a bit.

Hermione pecked him lightly on the cheek. "Not a word to Draco, all right? Especially not about the, er, good looks or the other bits."

"You don't want me to tell Draco you were talking about his bits?"

"Harry!"

"Fine, fine. Not a word."

Hermione gave him one last stern glance before heading up the girls' staircase.

Harry yawned, but before he went to bed, he called for Dobby to take his letter to the Owlery.

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The next day at breakfast, Draco looked a little less wan than usual, but he was still doing little more than picking at his food when Harry came to sit across from him where he'd taken up a position at the very end of the Slytherin table, as far as he could get from any of his housemates.

Draco glanced up, grimaced a little, and went back to pushing the runny yolk of an egg around his plate.

"So the flowers could have gone off better," said Harry after a moment. "Still, though, they got her talking to you, didn't they?"

"Such as it was."

"She liked the witchcraft quote--"

"It's not exactly a comfort to know that Hermione's going to repeat all our private conversations verbatim."
"Yeah, well since you were talking for hours and she summed it up in two minutes, I hardly think that's what she did," Harry retorted. "You'd feel a lot differently if the timing were better."

"Probably true." Draco sighed and pushed his plate away. "I don't like being this preoccupied. It shouldn't matter to me so much, should it?" He abruptly drew his wand and swished it, murmuring *Muffliato*. "If anyone can hear us, we'll sound like we're mumbling, now."

"Good. Because I have to tell you, of course it should matter. She's your mother!"

"Is she? I seem to remember something about her renouncing her parental rights."

*Ouch.* Harry hadn't realized that things had been as bad as that. He'd just assumed that Narcissa Malfoy had made no objection to the adoption. As far as Harry was concerned, she was a terrible person either way, but Draco obviously loved her. Harry wasn't going to hurt him even worse by acting like it was wrong to feel that way. "She's still your mother, so of course you're worried. You only get one mother, after all."

Draco sighed. "Says the boy who's on his second father. When are you going to understand? Severus really is your dad, you daft twit."

Harry clenched his fists, then saw what he was doing and yanked them under the table to hide them. "I didn't mean that he wasn't!"

"Over-reacting to a simple observation is hardly likely to convince me."

"Maybe I don't like being called names--"

"Oh, yes, of course that must be the problem. But wait! If that's the only issue, then why do you keep talking like you haven't internalised the adoption?"

"Maybe because I have amnesia? And anyway, I was talking about mothers, not fathers!"

"So you are going to stand in the way of Severus and Morrighan!"

"I was the one who said she should join the three of us for a family dinner, I'll have you know," said Harry, fuming by then. "And for your information, you're the one standing in the way of that happening! Severus said he'd make it a priority, but he was worried about your reaction!"

"My reaction? I'm the one who got the snitch flying in the first place!"

"Ha! He'd liked her for years before you sent them to *La Trivia*."

Draco spread his hands out on the table, fingers widely splayed as he spoke in a suddenly subdued tone. "*La Traviata, Harry."

"That's all it takes to calm you down? Me naming the wrong opera?"

"Not exactly. It just suddenly occured to me that I was lashing out at you for no good reason. It's just easier to have something else to think about besides--" His voice caught when he tried to go on. "Wh-- What might be happening right now to my mother. What if they're torturing her? What if she's dead already and it's all my fault?"

Harry's irritation vanished on the spot. "Oh, no, no. You can't think that way, Draco. You don't even really know that Voldemort is angry with her. But if he is, it's not your fault."

"No? If the Dark Lord is angry, it's because she raised a traitor. *Me*, that is."
"You can't be responsible for what a madman decides to do. And you wouldn't want to be loyal to him anyway," said Harry, leaning forward a little. "Think about what he'd do to Hermione."

"Thank you for that lovely image," said Draco sourly. "Now I can have twice as many nightmares."

"I didn't mean to--"

"No, I know you didn't." Draco sighed again. "Well, at least one thing is clear, now. I've been horribly self-centred of late. Not without good cause, but it needs to stop. So let's take care of that other matter, shall we? We'll go up to the head table and invite Professor Morrighan to that family dinner."

Harry gulped. "Um, maybe that should wait until you're not so upset--"

"So I can continue thinking only about myself? That's only going to keep me distraught. No, the best thing right now would be a distraction. I can hardly think of a more effective one that dining with Dad's intended bride." Draco shifted as if getting ready to rise to his feet.

Harry was the one who had brought it up, but now that a dinner with Morrighan might actually be on, Harry felt as if he couldn't quite breathe. "But that's still thinking of yourself, right? You need a distraction, see?"

"At least this distraction will work to someone else's benefit as well." Draco moved as if to stand up.

"Wait, wait-- It should be Severus who invites her, right? Not us, that's not our place--"

"He didn't mind when I basically set them up on a date--"

"He would have if he hadn't been so annoyed with my reaction!"

"That's why it has to come from both of us, this time." Draco gave a little jerk of his head. "Come on, let's go and do this."

"Here in the Great Hall? Where anyone could hear?"

"Did you think he was going to marry her and not let anybody know?" mocked Draco. "If that were his style, I dare say he'd have shown a great deal more reluctance to be acclaimed as Harry Potter's father. This might be even more shocking in its own way, but I say that's all the more reason to get people started thinking of them together."

"No, no--" Harry gulped, feeling like he was grasping for straws by then. "I . . . er, I meant Miss Burbage! You know, she's got this awful crush on Snape and so we really shouldn't invite another woman over when she's right there to get her heart broken--"

"She's thirty feet away," said Draco dryly. "Were you planning to shout your invitation?"

"Shut up!" snapped Harry. "I just-- I just--"

"I thought you were the one who said she should join us for a dinner, and I was the obstacle. Are you really sure you want to trade places?"

"I was trying to be mature during that conversation."

"And now you're not?"
"No, I am--" Harry slumped on the bench, wishing he could bang his forehead against the table. "It's just hard."

Draco leaned forward. "I don't really see why it would be, Harry. At least she's always liked you and treated you decently. I know you don't remember, but Morrighan spent months being a right bitch to me. And if I can look past that to think of Severus, I really believe that you--"

"Because of Lucius?" interrupted Harry.

"Because of Buckbeak, actually."

"Oh."

"Then she saw me with Loki and decided to give me a second chance. And I suspect that she and Severus also had words about it. So that's that. But what's your issue with her?"

"It's not with her."

Draco's brow furrowed. "With Dad, you mean?"

"No, it's just me." Harry sighed. "Oh, fuck it. I promised myself I wouldn't be a whiny little toerag about this. I guess it's time to stop being one."

"All set, then?" Draco gave him a tremulous smile. "Because this won't come across right if you seem reluctant. It has to be both of us, sincerely inviting her, if we want to give Dad this chance to have someone to be happy with."

*He has me*, Harry wanted to say. Or better yet, *He has us.*

But that was just stupid and he knew it. He wouldn't in a million years say he didn't need Luna just because he also had a father and brother. There was no reason why he should expect Snape to be any different. He was a human being too, with human needs. And that meant more than just family love.

Once, he would have laughed himself silly at the idea that the greasy git of the dungeons could love at all. Back then, he probably hadn't even really believed that the giant bat of Slytherin was just as human as everybody else. Talk about idiotic.

"Yeah," said Harry, his voice thick with embarrassment. At least Draco had had a good reason for being so self-centred. "You're right. About all of it. Let's go talk to her. Or him. Maybe, you know, the invitation should come from him?"

"You did notice that they're sitting side by side?"

Yeah, Harry had noticed, all right. "So we talk to him later and let him be the one to--"

"Certainly not. He'll tell himself I'm still too despondent. Or that you still aren't happy about it. The only way to get this broom in the air is for the two of us to take it by the handle."

"He'll be annoyed at our interference, though."

Draco cancelled the muffling spell. "Not for long."

Probably true. "Yeah, all right."

They made it up to the head table just as breakfast was drawing to a close. In fact, the only staff
member still at the head table was Hooch, and she was at the extreme far end.

Snape's eyebrows rose a little at their joint approach. "Is there a problem, gentlemen?"

"Just a small one," said Draco. "Good morning, Professor Morrighan."

"Good morning--"

"And the problem?" rapped out Snape.

"It's not really a problem at all," said Harry, steeling himself. Now or never, right? If he didn't say it, Draco would, and then Harry would miss his chance to seem like he didn't have a problem. Even if he did. "Draco and I would like to invite Miss Morrighan to dinner tonight. Um, in your quarters."

"In 'my' quarters?"

Harry thought the dark tone meant the man was objecting to their presumption, but Draco heard it differently. "At home, he means."

"Yes. At home," Harry quickly added. "I'm sorry, with the amnesia, it's still a little hard to think of it that way--"

"Don't apologize." Snape looked Harry over rather critically, as if he might say something more. Harry held his breath, Occluding as hard as he could while he tried to look open and accepting. He almost sighed with relief when the man finally turned his attention to Draco, who just stared back in a way that looked almost like a challenge.

After a moment, Snape shook his head slightly as if bemused. "Maura?"

She cleared her throat, one hand moving restlessly on the tabletop. "Well, that does sound lovely. But since we are both professors and your sons are our students, perhaps it would be more appropriate to wait until term ends."

Harry didn't know if she meant that or if she was playing hard to get, but she could hardly have given Snape a better opening. Assuming he wanted one. It did seem to Harry that he could manage his own courting. Then again, he wasn't exactly objecting, was he? His voice was positively velvety when he replied.

"Ah, but at home, these young men are my sons first and foremost. And I dare say they are not inviting you as a professor, but rather . . ."

He let the silence speak for itself.

Draco couldn't do the same, it seemed. "We want you to know that we approve of you and Severus being together."

To Harry's amusement, the last two words caused a slight pink tint to wash into Morrighan's cheeks. "Really, Mr Snape. That's a rather strong turn of phrase for a single outing to the opera."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much--"

"That is quite enough," interrupted Severus.

Draco looked down. "Yes, sir."
"We really do want you to come to dinner," added Harry after a moment of silence proved that Draco wasn't going to say anything more. He wasn't sure where he got the nerve to go on, but somehow he managed. "Please? It would mean a lot to . . . er, all three of us."

"You must forgive them, Maura," said Snape in a smooth tone that somehow sounded soft and hard all at once. "It has probably never occurred to them that I am capable of handling my own affairs without their prompting."

"Well, you did need a push to take her to the opera," murmured Draco. "And is 'affair' really the best word, considering?"

"Quite enough!"

"I must dash, Professor Morrighan," Draco suddenly announced. "I shouldn't be late to class. But I do look forward to your lovely company at dinner. As do we all, I feel certain."

With that, he whirled away, neatly evading Snape's glare.

"Teenagers," muttered Snape, raising his glare to Harry. "You don't know nearly as much as you think you do."

"Hey!" objected Harry. "I wasn't the one practically announcing how we'd noticed the two of you missing at breakfast all those times!"

Snape's own cheeks flared. "You appear to be!"

"Oh." Harry cleared his throat. "Um, right. Oops. Sorry."

"I dare say you will be."

Morrighan chuckled slightly. "I think you must forgive them as well, Severus."

His harsh visage softened at that. "As you wish." Then, to Harry: "And as for you . . . did your brother bully you into issuing this invitation?"

"Not at all," said Harry, raising his chin a little. That wasn't true, of course, but what did that matter when the truth would do so much more damage than a lie? And anyway, it was sort of true. "In fact, I was the one to bring it up this morning. But we both think it's a smashing good idea. Don't you?"

Snape looked like he didn't much appreciate the direct challenge, but he did rise to it. "Certainly. Maura, if you can overlook the untoward behaviour of my sons, who should by all accounts know far better, will you grace our home with your lovely presence this evening?"

Lovely presence. Now Harry was the one feeling a blush rise to stain his neck and cheeks.

"I will, though I must say that's the most barbed invitation I've ever received." Morrighan rose to her feet. "Mind you aren't late to Defense, Mr Potter." She suddenly raised her voice. "Madame Hooch? If I might have a word?"

Snape watched the two witches leave, then turned back to glower at Harry. "I did not need to be embarrassed like that, Harry."

"Look, we just wanted her to know that we like her. Um, with you, I mean. Especially after I was so horrible over the opera thing. It seemed important to make the effort."
"Now she thinks me incapable of making the effort, you understand!"

"Well, then you'll just have to prove her wrong, won't you?" When that only made Snape's expression darken further, Harry decided that retreat was probably his best option. "Oh, look at the time--"

"Go," muttered Snape, his own robes whirling madly as he rose and spun away toward his own classes.

It was a bit unnerving to head over to Potions at the end of the day, considering how the invitation at breakfast had gone, but Harry thought that a few minutes with Snape would help him feel less frantic about the prospect of dinner with Morrighan.

His first clue that Severus might be the one to need steadying was that fact that brewing was still in progress when Harry let himself in. He slipped into the empty back row and slouched down, hoping to remain unseen until class ended. He didn't, of course, but the odd thing was that it was the other students who noticed him, even waving a little. Snape didn't seem to see him at all.

He was obviously on edge, barking out commands and stalking back and forth like a panther while his students brewed. For all that, though, he was barely paying attention to what they did. When Ernie's potion boiled over, Snape stared at it for ages before finally spelling it away. And it was Padma, not Snape, who had to stop Luna --three times-- from adding extra moonwort to her cauldron.

Harry tried not to stare, but he'd literally never seen Snape so distracted in Potions before. He didn't know what was going on, but it couldn't be the prospect of dinner with Morrighan that had him in such a state, not considering all their breakfasts. Or did he think, even after that morning, that Harry was going to act out again about their relationship?

When Draco got up to put away his unused ingredients, Harry joined him in the supply cupboard and closed the door behind them. "Maybe we miscalculated," murmured Harry as soon as they were alone. "I thought as much when Severus wasn't around at lunch. We should have left things to him."

Draco nodded, his eyes deeply shadowed.

"Oh, no." Harry swallowed. "You've had news?"

"No, not that." Draco turned away from the shelves to face Harry. "During my free period I was supposed to have my careers session with Severus. I waited for more than an hour. He never showed up."

That didn't sound good.

"I just wanted him to be happy," added Draco, shoving his hands deep into his robe pockets. "And
now it's all a mess! He probably can't stand to look at me. Well, I know he can't! He never has, not once during this entire brewing session, and-- and-- well, you know perfectly well that I can't count on my mother for a fucking thing, and if I lose Severus too, I just don't know--"

"Oh, Draco." Harry didn't know what to do except pull the other boy against him.

"You are not going to lose me, you idiot child," said a strained voice as the door creaked open. "I thought you were over that."

"And I thought you'd take a little gentle teasing in stride, this morning," said Draco, stepping back from Harry.

Snape waved his wand in an elaborate arc and then questioned, "If I didn't want rid of you when you poisoned your fellow Slytherins, then why would I do so now?"

"Then why did you skive off his private conference this afternoon?" challenged Harry.

Snape blinked, and then his features abruptly twisted. "Your career advising appointment."

Draco raised his chin. "Don't pretend you forgot, because I know you, Severus. Plots within plots -- you never forget anything!"

"In actual point of fact, I did forget."

"Oh, please." Draco pointed to his crest. "Harry might fall for a line like that, but I happen to be a Slytherin!"

"Hey! Gryffindor never did mean imbecile--"

Snape pulled something out of the pocket of his frock coat and laid it down on the table in the middle of the supply room. "I did forget, Draco. I was a bit preoccupied buying that."

*That* turned out to be a small crystal pyramid. Cut with sparkling parallel facets on every side, it caught the light by its many prisms and seemed to shatter it into its component colours. Harry had seen similar items when he attended Muggle school, but this, he thought, just had to be enhanced with magic. Even by the dim light in the supply cupboard, the pyramid fairly glowed with the rainbows bouncing about inside it.

Draco staggered back until he collided with the shelves behind him. "Are you certain?"

"Of course."

"Because . . ." Draco wet his lips. "I know I went on about it, but I didn't intend to pressure you. Truly."

"I can assure you, you didn't," said Severus, stepping around the table to grip Draco by both forearms. "Except insofar as this morning's ridiculous exchange convinced me that I would much prefer to clarify matters once and for all."

Draco gave a shaky nod. "Then I wish you every joy."

Snape bowed from the waist, just slightly. "I thank you, Draco my son."

"Wait, wait! I said it wrong!" Draco moved to grip Snape then, the two of them standing with clasped forearms as he babbled out, "It doesn't mean anything, honestly! It's just, I wasn't expecting this today or I'd have reviewed the forms more closely."
"Draco," said Snape, leaning in a bit. "All is well. And appreciated, but nothing more is needful--"

"I want to do things properly." Draco adjusted his stance to look the other man steadily in the eyes. "I wish you every joy, Severus my father. May your heirs be strong in magic and bound to you in love."

Snape bowed again, this time a little bit more deeply. "I thank you, Draco my son." He stepped back, then, a slight smile curving his mouth as he added, "My heirs are already all I could wish and more."

Draco visibly swallowed. "Well, yes, but Professor Morrighan certainly looks fit, and--"

Harry had been staring at them rather incredulously, but this talk of heirs made him think he'd better rescue Snape from the conversation before it got too awkward. Morrighan couldn't have children, Snape had said, but he'd also said that he didn't think she'd want him talking about it to anyone. "So I guess that crystal thing is an engagement rock or something?"

Thank goodness that had come out calmly. Truth to tell, he felt a bit shaken that things were moving so fast, but he didn't want Snape to hear his unease. This should be a happy occasion, all around.

"Of sorts," said Snape, turning away from Draco to study him. "The tradition is by no means universal, but in some circles, a pledging glass typically accompanies an offer of marriage. If my intent is true, and hers is as well, then when we enclose the crystal in both our hands, it will reduce itself to a single, pure colour."

"Oh. So... it's a way to test... uh, the depth of your love?"

Snape chuckled. "I do believe the pledging glass originated with such intent, but in this day and age it is mostly used to divine the best type of stone for the engagement ring."

Draco raised his chin. "Green means emerald, blue means sapphire, red means ruby--"

"Yeah, got it, thanks."

"And now you are the one who seems out of sorts."

"Well, I don't like it when either one of you calls Gryffindors idiots, and I like it even less when you treat me like I am one!"

Draco sighed. "That was ill-done of me. Can I help it if I like showing off, particularly to you? After all, it's not as if I can talk to snakes or throw off Imperius like it's a blanket or cast a Basilisk in my spare time or--"

"And the crack about Gryffindors falling for dumb lies?"

"I didn't say Gryffindors. I said 'Harry,' and well... you are a little bit on the gullible side, sometimes."

"Better than seeing lies around every corner and thinking Snape's plotting something when he's just nervous about getting married!"

Snape folded his robes snugly about him. "I am not nervous about getting married."

That broke the tension admirably; Harry and Draco both had to choke off their laughter.
"No?" asked Harry. "Because I could swear that was you in here, so lost in your thoughts that you never even noticed me sitting in your class!"

"Really, Severus," drawled Draco. "When have you ever before told us to stir six times when your own chalkboard specifies seven?"

"I did no such thing--"

"Shall I pensieve you the memory?"

"Shut up," muttered Snape. It was probably the most immature comeback Harry had ever heard from him. But then he rallied. "Very well, then. I will admit to being a trifle nervous about proposing marriage. What if--" He pinched the bridge of his nose, so hard that his fingertips paled with the pressure. "What if she should decline me?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Yeah," added Harry. "I mean, the two of you are already . . ." He made a vague gesture. "You know.

"The one doesn't necessarily follow the other. I do hope you understand that."

"No, but you're old flames and all that, right? And now she's back here again, and you're not spying any longer, which really frees you up to have someone of your own, and . . . it's practically fated. Right?"

"You sound surprisingly at ease," said Snape, one eyebrow raised.

Harry smiled. "I think seeing you be so nervous helps."

"You'd rather I were uncertain?"

"No, no. It's just . . . well, I was thinking this morning that for a long time I had trouble thinking of you as a real person, instead of, um . . . some kind of super-scary magical enemy out to make my life as miserable as possible. And when I got amnesia I think I regressed back into that mind-set, at least some. But now, seeing you like this? It just underlines for me that you need love, Severus. Just like anybody else."

Snape, he thought, looked deeply shaken by all that. Maybe he had never expected Harry to be so very blunt. Or to understand himself so well, perhaps.

"But I would understand if you were still discomfited," Snape said after an awkward pause. "Truly I would, Harry. I know you urged me to please myself and leave you to deal with matters, but you must believe me when I say that I have absolutely no objection to a long engagement."

"Suddenly rushing out to buy her an engagement rock doesn't really strike me that way."

"Blame this morning's conversation," explained Snape. "The only sudden aspect to this is my abrupt awareness that I did not care to have my sons dancing around the issue with her again."

"What?" asked Draco. "All I said was that 'affair' was the wrong word!"

"And then your brother let slip that he knew we'd been sleeping together."

"For Merlin's sake, Harry--"
"I did not! I only said that they'd been missing breakfast together!"

"That's the same thing!"

"It is not!"

"It is! It's called polite innuendo!"

"It's just called breakfast!"

"It's called beside the point," interrupted Snape, "as I firmly intend to become engaged at the earliest opportunity. That, I do hope, will forestall your insane need to interfere in my romantic pursuits. Am I making myself perfectly clear?"

"I'm not sure," murmured Draco. "Are you trying to say we can't invite her over to dinner again?"

"No, but checking my own schedule beforehand would be preferred. As would leaving off discussion about how the lady doth protest too much."

"Ah, but once you're affianced, she won't be protesting at all, will she?"

"Draco!" snapped Snape.

"All right, I'll behave. Pity, though. It's great fun to have a reason to tease you."

Snape glared, but when Draco just grinned back, he sighed instead. "Incorrigible whelp. Idiot boy."

That wasn't exactly Harry's cue, but he didn't think he'd get a better one. Schooling his features to be a sincere and solemn as he could, he stepped forward, mimicking Draco's stance from before, and gripped his father by both forearms. Snape raised his gaze, surprised, as he returned the gesture.

"I wish you every joy, Severus my father," said Harry slowly, looking directly into his eyes. "May your heirs have strong magic and bound to you by love."

Snape executed another one of those slow bows. "I thank you, Harry my son."

Harry smiled widely, feeling better than he had in days. Maybe being mature came with its own rewards, at least sometimes. "And as for long engagements," he added. "Don't do that for me. Do it if, you know, it's what the two of you want."

"The two of us," murmured Snape. "Merlin's socks. What have I got myself into?"

"Just love," answered Harry. "But best not to keep her waiting too long for dinner, you think? She's not going to like being left standing out in the corridor. That's no way to get on her good side on the big night."

"About that . . ."

"Not tonight, then?"

"Oh, tonight, most definitely. I swear by all the gods, if my damned throat closes over, I shall go so far as to write my proposal. But I sincerely doubt that Maura will be waiting in the corridor. She has my password, you see."

"Oooh, la la," said Draco, eyes twinkling a starry grey.
"You were going to avoid untoward talk. I suppose that's a lost cause?"

"Probably," said Harry cheerfully. "But it won't be untoward. If that means what I think."

Severus made a show of dusting off his robes, though of course they were as immaculate as usual. "Will you both stand up with me?"

Harry blinked. "We are standing up."

"At his wedding," murmured Draco, but not in the know-it-all tone he'd used before. "Of course we will. It will be our honour."

"Yes," said Harry simply.

Snape gave a sharp nod, then led the way out into the empty Potions classroom and down the hall toward home.

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:
Chapter Forty-Four: Cursed

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------
Loving Luna

Chapter Notes

Thanks ever so much to my new beta, Maple in the Moonlight! He’s actually been with the Family project from the beginning and not only did he step up to beta, he's largely responsible for encouraging me to come back and finish the series!

Dinner went about as well as Harry could have expected.

Draco tried to cover his concern for his mother by being extra cheerful, but he took it so far that Marsha might call his behavior manic. Or maybe even a little bit demented.

Meanwhile, Snape was hiding his nervousness behind a thick layer of Victorian manners, pulling out Morrighan's chair for her, serving her from the platters that kept appearing on the table, and even picking up her dropped napkin with a flowery gesture! Harry couldn’t help but stare. Morrighan just looked amused, or maybe bemused.

What there was no doubt about, however, was her attire. Instead of skin-tight leathers, she was wearing a loose, flowing dress; she'd even worn robes over it to walk down to the dungeons. Had she finally figured out that her usual clothing was making all the boys stare at her with their tongues hanging out? Was she thinking that wasn't the best scenario for a family dinner? Or did she know that Snape was about to pop the question, and she didn't want to jinx it by getting the man's sons hot and bothered right beforehand--

Then again, maybe she didn't realize how close Snape was to making things between them official.

As for Harry . . . he tried to be on his best behaviour during the dinner, he really did. No scowling, no grimacing, even if the thought of sharing Snape was still eating away at him whenever he thought too hard about it. So, he tried not to think about it. That was easier when he was talking about something else, so he tried to steer the conversation to topics he knew a lot about so he could talk as much as possible.

It was a little annoying to have Draco kick him under the table for his efforts. Five times!

Finally, though, dessert was over and Severus was leaning toward Morrighan in a way that practically screamed, "Marry me!" and Harry just couldn't bear it.

"Wizard's Scrabble!" he suggested, waving his wand like he could summon it. Which he probably couldn't, since he thought the game was behind Snape's office wards, and Harry wasn't about to use his dark powers to make it come sailing. Though he was tempted.

"Another evening," murmured Snape. "Maura, I wonder if you would--"

"Chess?"

"I don't think Dad wants to play games," said Draco, waggling his eyebrows just a little.

"Tic-tac-toe? That's a Muggle thing, you draw this grid and--"
"Perhaps you could play it with your brother," said Snape dryly. "Now, as I was saying, Maura, would you like--"

"Fine, fine!" shouted Harry, something inside him snapping. "Just go ahead and ask her, fine!"

"A digestif?" finished Snape in the same calm, dry voice. "Limoncello? Or perhaps Galliano?"

Oh. A drink. He'd been trying to offer her a drink.

"I think I'll just go," said Harry miserably. This was even worse than the time he'd tried to keep them from going to the opera together. He'd messed up Snape's proposal, and he wasn't even sure why. He wasn't exactly trying to stop it, still. He just hadn't wanted to hear it.

"Oh, it's getting late and I should likely be the one to go," said Morrighan as she stood up and smoothed down her skirt.

As far as Harry was concerned, the comment only proved she had class. It would be easier to hate her if she'd be less considerate. Suddenly Harry was the one who wanted a drink. Something strong. Or maybe a potion would be better. One that would knock him out for a few weeks. Until the wedding was over, maybe.

Though he knew with a sick sort of despair that there was no way Snape would take marriage vows if Harry was out cold for weeks. The man would be brewing an antidote, instead.

Strange, how readily he could accept these days that Severus would put family first, above his own desires, even ones as strong as these must be . . .

"I need you to stay," said Snape abruptly, his voice grating a little.

"Severus--"

"Please."

She must not have heard him say that often, or maybe not in that tone, since she went perfectly still, like a wild deer scenting something unexpected.

"Harry and I have a lot of studying to do, anyway." Draco laid a hand on Harry's forearm. "You know, that exam in Charms? We'll go to Slytherin and hit the books."

By then, Harry felt sort of dead inside. It was easy to give a numb nod and let Draco more-or-less guide him to the front door. What surprised him was that Snape followed them out into the hallway, shutting the door behind him. Well, that and the fact that the man didn't look angry.

“Are you quite all right?”

“Yeah.” Harry cleared his throat. “Sorry for acting like a moron. It's just, I wasn’t expecting you to ask her right in front of me. Which you weren’t doing. I get that now.”

"Merlin's beard, of course he wasn't going to--" Draco shut up when both Harry and Snape glared at him. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the dungeon wall and glared back, just a little.

Harry lifted his chin. "I haven't changed my mind, though. You go ahead, like I said."

"And let you live with it.” Snape leaned down and peered at him closely in the dim light. Whatever he saw seemed to satisfy him. "Very well.”
"Good." Harry smiled. He thought it was probably wobbly, but that was all right. Severus would understand. "And thanks for not getting angry. I really didn't mean to blurt that out, about you proposing."

"I should hope not." Snape shook his head. "Perhaps I am the one in your debt, Harry. I'm not entirely certain I could have found the words tonight, but your sudden unease seemed to make my own nervousness recede. Though now . . ." He glanced at the blank wall now hiding the door to his quarters.

Time for Harry to prove he was worth something as a son. "You, at a loss for words? Come on, Severus. You'll be fine. She's going to say yes. You know she will."

"And the pledging glass will turn a deep, glorious crimson," added Draco, stepping away from the wall. "How could it not, with the two of you already so--" His voice slid into smooth innuendo. "Involved?"

"Draco!" hissed Harry.

"What? You were the one who announced to her at breakfast that you knew about them, how shall I put it, making the beast with two backs?"

Snape's nostrils flared. "A shade more subtlety would serve you better. Though I do appreciate the gambit."

What, he wasn't even annoyed? That seemed unfair considering how he'd reacted to Harry's accidental reference at breakfast!

Draco shrugged. "It worked a little though, didn't it? When you're tempted to get nervous, just start to ponder all those long, luscious romps the two of you've enjoyed, and--"

"That really is quite enough!"

"I hope you remembered to use those spells you showed me," Draco went right on. "I mean, in pureblood circles it's not the done thing to show up for the wedding already . . . what?"

Snape gave him a grim stare. "Enough, I said."

"Yeah, that's really none of our business," Harry said, hoping Draco would drop it. True, Harry had told Severus something similar recently, but that was what had made him let slip that Morrighan couldn't have children. The man shouldn't have to break faith with her again just to get Draco to shut up.

"Au contraire, I think it will be very much our business if and when a baby brother or sister appears in our home."

"Whatever happens, we'll live with it," said Harry firmly. "No matter what."

Snape threw him a grateful glance.

"I should have known you'd have to play the good son--"

"Me, good?" Harry scoffed. "I wanted to play Scrabble, don't forget. And then I announced that Dad wanted to propose!"

"So we're both awful, that's your point? I'm trying not to think about my mother lying dead in a
"ditch somewhere, in case you've forgot!"

"And I'm trying not to worry about Remus!"

Snape laid one open palm on Draco's forearm and his other one on Harry's. "There is nothing to be done about either situation at the moment," he said, his hair swaying slightly as he shook his head. "All we can do is wait."

"The waiting is the hardest part," sighed Draco. "Tom Petty."

Harry and Severus turned incredulous glances his way. "Who?" they asked, almost in unison.

"Muggle Studies," muttered Draco, shuddering. "We're up to 80s music. American."

"Waiting," Snape suddenly gasped. "Oh, sweet Merlin! Maura's been waiting all this time! I should get back to her before she decides to floo home."

"Yes, you should," said Harry firmly.

Snape gulped and squeezed Harry's forearm, hard. "Yes, I should. But now that the moment is upon me, I . . . I . . ."

"She won't leave without a proposal, not after what Harry said. She's too smitten!" Draco laid his free hand across the one Snape was using to grip his own forearm. "And if you get nervous, just think about--"

"Do not start that nonsense again!"

"I'm not," said Draco simply. "Just think about the fact that Harry called you 'Dad' a minute ago."

"I did not!"

"You did so."

Harry bit his lip, thinking back. "Oh, I did. Oh, God." He glanced up at Severus. "Um, no offense."

"None taken, most certainly." Snape suddenly pulled them both into a fierce embrace, and just as suddenly released them. "Go and see to your studies." With that, he was whirling away and rapidly tapping out the sequence that would admit him to his quarters. A moment after that, the heavy door thudded closed behind him.

"Slytherin tonight?" Draco started to head that way.

Harry shrugged. "Might as well, I suppose. And I thought you told me you were a bad liar. Snape believed that bit about a test!"

"He's got a lot on his mind," said Draco dryly. "I wasn't even Occluding to help the lie along. But don't start over-compensating. 'Snape,' Harry, really? You called him Dad once, you can do it again."

"Yeah, well maybe I will. But not if you go on and on about it."

"I'll keep that in mind." They'd reached the entrance to Slytherin by then. "Straight to bed, then?"

Harry had a better idea. "Eh, I think I'll pop over to Ravenclaw and see if Luna fancies a walk."
"After curfew?"

"Prefect," said Harry smugly, tapping his badge.

"Are you coming back to Slytherin afterwards?"

Harry wasn't going to answer that. Recent events had taken priority, but he was still working on his plan to keep people guessing about where he might be spending his nights. How else could he spend an entire night with Luna without having to answer awkward questions? "I don't know. Maybe here, maybe Gryffindor."

Draco took a step closer. "Here, all right? Just in case Severus needs to talk."

"Oh, he won't. You know she's going to say yes--"

"Please."

Well, he didn't hear that word very often from Draco. Harry held in a sigh. Yeah, there was a chance Snape might need to talk, he supposed. It would be a piss-poor son who went off at a time like this. Just in case.

"I'll skip the walk," he decided.

"And sleep here?"

"Yes and sleep here, you moron. In case Dad needs us."

Draco grinned, but it was short-lived. "I think my mother needs me. And there's not a fucking thing I can do to help her."

Probably not, but there was something that Harry could do to help his brother. Namely, distraction. A powerful one. "Let's firecall the Gryffindor common room and invite Hermione over for Wizard's Scrabble. I'd like to see you try to best her. Bet you can't even come close."

Draco's eyes gleamed. "Hermione," he said slowly. "Now there's an idea . . . but what if Severus--"

"Oh, she'll understand if we need some family time. But we won't." Harry turned to the door and gave the password. "So do you want to invite her or should I?"

"Me. Definitely me."

Harry laughed and led the way into Slytherin.

The waiting really was the hardest part, Harry decided the next morning. Snape hadn't sent any kind of word at all, and in this case, no news was probably good news, but it would still be nice to know for sure if they were about to end up with a stepmother.
Ugh. Stepmother. Even the word made him want to shudder. In fact, it called images of Petunia Dursley to mind. Hazy, wavering images of her scowling at him when he asked for a rasher of bacon, or her sneering when six hours in the hot sun hadn’t been long enough for him to finish all the wedding . . .

Which was ridiculous. She hadn’t been his stepmother. Or even any sort of mother!

Though . . . it was probably very bad of him to hate a dead woman.

Harry didn’t want to think about that. “Let’s pop over to Severus’ quarters for breakfast,” he said the moment Draco finished charming his robes to hang perfectly straight.

The other boy raised an eyebrow. “Where?”

God, would he never stop pressuring Harry? “Home, fine, all right?”

“No need to overreact,” murmured Draco with a sidelong glance at the other Slytherin boys as they milled about the room. That was even more infuriating. Harry wasn’t about to blurt out Snape’s wedding plans! He did know a bit about discretion! Well, not counting last night or maybe breakfast the day before.

Huh. Discretion . . . it somehow seemed like he and Snape must have had some long conversations about that very topic at some point. But Harry couldn’t remember them, so they must have happened during his missing year. But what could they have been about? He knew from the papers, not to mention what everybody had told him, that Snape hadn’t tried to keep the adoption a secret . . .

“And if you think for a moment, you’ll know why today’s a spectacularly bad time to join Dad for breakfast.” There was just a hint of emphasis on the last word.

Harry blushed. Damn. Why hadn’t he realised what Snape’s silence must mean? Of course she’d said yes, and then the two of them would have been in a mood to celebrate. And how would a newly engaged couple do that?

Though . . . a little voice whispering into his mind said there were other possibilities. Maybe Morrighan had refused Snape’s offer of marriage, and Snape had promptly got drunk off his socks. He did that when he was really upset, after all. Shouldn’t his sons go and check on him, in that case?

“No,” said Draco.

“I didn’t ask anything!”

“The look on your face did. And the answer’s no.”

“But what if—”

“No.”

Harry sighed, knowing that his brother was probably right.

“Well if he’s not at lunch either then I’m going home to see him. You can join me or not, just as you please!”

Draco took him by the arm and steered him down the stairs, talking quietly against his ear as they
descended. “It will be all right, Harry. You’ll see. Who knows, it might even be brilliant, having a new . . . family situation.”

“I’ll show you a situation,” muttered Harry.

“That makes no sense at all.”

“I know!” Harry forced himself to unclench his fists. “I’m fine, really. I mean, I have to be, because the alternative is completely stupid. This’ll be good for Snape, and . . .” It felt like his breath was coming in gasps. “And whatever you have to say on the topic, I do want to be a good son!”

“No worries there.” For once, Draco didn’t sound peeved by the fact. “We both do. I like your lunch plan.”

They’d reached the common room by then. “Fine. Now let go of me. I’m headed to Ravenclaw since somebody stopped me from going last night!”

“And I shall head to Gryffindor,” retorted Draco, nodding. “Excellent notion.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Um . . . you know, people weren’t too rude to Hermione last night, but I don’t know if having her eat at the Slytherin table with you is a good idea.”

“And I don’t know how welcome Luna will be there, either.”

“I wasn’t going to ask Luna to eat with the Slytherins!”

Draco just stared at him.

“Oh,” said Harry after a moment. “You’re going to try to eat with the Gryffindors? Really?”

“You can’t be that surprised.” Draco slanted him a sly smile. “They’re not usually a violent lot, and after all, my own brother is a Gryffindor.”

Harry appreciated hearing that, but he was still worried. Jerking his head to say that Draco should follow, he stepped out into the corridor and cast a privacy charm. “Look, it was bad enough when you sent her millions of fancy flowers, but you can’t start having meals with her--”

“Why, because Weasley will turn apoplectic and possibly explode?”

“You can’t be that surprised.” Draco slanted him a sly smile. “They’re not usually a violent lot, and after all, my own brother is a Gryffindor.”

Harry appreciated hearing that, but he was still worried. Jerking his head to say that Draco should follow, he stepped out into the corridor and cast a privacy charm. “Look, it was bad enough when you sent her millions of fancy flowers, but you can’t start having meals with her--”

“Why, because Weasley will turn apoplectic and possibly explode?”

“I’m not joking!” snapped Harry, stomping down the corridor and around a corner so they couldn’t be seen arguing. He didn’t want it to get back to Snape, not today of all days. “How can you be so thoughtless? She’s Muggleborn, in case it’s slipped your mind!”

“So you’re a blood purist, now?” Draco twisted lip. “No? Then what is it? Because it seems to me that you suggested she spend time in Slytherin, just last night!”

“But I was there! People could easily think it was me she was visiting, not you!”

“I’m not good enough for her, is that your fucking point?” Draco bared his teeth. “Oh, sure, you’ll call yourself my brother but you don’t think I’ve changed enough to deserve a jewel like her! I bet you would have said so the minute we kissed if you hadn’t been so distracted worrying over your precious werewolf friend--”

Talk about projection. “Oh, shut the fuck up,” said Harry, snorting a little. “The only way you could think that of me is if you wonder about it yourself. Or maybe you wonder what Hermione
Draco shoved his hands deep into his pockets. “Point taken.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry about her. Not with the way she went on and on trying to convince me you’d changed. Practically bleating, she was.”

_It’s sheep who bleat_, Draco said, deep in the recesses of his memory.

“Then what was your concern?” asked the other boy, voice still haughty.

“Just that if you make your interest so public, it’ll get back to Voldemort for sure. Aren’t you near the top of his list of people he’d like to torture? Imagine what he’ll do to Hermione if it gets around that she’s so important to you!”

Draco smiled, but his eyes were bitter. “Do you think I haven’t thought of that? It was all that kept me from going to Rhiannon five hundred different times. But Hermione?” He shook his head. “When you think on it, she’s actually the perfect girl for me. She’s already near the top of that list, herself. Dating me can’t make things worse.”

Harry blanched. He was right, of course he was right. Hermione’s friendship with Harry, all the help she’d given him over the years . . . she’d been in the Hall of Prophecies with them, for God’s sake! He couldn’t believe he’d overlooked all that.

There wasn’t much excuse, other than maybe his saving-people thing. He did want to keep her safe. Though it wasn’t within his power. After all these years, Hermione was too closely associated with him. Voldemort no doubt knew all about her.

But . . . it was within his power to protect someone else, wasn’t it?

“Luna,” moaned Harry, slumping against the wall and sliding down it to hang his head in his hand. “Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck! What the hell’s wrong with me? I should have seen it sooner!”

“I should have too,” said Draco slowly. Leaning down, he grasped Harry by both forearms and pulled him to his feet. “But maybe she’s like Hermione. Didn’t she fight Death Eaters at your side, fifth year? I seem to recall hearing some gossip around the Manor that summer.”

“Yeah, that’s a great consolation to think she’s already on his hit list.” Harry clenched his jaw. “But she’s _not_, not the way Hermione is. I have to protect her. I have to . . . I have give her up.”

“Maybe not. You’ve been so intent on her lately that perhaps word has already spread to the Death Eaters. So giving her up would be futile, don’t you see?”

No, Harry didn’t see. “We haven’t been together long. If I break it off, everybody’ll think it was just a crush.” Harry abruptly spun on a heel and slammed his fist into the stone wall. “Damn it! It’s not a crush! I love her!”

It took a couple of seconds for pain to start radiating through his knuckles and up his arm. When it hit, it was so intense that Harry thought he’d vomit. He managed to choke back the vile flavour that rose up into his mouth.

“Harry!”

“Yeah, no breakfast for me,” he gasped, just before another wave of agony crashed through him, this time reaching all the way up to his shoulder. “H-hospital w-wing.”
I shall have your favourite bed made ready, Mr Potter . . .

His legs didn’t hurt, but it was strangely hard to walk. Maybe because his vision was trying to tunnel in. Draco half-carried him part of the way, helping him onto a bed, though maybe not his favorite one. Which he didn’t have, so he wasn’t sure why he kept thinking that.

The strangest thing of all, though, was the fact that five minutes after Madam Pomfrey had healed his fractured knuckles, Luna strolled up to his bedside and bent down to kiss him on the nose.

“Hey,” said Harry, yawning a little after the potions he’d taken. His vision was swimming a little, but that just made Luna’s golden hair look pleasantly fuzzy. Like a halo. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“Of course not.” Luna gave him another kiss on the nose.

“Wish you’d miss and kiss my mouth--”

Draco strangled a laugh. “You must forgive him. He’ll be woozy for a few more minutes, I think.”

“And then I have to talk to you,” added Harry. “’Bout something important.” He was pretty sure it was, anyway. He couldn’t quite focus his mind at the moment.

“Yes, I know,” said Luna, smiling at him in a way that made his skin heat.

“And in the meantime,” said Pomfrey as she bustled over, “I shall notify your father of your injury.”

“No, no need for that,” said Draco. “He’s healed now.”

She gave a scandalized gasp. “He has a father on staff! Severus should certainly be informed!”

“Not right now, he shouldn’t,” snapped Draco. “He’s involved at the moment. With . . . er, brewing an important potion, and he won’t thank you if he has to start over!”

Draco must not have thought her convinced. “Tell her, Harry. Tell her you’re of age and she should stay out of it.”

Harry thought this sounded important too. “You’re of age and she should stay out of it.”

“Say it properly!”

Huh. He could tell that he hadn’t. The sleepiness washing over him was receding, too, and he could suddenly think a lot more clearly. Morrighan . . . Draco was talking about how Snape would want to breakfast alone with his fiancée. Harry pushed up on his hands, recognizing that he really couldn’t feel one of them, and took a deep breath. “I’m of age. You’re not supposed to tell people how I am. So, yeah, don’t tell Severus.”
She huffed, clearly exasperated, and whirled away to head towards her office.

“Thanks,” said Draco, flopping down into a chair.

“You’re not staying. But Luna is. I have to talk to her, if you remember?”

“I didn’t think you remembered yet. But I suppose those potions really do wear off quite rapidly.” Draco rose to his feet. “I’ll see you later.”

“At lunch. We’re going to get some answers, I remember that too.”

Draco hesitated, his gaze darting between Harry’s healed hand and Luna as she took the chair he’d vacated.

“Yeah, go,” sighed Harry, easily able to read the look on his brother’s face. “I’m not going to do that again. I’ll be all right.”

“As you say,” murmured Draco. “Until lunch, then.”

Finally alone with Luna, Harry pushed up on his hands more and wondered how on earth to begin. Then it came to him that a privacy charm was in order. A strong one. Thankfully his wand was right there on the bedside table. After he’d cast, he knew he had to go ahead and say it. “Um . . .”

Luna lifted her own wand and cast a twirly little spell he didn’t recognize, but its effects were unmistakable. The ghost of a moist caress slid across his lips, lingering and teasing him before fading away.

Well, he knew from her Christmas present that she’d mastered the charm for blowing a kiss.

“And not on your nose, either,” she teased, her wand starting to swirl again.

“No!” yelped Harry. “The last time left a lipstick stain that lasted for hours--”

“Oh, don’t be a goose. I wouldn’t be so colourful now, would I?

That was a relief, and not just because of the embarrassment factor. Nobody would believe they’d broken up if they could tell she’d been blowing him kisses! Despair flooded through him again, but there was nothing to be done except follow through on his resolve. He’d rather give her up forever than have her end up tormented for being his sweetheart.

“I have to talk to you,” he said, each word feeling like it was being dragged through him against his will.

“Yes, I know.”

Right, he’d said as much in front of Draco.

“Luna, I . . . I . . .”

“You love me dearly. Yes, I know.” She scooted her chair up close to his bedside and grasped his left hand, the one that hadn’t been injured, gently lacing their fingers together.

Touching her, feeling her soft skin, wasn’t exactly helping Harry’s resolve. But her words were worse, because now he had to hurt her even more than he’d planned. “No, that’s the thing, you see? I don’t. Er . . . I don’t l- love you, it turns out.”
God, this was awful. His eyes were aching, feeling like they were puffing up. He was probably just seconds away from bursting into tears. It wasn’t fair! Why did he have to lose everyone? Even Remus might never wake up! But if he didn’t lose her this way, he might lose her forever, and it would be all his fault! He wouldn’t be able to live with himself. He knew he wouldn’t.

So this was better, no matter that he’d rather hit a stone wall again and again than say such things to her.

“Don’t be such a silly. Of course you love me--”

Luna’s quirky ways, usually so endearing, were anything but at the moment. But Harry had to get through to her, so he doubled down.

“I don’t! I don’t even like you most of the time!”

“I think you do.”

Fuck. She wanted him to prove it? “No, I bloody well don’t! You-- your hair--” What was he going to say, that her hair was too long and golden, her eyes too sparkly? He had to complain about something that would make sense! Not that Luna made a lot of sense, most days . . . “You aren’t like everybody else!”

She squeezed his hand. “And that,” she said softly, leaning over to drop a kiss on his mouth, “is why you love me.”

Harry kissed her back, eagerly, hungrily, forgetting everything except that this would be the last time ever. He could tell by then that he was going to have to hurt her horribly to get her to believe him. He was going to have to rip out her heart, too, and leave it bleeding and alone on the hospital wing floor, the way his already was. She’d never forgive him, but there was nothing else to be done!

He ripped his mouth away from hers and practically shouted the word. “Listen--”

“No, I think you should listen,” said Luna with perfect serenity. “You don’t have to do this, Harry.”

If only he didn’t!

“But I don’t love you,” cried Harry, desperate to get this over with.

“Yes, you do. Though I wish it didn’t make you smash your hand into walls when you think you’re going to hurt me. Maybe you could love me just a little less?”

She offered that like it was a perfectly sensible suggestion. It made Harry want to wrap her in an embrace, hug her close, and never let her go as he told her that he would never, ever love her less.

Then the rest of what she’d said came to him. “Wait. Is that just a lucky guess? How would you know I’d smashed my hand into a wall?”

Another kiss, but this one on the hand she was still holding. “The Prenglies, silly.”

“They’re spying on me? All the time?” Aghast was a mild word for Harry’s reaction to that.

Luna laughed, the sound like tiny bells chiming. “No, but they’re my special friends, you know. You think they’re going to ignore matters when you’re saying my name in such an agonized tone?”
Oh. “So you already know.”

“Yes, Harry Potter. You have to break up with me.” She gave him a reproving glance. “You could have just said that, instead of pretending.” Then she tilted her head to the side and eyed him with interest. “You’re not really very good at pretending.”

“I couldn’t have just said that,” protested Harry. “You might have thought there was still a chance and started . . . uh, giving me cucumbers again or something!”

“But there is still every chance, since you love me so very much,” she said patiently, like she thought Harry was a little dense. “How could it be otherwise, Harry? I love you, too.”

He felt like the air had been sucked completely from his lungs. She loved him, too? She loved him, too!

“Come here,” he said thickly, grasping her arms and pulling her down to half-lie across him. They kissed for what seemed like hours, until having no air really was a problem. But of course even a thousand kisses couldn’t solve this.

“We still have to break up,” said Harry when he could bear to move his mouth away from hers. “The Prenglies told you everything, told you why?”

She nodded, her gaze dimming with sadness.

Harry swallowed down his regrets, even as he clasped her more tightly, shifting her so the top of her head was resting just beneath his shoulder. “And . . . and it has to be real. I’ve been too public about how special you are to me. Everybody has to believe we’re over, now. We can’t risk . . . uh, ignoring each other in the Great Hall and then sneaking off to be alone in dark corners. I’m sorry, but we have to really, truly break up.”

For now, he almost added, but forced himself not to. He couldn’t think that way. No backsliding. If he loved her, he had to do this for her, so she could stay safe.

“You understand why it has to be real?”

She nodded, her gaze dimming with sadness. “Because you are so very terrible at pretending.”

He wasn’t, but it wouldn’t help to say so. “So how should we break up?” he said instead. “A huge fight in the Great Hall? I can probably manage that, I’ll just pretend you’re Zabini when I call you names—”

“Oh, no,” she murmured, moving to sit up at his side, her slender body perched on the edge of the bed. “Don’t you see? A dramatic scene would only underline how important I must have been to you. Far better that you simply lose interest.”

She was right, he realized. Act as though she’d been nothing but a mild crush, easily discarded and just as easily forgotten.

“But don’t ignore me completely,” she added, smiling sweetly. “Because that would be dramatic too, in its own way.”

“Just go back to how I’d treat you if you were nothing to me,” said Harry, groaning. That was going to be hard.
“And I’ll behave the same, and in a few weeks . . .” Luna shrugged. “Nobody will think twice about us.”

“Fuck.”

“No, we can’t do that,” Luna told him. “Don’t you see, it would make it difficult for people to believe--”

If the situation had been less dire, Harry would have laughed. “Yeah, I know that. Well. I guess it was a good thing the Prenglies told you what I was planning. At least this way I didn’t have to hurt you when I broke up with you.”

Luna gave him a steady sort of look. “I wouldn’t have believed your nonsense about not loving me, Prenglies or no, Harry.”

“No?”

“No.” She gave him one last kiss on the nose, and then moved off the bed and back into the chair, like she knew she had to stop that, now. “I know what’s real and what’s not.”

Harry did laugh, then, thinking of Nargles and Snorkacks and Blibbering Humdingers. It wasn’t a happy sound though. It was affection, but it was also saying good-bye.

Luna must have understood that. She rose from her chair and gave him one last soft glance, and then she turned her back on him and walked away.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Forty-Five: The Mad Tea Party

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
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Harry ended up missing his first class of the day. Too bad it couldn’t still have been Defense, since he didn’t much feel like seeing Morrighan. The new term’s timetable had switched things around a bit, though. Just his luck.

At least she wasn’t in the room when Harry arrived. He leaned against the wall next to Draco and tried his best not to scowl. For two reasons, now. He couldn’t have people thinking he was upset, since they’d notice he wasn’t hanging about with Luna soon enough, but he also didn’t want Morrighan to know how much he hated the idea of having a step-mother.

_Ugh._ That time, the word actually made his stomach churn.

Draco shifted over until their shoulders nearly touched, and spoke in a low tone. “Everything all right?”

“Yes.”

“I meant--”

“Yes, I did what I told you about.”

Draco nodded, the motion very slight. “I’m the one to talk to if things get difficult to bear, then. I know what it’s like.”

He didn’t know what _this_ was like, having to give up the girl of your dreams. He did know what it was like to miss the love of his life, though.

“Yeah, I’ll keep it in mind,” said Harry in a short tone. Then he reminded himself to cut that out. He had to seem casual. Easy-going. _Happy_, for fuck’s sake.

In the end, it was a relief when Morrighan stepped out of her office, a raven perched on each leather-clad arm, and announced that today they were going to learn ways to fend off necromancers.
By the time class was over, Harry felt pulled thin, like melting strands of candy floss. It was the strain, he supposed. His mood kept shifting, moment to moment, swinging wildly between fury at the sheer unfairness of life to agony at the idea of years passing before he could kiss Luna again. One second he wanted nothing more than to bawl, and in the next, he was wishing for a wall to punch.

The worst part was that he couldn’t show any hint of his turmoil. He wasn’t sure how well he was doing at that, either. Maybe Luna was right and he couldn’t pretend worth shite.

*Luna, beautiful Luna...*

But finally Morrighan dismissed the class and Harry gathered up his things.

“Join me for lunch, too?” asked Hermione, stepping close alongside Draco.

Draco backed away from her. “I’d love to, but Harry and I have another engagement.”

*Engagement.* Damn it, Harry wanted one! And instead he had to make sure he didn’t wreck somebody else’s with his selfish, needy whinging!

“Oh?” asked Hermione, one eyebrow arched.

Well, she always did want to know everything, didn’t she, thought Harry. He knew he was being petty, but he also knew he didn’t care. “Yeah, and it’s important,” he practically barked, “so if you’ll excuse us--”

Hermione blinked, clearly shocked at his reaction. “I’ll just go to lunch, then.”

“Good fucking idea, since it’s lunchtime--” He couldn’t say anything else, though, because just then Draco twitched his wand and a calming charm descended on him, tickling as it oozed into the pores of his scalp. He would have complained about Draco’s high-handedness, but at the moment, he felt too placid to object.

“I’ll see you later,” he said instead, the comment directed at Hermione.

She peered at him closely, then shrugged. “All right. See you later, Draco.”

He nodded instead of replying out loud. When Hermione was gone, he got straight to business. “So, Dad. I don’t suppose you have a handy map on you? I’m not sure if he’ll skip the Great Hall today and we should head home.”

“I don’t keep it on me all the time,” said Harry morosely. Maybe he should start, though. He could keep watch over Luna and love her from afar--

“Pity.”

A swishing mop whisked past them, Morrighan following behind it, waving her wand. Harry almost sneered. What was she up to? Practicing her household charms for when she got married?

She stopped when she reached them and gave them a bright smile. As far as Harry was concerned, that sealed the deal. She’d been so business-like during class that he’d wondered if maybe she’d said no, or Snape had lost his nerve in the end, but now it seemed clear that she was delighted to be engaged.

“Severus and I would like to invite you both to lunch in his quarters,” she said, eyes sparkling more
with every word. “Shall we Floo from my office?”

The casual way she suggested that made Harry want to kick her, even though he knew he was being unreasonable. There was no reason why a fiancée shouldn’t be added to the wards on the Floo. And she’d obviously been able to join Snape there without being seen for weeks, now.


“Yes, lovely,” echoed Harry, doing his best to emulate Draco’s posh tone. Better than sound churlish.

Well, at least Snape had finally remembered that he should tell his sons the big news. That was something, Harry supposed.

“Health and long life,” said Draco, raising his champagne flute to clink it against Maura’s. “I’m pleased indeed that you will be joining our petite famille.”

“Thank you, Draco.” Morrighan’s own voice was warm. “You’re very gracious considering what a terrible start we had this year, you and I.”

Harry bit the inside of his cheek to keep from sneering. He couldn’t remember for himself, but according to Ron, Morrighan was the one who’d caused that terrible start! According to Draco, too. He’d called her a bitch more than once during their study sessions, and now he was welcoming her into the family?

The trouble was, Harry had to do the same.

He lifted his own glass. Draco’s toast hadn’t sounded like a ritual, not really, which was a shame since that meant Harry couldn’t just copy it. “To a long and happy marriage,” he said instead. “Severus deserves that. And, er, so do you.”

It sounded lame to his ears, but maybe not to theirs since Morrighan kept beaming and even Severus looked like he wanted to be smiling ear to ear. It was a really weird look for him.

Clink, clink, clink, went their glasses as Snape and Morrighan toasted each other, too.

And then it was apparently time for lunch.

“I do believe some sustenance is in order,” said Snape with a sideways glance at both his sons. “Lest you prove too inebriated to attend your afternoon classes.”

“Yes, I’m a bit surprised you’d give us liquor in the middle of a school day,” said Harry, relieved the toasts were finally over.

“Ah, but this is a special occasion. However . . .” Three long steps brought him to the Floo where he ordered whatever suits. A moment later, four china plates heaped with food shimmered into
existence on the table. With them came an ice bucket boasting another bottle of champagne, not to mention three vases overflowing with brilliant red chrysanthemums and silverware that looked made of pure gold.

Draco choked back a laugh. “Whatever suits, indeed. Are you sure we were the first ones you told, Severus? The elves seem to know quite a lot.”

“Perhaps you weren’t aware that they’re magical?” drolled Snape.

“Of course, but I mean . . .” Draco plucked a chrysanthemum from the vase and twirled it between his fingers, examining it from every angle. “Quite a lot.”

To Harry’s astonishment, Morrighan actually blushed a little. She even giggled for a moment, but then she rallied and gestured toward Snape’s bookshelves. “You’ve noticed the pledging stone.”

Harry hadn’t, but then, it didn’t look the same as when he’d seen it before. Now, it glittered from within with scarlet flames that looked hot enough to melt it from the inside out. Glittered, hell. The thing was practically blazing!

“Crimson, just as I predicted,” said Draco smugly. “That bodes well.”

Morrighan’s laugh that time was full-throated. “Your sons are absolutely incorrigible, aren’t they?”

“In need of correction, I think you mean,” retorted Snape.

“Hey, I didn’t say anything,” said Harry. “I don’t even know what the big deal is!”

Snape glowered. “Well, Draco, aren’t you going to tell him?”

Draco pressed his lips together, clearly trying to hold in laughter. “On reflection, I think not. Why don’t you?”

He almost instantly began pressing his lips tightly together again.

“Maura, will it ruin the festive occasion if I throttle--”

“I dare say it will,” said Morrighan, shaking her head at their antics. “Red means passion, Harry. A passionate love.”

“Oh,” said Harry, his mind going blank. It wasn’t like he hadn’t known they’d already got together that way, but he had literally no idea what he was supposed to reply.

“Oh, look, the food’s arrived!” chirped Draco, rushing over to put the table between himself and Snape. But then he looked straight at the man. “Excuse my high spirits, please. I’m just happy for you. And it’s such a relief to have good news for once, don’t you think?”

“It is,” said Snape, pulling out Morrighan’s chair before seating himself. He waved for Harry to join them, and then tapped the table three times with his wand to make the plates gently float up and migrate to the person they would best suit.

Harry ended up with two cheeseburgers, three strips of fried cod, a side of shepherd’s pie, a dish of greenish custard, and five shortbread cookies shaped like radishes. Seeing his dessert plate was like a blow to the gut. Yeah, the elves knew what would suit him best!

To cover his upset, he started shoveling food in his mouth, muttering “I’m famished,” when Draco looked snooty about it. “You know I skipped breakfast.”
Uh-oh. Mistake to mention that, Harry soon realised.

“We’ve talked about this,” said Snape sternly. “Denying yourself food when you are upset is a most unhealthy means of coping with emotional turmoil.”

“It’s not like that,” said Harry between bites. “I didn’t mean to skip breakfast. It was more like I missed it.”

“Because?”

Harry thought it rather unfair how dark that tone still was.

“I had to go to the hospital wing. To um . . .” He should have thought this out, since now it was going to get embarrassing. “Well, I needed my hand fixed, that’s all.”

He’d have made up something if he’d known how the man would interpret that.

“You told me you wanted me to proceed,” said Snape slowly, staring intently at both Harry’s arms. “And you promised me most emphatically that you would come to me if you had any urge to stick yourself.”

Snape suddenly lunged across the table, his hands grasping both Harry’s wrists. “You foolish boy! Don’t you understand? If you need me, you’re to come to me! Even if I’ve only that instant become affianced!”

Draco cleared his throat. “Oh. Er . . . Professor Morrighan . . . he doesn’t mean that you don’t matter, I’m certain. It’s just that Harry--”

“I can speak for myself,” snapped Snape.

“I understand,” murmured Morrighan. “When Severus loves, he does so intensely. With his whole heart.”

Harry felt shaken, and not just because the man was trembling as he held onto his wrists. He’d known that Snape loved him, and he’d known that it was real. But he hadn’t known that it was quite like this, had he?

“I didn’t mean to make you think I’d stuck myself.” Harry shook his hands a little to make his father let go. “I’m sorry. I would come to you. I mean, I will. Um, if I think I’m going to.”

Snape sat back, his gaze still dark. “And your injury?”

God, Harry didn’t want to talk about this. Especially not in front of Morrighan. But Snape had already let slip about the needles, and he supposed that was even more private. After all, he’d been dating Luna in full view of the entire school.

“I punched the wall outside Slytherin, all right?”

“You can hardly expect me to agree that such an occurrence is all right,” huffed Snape, rubbing the side of his long nose. “Was it our engagement that had you so distraught?”

“No!”

Snape leaned back against his chair again. “Concern about the upcoming Gryffindor match?”

Harry stared. “You know I’m all right with flying now. The prospect of a game doesn’t bother
me.” He dragged in a breath, knowing that he had to get this over with. “It’s just that I broke up with Luna.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah, and I fucking well didn’t want to say so right now and ruin your special day,” added Harry. Well, it was true enough that he didn’t want to explain everything in front of Morrighan.


“I’m sorry, I thought I was at home where I could speak freely!” Harry abruptly covered his face with his hands. “Oh, God. Sorry. I mean, I really am. I’m ruining your special day anyway!”

“No, you aren’t,” said Morrighan softly. “I’m actually quite touched that you would feel able to let fly and be yourself with me right now, Harry. And I do understand how agonizing romantic troubles can be.”

“You are indeed at home, you idiot child,” added Snape, dark eyes glimmering. Harry couldn’t tell what with; it might have been sympathy. “Still, there is such a thing as--”


Snape inclined his head.

Draco must have thought it was time to lighten the mood. “Most of your meal I understand,” he said, setting down the spoon he’d been trailing through some sort of iced soup. “But your pudding, is it mint custard?”

Grateful for the distraction, Harry tried it and grimaced. It wasn’t sweet at all, and the flavour was so odd that he couldn’t place it at first. Then it came to him. God damn it, why did the elves have to know so fucking much?

“Cucumber.” His chest ached as something inside there twisted itself into a tight knot. “I can’t--excuse me, please.”

He shoved to his feet, his chair clattering behind him as he darted into his bedroom, slamming the door just before tears started slipping down his cheeks.

When Harry emerged almost thirty minutes later, Draco and Morrighan were nowhere to be seen. Snape was sitting on the sofa, his head tilted back to rest atop the back of it, his eyes closed.

He opened them when Harry cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” said Harry, feeling like the world’s prize idiot for having to say it again so soon. “I’m not actually mental.”
Severus gave him a glimmer of a smile. “Your brother explained about the cucumber.”

Harry gave a shaky nod, wondering if Draco had stopped at that. He should have known that when dealing with Snape, it wouldn’t much matter.

“You said that you broke up with your petite amie,” observed Snape in a mild tone. “Your reaction to your pudding course would indicate, however, that you didn’t wish to.”

“Master of understatement, aren’t you?”

“Or perhaps your comment lacked precision, and she was the one to--”

“Shut up.”

To Harry’s vast surprise, Snape did. Maybe that was why he suddenly felt willing to explain.

Harry sighed, wondering how to start. Wondering why this had been so much easier to discuss with Draco. “Um, yeah. I was the one to break it off. Because she’s not going to be safe if she’s associated with me. So I had to stop it. So I did.”

Snape shifted over on the sofa, waving a hand to indicate that Harry should join him. “I suppose this is what you meant, months ago, when you said that you couldn’t have anyone.”

Harry plumped the cushion behind him, but it didn’t help. He still felt like he was leaning against rocks or something, talking this over with a father he knew he had but really couldn’t remember. “I bet it was. Why, what did you think it meant?”

Snape coloured slightly. “You recall during our planning for the Yule Ball, that I admitted I had been under the impression you were attracted to your own gender?”

Harry snorted. “This was one of the reasons why? Because I said I can’t have a romance?”

“I mistook the reason why you thought you couldn’t have one.”

It took Harry a second to follow that. “Oh, great. Not only did you think I was gay, you thought I was a bigot about it!”

“I thought you were raised in a Muggle culture quite intolerant of such inclinations.”

Harry supposed he had a point, so he let it go. “Well, now you know I was just thinking of protecting the people I love. Which I’m doing with Luna. And I’m not trying to break up your romance, honestly, but haven’t you thought of that for yourself? I’m sure Voldemort would love to get his scaly hands on anybody you love!”

Snape gave him a long glance, then finally answered. “Maura is well able to protect herself, hence her current teaching post, and it is her right to decide for herself whether she will allow a madman sway over her life. Moreover, I don’t believe I have a ‘saving-people thing,’ as you do.”

“But I’m sure you’d save her if something happened!”

Severus reached out and patted his hand where it was scrunching a cushion. “Yes, but not the way you would. I would favour a more Slytherin approach, though I count it a good thing if your own saving-people impulse is beginning to re-emerge.”

“I didn’t think you approved of it,” scoffed Harry. “Or not much.”
“I don’t entirely, but I do believe it may presage a return of your full memory. That can only be a good thing.” Snape gazed at him for a moment more, but Harry said nothing. “Now, if you feel sufficiently composed, you should return to your class in progress.”

As Harry stood, Snape withdrew a bit of parchment from a robe pocket. “Lest you lose Slytherin points for tardiness.”

Harry glanced down at the excuse and shrugged, but felt he had to say the obvious. “You know, points from Gryffindor matter to me too. Probably more, if I’m being honest.”

“This comes as no shock to me.”

“All right, then.” Well, if Snape of all people could be gracious, then damn it, Harry could be the same. “She was really nice about it, but I did ruin your grand announcement. Why don’t you invite her back for dinner and we’ll try again?”

“Maura will be traveling this evening. She needs to inform her parents of our news.”

Huh. Harry hadn’t once thought of that. But then, needing to tell parents things wasn’t an impulse that came to him naturally. For obvious reasons, he supposed. Or maybe it had never crossed his mind that she must have parents.

“But speaking of grand announcements,” added Snape, “I must ask that you make none at all. Maura and I will not be informing anyone else of our engagement until she can speak with her family.”

Harry hadn’t been planning to tell anybody, anyway. Nodding, he let himself out of the man’s quarters without another word.

The next few days were sheer agony for Harry. He had to go to classes and meals and DA meetings and Quidditch practices, doing his level best to act like things were fine, when all the while his heart was aching for Luna. At least she wasn’t in most of his classes, but she did pop by from time to time, smiling serenely as she took up residence at a free table and started in on whatever lesson was going on.

Harry would scowl, and then remind himself to cut it out. He’d liked her free-spirit approach to learning when it meant he got to see more of her, but now, it was like she was torturing him! Why didn’t she stay away? Couldn’t she see that she was hurting him?

She probably couldn’t, Harry glumly concluded. She probably had no idea, since it seemed to hurt her not at all to see him. She’d wave gaily as she strolled about a class, saying, “Hi, Justin! Hi, Harry! Hi, Ernie!” just as though they were all the best of friends.

In fact, she treated Harry exactly like he remembered from fifth year. Just like their snogging sessions hadn’t meant a thing!
Quite clearly, she was able to forget Harry a lot more readily than he could forget her.

It made him want to march straight up to her and demand an explanation, but of course, he couldn’t do that. No, he had to act like there was nothing between them!

No matter that his heart broke a little more every time he heard her lilting voice.

At least he didn’t have to worry about running across her on Saturday, when he had his potions tutorial with Snape.

“You seem morose,” the man commented as he watched Harry grind lacewings into a fine dust.

Well, of course he did! The strain of having to pretend all the time was driving him batty, but down here he could relax a little and let his real feelings show.

Not that he wanted to talk about them. “Any progress yet with Morrighan’s parents?”

“They’re still incommunicado, as it were. One of the drawbacks to the Ministry’s civil justice system.”

Morrighan’s parents were busy contesting a will, it turned out. In the wizarding world, that was done in the Department of Mysteries, since it involved the world of the dead. The rub was that nobody visiting the Department for that reason was allowed messages from the land of the living until the disputed estate had been settled. Morrighan hadn’t even been able to tell her parents that she needed to see them.

Which meant that Harry and Draco were still under strict orders not to tell anybody about their father’s engagement. Harry had started out fine with that, but as the days dragged on he’d grown to have more and more sympathy for Snape’s plight. It wasn’t so very different from Harry’s, in a sense. Snape had to pretend, too.

“Though I do appreciate the inquiry,” added Snape, covering Harry’s hand with his own to show him how to twist the pestle more effectively.

“Aren’t you getting impatient?” asked Harry. “It’s been more than a week. They should have known when they went down there that something important could happen. Maybe you and she should just go ahead and announce it.”

“Out of the question.”

The adamant way he said that was rather interesting. “Are you sure you’re just following her lead? Maybe deep down you don’t want people to know.”

“No, it’s simply imperative that she be able to inform her parents in advance of any announcement.”

Harry gave Snape a sympathetic glance. “It’s going to cause a huge commotion whether her parents know or not. I mean, I don’t think most of Hogwarts views you as the marrying type--”

Snape’s own glance back challenged him to think a bit more. “I dare say they didn’t view me as the fatherly type either, Harry.”

Right. He hadn’t hesitated to let the adoption be known. Not his, and not Draco’s. Though in those cases, the circumstances had meant things were pretty public from the start. “Well, I still think that--”
“Her family loathes Slytherins,” Snape interrupted, suddenly pinching the bridge of his nose so hard that he left indentations. “Her entire family. The last thing Maura wants is for her parents to hear second-hand that she’s going to spend the rest of her life with one.”

Oh. Harry almost said that a lot of people hated Slytherins, but stopped himself in time. “Um . . . was she sorted Slytherin? They might understand in that case?” Maybe that was how Snape had first met her.

Snape fetched a tin cauldron and poured a measure of hellebore into it. “Not only was Maura not a Slytherin, she did not attend Hogwarts.”

“But her parents did,” guessed Harry. “And learned to hate Slytherins.”

“So much so,” said Snape, slamming down the hellebore flask, “that they forbade her to attend here herself!”

That did sound bad. “But she teaches here,” said Harry. “They know that much, right? They must know that she might not hate Slytherin the way they do.”

“Hatred is not rational.” Snape sighed. “But truly, Harry, we will wait a year if needs be. If Maura’s parents learn that she is engaged to the Head of Slytherin, a suspected former Death Eater, without her there to smooth the waters, they may never speak to her again.”

Ouch. Harry’s head began to pound. “Any chance of a headache draught?”

A moment later, a small vial came flying in from Snape’s office.

“All of it?” checked Harry before downing the lot. “Wow. That really is amazing.”

“Sometimes I think it a pity I was never able to see magic as magical,” lamented Snape.

“It’s not, to you?”

“It is simply life.”

With that, they crushed and minced and stirred until their potion was a thick pinkish goo. Harry couldn’t remember for certain, of course, but he thought he’d never enjoyed brewing so much. Strange how things turned out. Now he was looking forward to their next Saturday session! If it was anything like this one, it would probably get his mind off Luna for a few hours.

The question was, how was he going to make it through another week? And another?

When Snape dismissed him, Harry ran straight to Slytherin and up to his dormitory there, throwing himself on his bed and pulling the curtains closed with magic, so they’d lock. Another irony: better Slytherin than Gryffindor, since at least here, Draco would know to keep people away.
“Just my luck,” muttered Harry as he crushed the letter that came to him on breakfast the following Saturday. Here he’d been looking forward all week to his next potions session with Snape, and the man had cancelled it only an hour beforehand! By owl post, no less! “Serve him right if I go straight back to hating his stupid subject.”

He should have known that Draco wasn’t above reading someone else’s private letter. “I knew you couldn’t hate Potions forever!”

“Oh, shut it.” Harry ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take, pretending every second--”

He stopped only because Draco kicked him in the shin.

“Ow, you prat, you fucking prat!”

“Looks like trouble in paradise,” sneered Zabini from a few feet away. “Maybe you should go back to eating in Gryffindor where you belong!”

“Maybe you should eat dirt like the worm you are,” retorted Draco. “I know a spell to that effect, if you’d like me to try it.”

“Do it so you can be expelled again! Go on!”

“Or in the alternative I can let Severus know that you just maligned his son . . .”

Zabini paled and turned away.

“When are you going to get it through your stupid blond head that Gryffindor’s not an insult?” shouted Harry, grabbing Draco’s bowl and dumping its contents -- gooey porridge drizzled with even gooier honey -- on his head. “I don’t know why I sat here all week if you don’t even know that much by now! Maybe I should go back to Gryffindor where I belong! And where people don’t kick me!”

“Merlin, Harry,” gasped Draco, blobs of porridge flying out as he shook his head wildly. “Think, would you?”

Harry didn’t want to, because that might mean he’d start thinking of Luna. Except, he was doing it anyway! Just as suddenly as it had arrived, his anger evaporated. “Oh, fine. Scourgify. There, good as new. Sorry about that.”

It was all he could do not to sink his head down onto the table, bursting into tears on the way down. Or maybe he should just bang his head into the table a few hundred times? That idea wasn’t half bad.

“Come on,” said Draco, grabbing his hand and pulling him to his feet. “We need to get out of here before more students arrive.”

It was true that at least nine-tenths of the students were having a lie-in, just like on most Saturdays. But not Harry. Oh, no, he’d wanted to make sure he was on time for his potions tutorial!

“I won’t throw any more food on you,” grumbled Harry, but he let Draco pull him from the Great Hall anyway. It wasn’t like he had an appetite, was it?
“Sorry,” said Harry again once they were in the Room of Requirement. “Though you should say it too! I’m fucking well tired of you acting like Gryffindor is a nasty disease!”

“Fine. I’m sorry, Harry! But you misunderstood everything as usual, you know! Zabini’s insult was to imply you weren’t a Slytherin. Which you most certainly are!”

“Well, then, you deserved the porridge for kicking me!”

“I didn’t know how else to keep you from lamenting out loud for everyone to hear! Pardon me if I was trying my best to protect the lovely Miss Lovegood!”

“She is lovely, isn’t she?” Harry dropped into a puffy armchair and dropped his head to his hands. “Lovegood, she’s that too. Do you know she was sweet as pie when I explained things to her? I can’t do this, I don’t know how I can do this, I have to do this!”

Draco pointed his wand at the fireplace, sinking down into his own chair once the flames were dancing brightly. “You do the impossible all the time,” he said, sighing. “You’ll get through this.”

“No point now.” Harry raised stricken eyes. “You heard Zabini. Trouble in paradise! Oh God, he knows I love her still and he’s as evil as they come--”

“Please. He’s a fifth-rate amateur villain at best,” sneered Draco, waving a hand as though to brush away an insignificant flea. “And he doesn’t know a thing. By trouble in paradise, he meant us, Harry. You know, brotherly love?”

“Really?” Harry gulped, suddenly hopeful.

“By Slytherin standards, the two of us have been disgustingly sappy.” Draco grinned. “I had to. It was the only way to get through to my Gryffindor brother. Both before and after the amnesia, come to think of it.”

Harry narrowed his eyes, smelling a trick.

“For fuck’s sake!” erupted Draco. “I mean it! You’re a Gryffindor and I know you’re a Gryffindor and I like you that way, all right?”

“Really?” asked Harry again.

“Yes,” said Draco, crossing his arms. “You see? I told you I was getting sappy. Besides, why wouldn’t I like you Gryffindor too? Without your ridiculous bravery we’re probably all doomed.”

“You still manage to insult Gryffindor about once a day,” said Harry quietly.

“Well, if you were a little more Sl-- subtle, in your thinking, you’d see something else in that.”

Harry couldn’t resist. “Projection, right. Deep down you secretly long to belong to the House of the Lion.”
Draco shuddered, but didn’t comment on that. “I think it’s more a case of insecurity, Harry,” he admitted, gaze shuttered as he stared at the fire. “Don’t you understand? I want you to be one of us, so you won’t . . . uh, despise us for our Slytherin traits, I think.”

Oh. That actually made a lot of sense. From what he’d heard, when he’d first been adopted, he hadn’t complained much about being in Slytherin. Since the amnesia, though, he’d been pretty rude about the whole thing, right up until recently. No wonder Draco would be feeling sensitive on the issue.

“You’re a Slytherin and I know you’re a Slytherin and I like you that way, all right?” said Harry, sitting up completely. “Without good strategy we’re probably all doomed too, you see?”

“All right, then.”

“All right.”

The fire crackled in the stillness for a few minutes, then. When Harry looked around the small chamber, it looked about the same as the one they’d used when Draco was telling him forbidden stories about his forgotten year. But everyone was allowed to fill in the gaps, now, so Harry wasn’t sure why they’d come. “Did you want a private place for us to finish breakfast?” he finally asked.

“In case I lost it again?”

“Your mood hasn’t been the best this last week, but no.” Draco paused. “I thought you’d like a place where you can really relax. There’s nowhere else, right? Even at home you have to pretend things are better than they are, in case Snape thinks your mood is because you don’t want a stepmother.”

Like clockwork, the word slammed into him on a wave of nausea.

“Snape told you,” said Harry dully.

“No,” Draco answered, the single syllable sharp. “You did. I’ve known since you tried to stop them from attending the opera. And the books I read covered it too. The ones on how children react to adoption. Muggle books, mind. Not sure if I mentioned them to you before.”

“You read Muggle books, for me? Now that’s sappy.”

“Back to you,” said Draco briskly, though with a hint of color along his cheekbones. “If this morning’s display is any indicator at all, you need a break in the worst way. Who wouldn’t? You’re putting on a show twenty-four hours a day.”

“Not a very good one,” huffed Harry, thinking of the porridge.

Draco easily followed his train of thought. “Oh, that’s easily explained. Pretty soon people will know that Dad’s engaged. Anyone who heard you talk about pretending will think you meant the way we knew but couldn’t say anything.”

“Pretty soon, my arse. Her parents are going to be contesting that will forever!” Harry gulped again. “And Remus is still unconscious, and Voldemort is still trying to get Dark Powers like mine by messing with his marrow, and I’ll never get to kiss Luna again. Nothing’s ever going to change.”

“And still no word on my mother, either.”

That time, Harry was almost ashamed that he’d forgotten her. Almost.
“So we’re both depressed, but I know what will help.” Draco’s grin looked forced that time as he leaned back in his chair. “Oh, Room? The two of us would quite enjoy afternoon tea--”

It wasn’t even close to afternoon. “Um . . . don’t you mean high tea?”

Draco looked positively scandalized. “Certainly not. That’s for the servants,” he said as a table appeared between them and various bits of china popped into existence. “And I wasn’t done ordering; don’t interrupt again. We wouldn’t want to confuse the Room.”

What was confusing about tea?

“This won’t do,” Draco announced to the air, holding a teapot aloft. “We’ll start off with blooming white tea in a crystal pot so we can enjoy the view. Laced with a generous dollop of the very finest Irish single malt whiskey, mind.”

All right, so there was more to tea than Harry had known. But whiskey?

Harry cleared his throat. “I don’t think people drink their tea with--”

“We’re going to.”

Harry gaped when a clear teapot appeared, its contents a deep translucent ruby cradling a strange-looking flower. “Is that safe to drink?”

“It’s a tea flower. Very sophisticated, if I do say so myself.”

“But is white tea supposed to be red?”

Draco smiled, the expression mischievous. “That’s the exact shade of a well aged whiskey.”

“I thought the Room would only give us liquor if it thought we weren’t going to drink it!” hissed Harry.

“I found a loophole.” Draco poured out two generous cups, drank half of his, and announced, “Ah, this would be perfect with a splash more whiskey.”

The liquid level in the teapot increased by a full inch.

“More of a splash than that, mind,” said Draco, and the level shot up until liquid filled nearly the entire spout.

“The Room can’t possibly be this stupid,” said Harry, laughing.

“But it can. It gave me a slice of cake with rum sauce earlier this week, and I tasted real rum. A lucky happenstance that got me thinking about how I might cheer you up a bit. Now, toss that pitifully weak tea over your shoulder and refill your cup with the improved variety.”

Harry did, taking a small sip. “Wow. Strong.”

“But good?”

“Not sure.”

“Drink enough and you will be.”

Harry downed what remained in his teacup, then poured himself another and downed that too.
Draco, not to be outdone, kept pace. It wasn’t until Harry had almost finished his third cup that he gave a sharp nod. “It’s getting better. The taste? Not good, but yeah. Good.”

Draco laughed. “And the glorious part is that we can order as many pots as we like.” He raised his voice. “Away with this one. We should like oolong next, no need for blooming. A third of a pot at most because we need it strongly, strongly imbued with . . .” He turned questioning eyes at Harry.

“Um, rum?”

“Rum!” announced Draco. “Let’s make that spiced rum, if you please!”

Harry tried it when a new pot appeared and made a face. “Tea with liquor is just plain strange.”

“Mmm, but I tried ordering shots and mixed drinks and such.” Draco shrugged. “No luck. The trick is to focus hard on the tea when I speak . . .”


“Not good!”

That had them both cackling and pouring themselves refills of oolong with rum.

“Tequila!” declared Draco when they’d finally drained the pot. “Er, I mean tea-quila, Room! That’s a quarter pot of Earl Grey with a lovely huge helping of tequila poured atop--”

That one was pretty foul; they drank less than half the pot before giving up, which started a bit of a game between them. They started ordering teas left and right, drinking their fill of the ones they liked and almost instantly banishing the really bad combinations.

“French Chamomile infused with the finest Russian vodka!” called out Draco.

“English breakfast and gin!” yelled Harry when it was his turn.

“Flowering Jasmine tea with sixty drops of Earl Grey and a full pint of cognac!”

“Uh . . . uh . . . Lipton’s with uh, uh . . . brandy!”

And on, and on.

Draco had been right, Harry found out. As long as he thought really hard about the tea part of the order, it would come through just the way he’d requested.

“Mos’ . . . mos’ a these are pretty foul,” admitted Harry after almost gagging on Draco’s latest concoction of whole-leaf Himalayan mint tea and vermouth, shaken not stirred. “Why’d you say it so silly?”

Draco patted his tummy, a lazy smile of contentment lifting the edges of his lips. “Mmm. Muggle Studies, Miss Burbage has this perjecter she runs with her wand, and we’ve been watching movers. Loads of Muggles say the strangest things--”

“Movies,” corrected Harry.

“Mmm, right you are. Movies. Poor Miss Burbage. She really wanted Dad to notice her.”

Harry didn’t want to think about Snape’s engagement. “Which movies?”
“Oh, er . . .” Draco blinked. “She started with that Oz one we saw in the summer, and one about a number man with a license to kill, and there was one in a galaxy far, far away. Oh, and one about a girl named Alice, too. But she was made of paper. I do believe they had a mad tea party in that one--”

Harry howled. “Mad tea party!”

“Maybe that’s why I thought of tea . . . “ Draco’s nostrils suddenly flared. “And this is a poor excuse for one, a poor excuse indeed. Where are the cakes and such, I should like to know! Afternoon tea, hmmph!”

A three-tiered china platter heaped with food glimmered into place on the table, which expanded to make room for it amid the scattered pots and cups that had yet to be banished. Small porcelain pots of jam and clotted cream also popped into existence.

“Oh,” said Draco in a more moderate tone. “That’s better. I s’pose I was really focused on the tea itself.” He helped himself to a tiny watercress sandwich from the middle tier, then scowled. “Oh, honestly. Am I supposed to place this on my saucer? And I haven’t a napkin or a fork or--”

He shut up when everything he was talking about and more was added to the table.

“Twit,” said Harry fondly as he proceeded to eat directly from the tiered stand.

Draco wrinkled his nose but didn’t comment. After a moment, he looked at his teacup critically, then shrugged and filled it almost all the way to the brim from a pot he seemed to choose at random. “So what shall we toast to?”

The sight of Draco’s cup lifted high brought a rush of memories back. Celebrating Snape’s engagement when his own heart was breaking apart. Running off to his room before he started to blubber like a baby. Throwing himself onto his bed and biting his own fingers to keep from making any noise as he cried and cried.

“No toasts,” muttered Harry as he grabbed a teapot and sloppily poured himself a new cup, barely even noticing when he overflowed tea-and-whatever onto the table. He drank it down to the dregs without stopping. “I’m sick of toasts.”

“Well, I like them--”

Before he could drink to something, however, the magic in the Room produced a silver platter, this one boasting about a dozen toast soldiers marching in formation along the rim, one of them imperiously calling out orders to his crustless troops.

Harry chortled, his mood see-sawing between extremes. Yeah, he could drink to something after all. Well, to each one of them, more like. That was only fair, he thought as he guzzled even more tea. Like a slow tide receding, his thoughts of Luna mellowed until they didn’t hurt so much. Instead, they felt warm, like the twilight when the sun had just barely dipped behind the horizon . . .

“Luna means moon, did you know that?” he asked, a pleasant drowsiness settling over him like a snuggly blanket. “I dunno if that’s such a good name for her. She’s sunny, you know?”

“Like a walking cheering charm,” agreed Draco, raising his cup, then looking around, blinking. “My good Room! If you would be so kind?”

Harry snatched a teapot from the table and sloshed some into the cup for him, but Draco was slow
to register his action. He kept waving his teacup to and fro, and when Harry couldn’t keep up, a
sizeable measure of boozy tea ended up on the stone floor. “Hol’ still!” Harry finally complained.

Draco finally stopped moving his cup about. “Mmm, vodka. Always did love me some nice
p’tatoes.”

“With sour cream and butter and chives and bacon,” sighed Harry, rubbing his stomach, though he
didn’t notice when a full plate of them appeared for him. “Used to think about ‘em, you know,
when I was locked in the cubburd. Um, you know about the cubburd? I can’t ‘member.”

“You can’t ‘member!” howled Draco. “Only just noticing, were you?”

“But I ‘member lots,” protested Harry, refilling his own cup again. “Um, didja know I made my
teacher’s hair turn blue once?”

Draco leaned over towards Harry, nearly topping out of his chair. “Do tell, do tell. Which teacher?
Umbritch?”

“You liked her,” sniffed Harry. “You took points from ‘Mione for being a Muggleborn! ‘Cept you
used a nastier word, didn’t you? Budmlood!”

Scowling, Draco threw a teapot at the hearth. Then he threw another.

“Prob’ly why she hates me now,” muttered Draco. “I called her all those nasty names ‘cause I’m
an arse.”

Now that was just silly. “She doesn’ hate you--”

“Does too! She hardly looks at me in classes, now, an’ she won’t even be my partner in Potions!”

“Didja ask her?

“Course I asked her!” Draco slumped down in his chair. “Maybe she needs s’more possums? I
mean, blossoms?”

“Tea blossoms!” called out Harry. But no, that didn’t sound quite right for Hermione. “Or books,”
he added after a moment.

“Books,” said Draco slowly, nodding his head in a loopy motion. “D’you think there’s any she
hasn’t read?

Both boys guffawed at that, which made Harry realise something. He made a kissy noise, mostly
because he couldn’t resist. “Uh-uh, Drakey-wakey. I know a seeecrit….”

“Tell me!”

More kissy noises, nice long slurpy ones. Harry got sort of lost in the game, trying to draw each
one out longer and longer… Then he thought he should probably tell. After all, ‘Mione would want
him to. She’d been clear as day, right as rain, that he shouldn’t be a teaspoon, hadn’t she? Well,
Harry would show her!

“She said--” Wait, what had she said? It took Harry a second. “Oh, yeah. You’re a good kisser.”

Draco preened. “Never had a complaint, have I?”

Harry wouldn’t know about that. “‘Mione likes ya!”
“Don’t call her that. She’s mine!”

Harry furrowed his brow. “Well, if she likes you enuff, then yeah, ‘Mione’s yours.”

Draco jumped up and brandished his wand. “Don’t you dare, Potter! What do you mean, what’s ‘mine is yours!’ She’s mine, not yours!”

Harry scrambled to his own feet, putting his hands up, no idea what Draco was on about. But then again, who could understand a Slytherin? “She can be yours if she likes,” he clarified, just before an entire week’s worth of tears seemed to well up behind his eyes. Once he started crying, he couldn’t seem to stop. “But Luna won’t ever, ever be mine!” he blubbered, stumbling forward and throwing his arms around Draco, shaking him a little to make him understand. “Not ever, ever, ever, ever, ever--”

For a long moment Draco was still, but then he shoved his wand in a pocket and hugged Harry back. “’S all right,” he soothed, squeezing tighter.

“Not! Not, not, not!” cried Harry. “Never, never, ever, ever--”

“Will be,” promised Draco. “You jus’ want s’more tea.”

That just made Harry cry all the harder. “Want Luna!”

“Now, now, you wouldn’t want to get your brother all wet--”

“I want to get Luna all wet!” howled Harry.

Draco strangled a laugh, then spoke very solemnly. “I meant, stop your crying--”

“I want Luna to stop my crying!”

Draco paused for a second, his brow furrowed. “Do my homework!”

“I want Luna to do your homework!”

“Do you really?”

Oh. Harry pinked up and suddenly realised what he’d said. Idiot. Even more disconcerting was the fact that he was hugging Draco. He stepped back and cleared his throat. “Er . . . sorry. Didn’t mean to make you my plushie. Don’t think I have a plushie.”

And suddenly he was bursting into tears all over again, this time because he’d never, ever had a plushie.

“There, there.” Draco patted him on the shoulder. “’S all right, Harry. You can have my plushie dragon.”

“Thought you didn’ have one!”

“Well, I do. Green an’ silver. But you can have it.”

Harry stuck out his lower lip. “Don’t want second-hand. I always get second-hand! I want my own plushie!”

Draco waved his arm in a long arc. “I’ll buy you a hundred bran’ new plushies, every single one just for you. Hmmm?”
“I wanna unicorn an’ a dragon,” said Harry, lower lip quivering by then. “An’ a Teddy bear.”

The moment he said those last two words, they seemed to take over his every thought, years and years of longing hitting him now, all at once.

“I wan’ a Teddy bear!” he wailed. “A big huge fuzzy one!”

Draco waved both his arms, that time. “Let’s get you one, straight away! Oh, Room, my good Room? We find ourselves in fine straits! We shall require a way to get to Hogsmeade!”

The instant Draco finished speaking, part of one wall dissolved into a stone tunnel.

Draco stared at it and laughed; Harry stepped into it and giggled.

And just like that, they were on their way.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Forty-Six: Cursed

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Chapter Notes

Thanks ever so much to my new beta, Maple in the Moonlight! He's actually been with the Family project from the beginning and not only did he step up to beta, he's largely responsible for encouraging me to come back and finish the series!

The other end of the tunnel looked blocked, but then it swung outward like a door and Harry and Draco crawled out into a smallish, rather dingy room. Harry took one slow look around before his lower lip started quivering again. “I don’ see any Teddy bears . . .”

“There, there.” Draco patted his arm again. “We shall find you one.”

The door creaked slightly as they swung it open. They walked along a short landing and then down a rickety wooden staircase. Plushies were completely forgotten when they reached the large dusty room at the bottom, though. Tables were scattered haphazardly around the interior, with three chairs occupied by cloaked figures hiding their faces in their hoods. Along one wall ran a dusty wooden bar.

“Been here b’fore,” said Harry, eyes widening.

Meanwhile, Draco was staring at the old, wizened, long-haired man behind the bar. “Well, would you look at that. It’s the headmaster, sure as my name’s Malfoy.”

Harry peered closely, blinking several times. “Thought your name was Snape.”

“Semantics,” scoffed Draco. “Though . . . the nose isn’t quite right, is it?”

“Glamour,” decided Harry.

“Bad glamour. Didn’t know old Dumbledydore had a second job, though--”

Harry bent over double laughing. “Mmm, he’s saving for a telly--”

“I miss the telly,” said Draco as if he was revealing the secret of the ages. “Muggle magic, I ‘member saying. The pictures never repeat!”

Harry chortled. “Sometimes they do.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

By then, the old man behind the bar was eyeing them. “Shh, shh,” whispered Draco. “Act casual.”

“But Dumblydore--”

Draco gave him a wink. “He can’t admit he’us if we can’t admit we’re him--” Blinking, he started over. “I mean, we’ll keep our seeecrit if if he’ll keep his… fuck it, you know what I mean.”
Harry nodded, very solemn. “Slyth’rin. Right.”

Draco sauntered over to the bar, Harry in tow, and perched himself on a stool. “Firewhisky, my good man,” he announced in a snooty voice. “Ogden’s, if you please. For my friend and myself.”

Harry poked him. “Brother.”

“And another one for my brother,” added Draco.

“You both from these parts?” asked the man in a gruff tone, both eyebrows vanishing behind his ragged long hair.

“Oh, no indeed,” said Draco. “I originally hail from Swindon, and my friend and brother here was born aboard a ship far at sea. We’re seeing the sights of wizarding Scotland, don’t you know!”

“You are a sight, that’s what I know,” grumbled Dumbledore-in-disguise as he slammed three tumblers of a smoking liquid in front of them. “Well, boys? Drink up! Enjoy!”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Draco easily drained his glass and the spare one while Harry sipped a bit more cautiously at his own. “Far superior to tea-quila, I do declare. Good show, old man! Good show!”

“Ya want another?”

“Indeed we do!”

Dumbledore-in-disguise sighed so hard that spittle flew from his mouth, but that didn’t stop him from pouring more Firewhisky into all three tumblers.

A shady character seemed to materialize from nowhere, right alongside them at the bar, speaking in what could only be described as an oily voice. “Fresh meat, looks like. Jerome, get yer scabby arse over here and lookee what I found!”

Draco looked down the length of his nose at the stranger, then appeared to realise that would do him little good when the other man was standing over him. “Meat?” he inquired. “I do believe you’d be better served, literally, at the Three Broomsticks yonder. They do a marvelous Sunday roast, though I don’t frequent such an establishment, quite obviously—”

“Why you little ponce,” snarled the stranger.

“The bangers and mash is spot on,” added Harry, quite oblivious to the undertones.

“Eh, off with ya,” said the barkeep, something vicious lurking behind the short command. “These two aren’t your type.”

If anything, the man’s voice grew even oilier. “They might be. But if you need some kind of . . . incentive . . .”

“Yer ball’s do for a start. And then if you don’t shut up, your tongue.”

The man snarled and whirled away in a swirl of black cloak, apparating away at almost the same instant as a second man in the bar.

“Yes, it never does to let in the riff-raff,” said Draco. “I dare say he could have used a freshening charm before gracing your pleasant establishment with his dubious presence.”
When the old man’s face twisted, Harry thought he’d better explain. “He ronked.”

That didn’t seem to help.

“Ach, just drink up if that’s what yer here to do,” snapped the barkeep before stepping away to the end of the bar, where he started wiping down the same spot, over and over, his beady blue eyes trained on them all the while.

“Well, you heard the good man!” Draco pushed the spare glass over to Harry. “Your turn, this time.”

They both sipped more slowly on this round. In Harry’s case it was because the room was spinning and he didn’t want to slosh.

“So you ‘member this place?” asked Draco as he grabbed nuts from a bowl and tried to build them into a tower.

Harry smiled in fond remembrance. “Oh, yeah. Last year, Dumblydore’s Army sign-ups. Smith’s a prat, did you know?”

“What’s the name?”

“Zacharias? Smith, mostly--”

“No, the pub?”

Harry tried to think. “Um, Hog something.” Through the window he saw the sign swinging, a grisly severed head etched onto it. “No, Boar. Boar’s Brain, that was it.”

Draco peered through the window, too, then let out a long whistle. “Look, it’s Dad! And Maura! Aww, and they’re holding hands. So nice to see him happy for once.”

“You’re jus’ made o’ sap!” laughed Harry, tripping over his feet as he made his way to the window and used his wand to poke it open. “Hallo there, Sev’rus!”

The man stopped in his tracks, his gaze incredulous.

“Dad,” urged Draco in a stage whisper. “Call him Dad!”

“Hallo there, Dad!” Harry obliged.

The same stage whisper. “And her, don’t forget her!”

“And Perfesser Morghihan!” added Harry, waving wildly. “Hallooo!”

Snape was stomping forward by then, almost dragging Morrighan as she hurried to keep up with his long stride across the snow-covered ground. Harry leaned out the window to greet them and promptly fell arse-over-teakettle into a snowbank.

Draco chortled, then reached out the window and tried to fetch him back in.

Shaking him off, Harry stood up in the snow instead and grinned. “Sev’rus, Perfesser Morghihan! Did I say hallo yet?”

Snape grasped him by the collar of his robe and pulled him close to hiss. “What are you doing here, you absolute cretin? What is the meaning of this?”
“Having a drink,” said Harry merrily, fascinated by the way the sun was swinging in the sky. “Think the Room must have wanted us to, ‘cause it sent us here, didn’t it?” He lowered his voice. “Dumblydore’s working jus’ now. But don’ let on, ‘cause I think it’s a seeecrit.”

Snape’s whole face was contorting with rage, but Harry knew what that meant. “Oops,” he said, giggling because it was really quite silly. Always had been. “Perfesser Dumbledydore, I meant.”

“Get inside this instant!” Snape underlined the command with a sharpish shove, propelling Harry towards the door of the pub.

Draco was hanging onto it, swaying on his feet as he gaily waved them inside. “A drink, excellent notion, my good man! We shall all have a drink t’gether!”

“We most certainly will not,” snarled Snape, slamming the door once he and Maura were inside. He moderated his tone to something calm yet dark as he glared at the barman. “Dumbledore.”

“Perfesser Dumbledydore,” Harry reminded him in a stage whisper, before doubling over and howling with laughter.

“Please do excuse my idiot sons,” snapped Snape. “I do hope they have not troubled you unduly.”

“Lost me some business, is all.”

Snape drew forth two gold coins.

“Heavy drinkers, they were.”

Sighing, Snape tripled the amount. “Will that be sufficient?”

The gnarled old man considered the small stack of galleons and finally gave a curt nod, adding, “Soon as they pay up.”

Snape turned his glare on his sons. “Well?”

Draco shook his head. “I shouldn’t think to trust well water in an establishment such as this, Sev’rus. My good barman, have you any elf-drawn eau minérale?”

“Pay,” grated Snape, grabbing Draco by the collar much as he’d done earlier to Harry. “Pay your bar tab!”

“And mine!” chimed in Harry. “Don’ think I’ve so much as a noot!”

“It shall be my pleasure,” announced Draco, poking about in his pockets for a moment. “Hmm. Well, perils of a last-minute ‘venture, I do declare. Sev’rus, would you be so kind as to allow me a slight advance on my ‘llowance?”

“Idiots doesn’t begin to cover it,” muttered Snape, fishing about in his own pocket again.

“Ach, that sums it up, it does,” murmured the barman. “Kept an eye on them for you, though.”

“An owl or silver message would have served better, Dumbledore!”

Harry snorted. “I tol’ you, it’s Perfesser--”

“That’s enough, Harry,” said Morrighan, very quietly. “It’s not your place to rebuke your father.”
“But Dumbles--”

“For Merlin’s sake!” Snape erupted, even as he slammed several more Galleons on the bar. “Are you blind again? That’s Aberforth, not Albus!”

“Aberforth!” Draco guffawed. “Aberforth!”

“Think my name’s funny, do you?” grunted the old man. “Eh, Draco?”

“Yeah, your name is weird, Draco” agreed Harry, nodding sagely until the bobbing motion made him lose his balance and fall off his bar stool.

“Enough!” roared Snape, yanking him to his feet, his other hand darting out to catch Draco’s sleeve. “We will return to the castle at once. Come along!”

“Good day, my good man!” called out Draco as he was pulled out the door. “Until next time!”

Snape growled, but didn’t say another word until they’d reached his quarters.

“---------------------------------------------------

“Well,” said Morrighan in a light tone, “I suppose there’s nothing like being thrown into the deep end without warning.”

“Of parenting, I presume you mean?” asked Snape, the second word dripping with disgust. “I do hope this won’t change your mind about the endeavour.”

“Of course not,” she said softly, covering Snape’s hand with her own as they sat together on the sofa.

“Could you not yell?” asked Harry, clutching at his temples with both hands.

Snape’s voice went oily with menace. “Oh, I think there may be some yelling, yet.”

“Ow, ow, ow,” moaned Harry. “I thought you were a Potions Master. Don’t you have something better on hand?”

“You’ve had a sobering potion! Perhaps skipping the hangover cure will disabuse you of the pleasures of drink!”

Draco staggered into the living room, his face tinged green. No question of why, after all the retching noises they’d been hearing coming from his bathroom. “Oh, ick, gross, that’s completely rank, I can’t believe you’d make me go through something like that a second time--”

“Don’t be such a wuss,” snapped Harry. “I’ve sicked up a hundred times. Next time, close the door so we don’t all have to hear it.”

A wave of red washed into Draco’s face, hearing that. Combined with the green, it made him look
as sick as he’d sounded. “Next time?” he moaned, collapsing into an upholstered chair and hanging his head over the arm. “Merlin’s bloated balls, I think I shall die...”

“At least your head’s not going to explode--”

“I think it is--”

Snape flicked his wand slightly, causing a small brownish bottle to fly into his hand. “Tempting as it is to allow you both to suffer for several more hours. . . Two swallows each.” He waited until they’d both done as instructed. “Better?”

Harry’s throat convulsed, making him swallow several times in a row. “Yeah,” he said finally, the single word gruff.

“Yes,” said Draco, shoving his hands in his pockets as he slouched down into the chair.

“Thanks,” added Harry.

“That dose was for my benefit,” retorted Snape. “Listening to the pair of you whinge on was growing tiresome indeed.”

Morrighan laughed, the sound like a low drawl. “Now, Severus, you know that’s not entirely the case. I could see you struggling not to offer them some hangover cure sooner.”

“Learn by experience,” muttered Snape, his upper lip twisting.

Harry’s nostrils flared. “Oh yeah? I seem to recall that when I found you drunk off your socks, I didn’t hesitate to offer you a sobriety potion!”

Snape’s cheekbones reddened slightly, and no wonder. In the next instant Harry was realising that he’d blurted that out in front of not just Draco, but Morrighan as well. “Oh, God,” he moaned, plonking his forehead onto the dining table. “Sorry . . . “

“Perhaps we should proceed to the core of the wand,” said Snape crisply. “Namely, what in Merlin’s ever-loving name were the two of you doing in that condition in Hogsmeade?” By the end, his voice was approaching a full yell.

Harry lifted his head a little and wiped at his eyes. “I . . . I . . . it’s all confused. I mean, there was Luna, and I . . . I . . .” To his utter horror, the tears he’d been holding back suddenly gushed out, flooding down his face. “I just wanted a Teddy bear.”

For a moment, Snape simply stared. “A . . . Teddy bear?”

Harry wiped furiously at his face, grabbing at the cloth napkins Snape handed him. It didn’t help, though. He was still crying. “It wasn’t about that, it was more about Luna. She acts like I’m not even there! Well, not like I’m not there, but like I don’t matter, like we’re just friends and I hate it, hate it, hate it!”

“And for this you went to Hogsmeade?”

“No!”

“Harry,” said Snape in a level tone. “I don’t understand.”

Morrigan rose to her feet in one fluid motion. “I think it’s time I took my leave, my darling. You seem to have the situation well in hand.”
“You needn’t go.” Snape cleared his throat. “You’re very soon to be a part of this family--”

“Yes, but even then there will be a time and place for you to speak to your sons without me.” Leaning down, Morrighan dropped a brief kiss on Snape’s lips. “This is one of them. Trust me on that.”

With a baleful glare at Harry and Draco both, Snape stood up and saw Morrighan over to the Floo. Once she was gone, he stayed there, darkly eyeing the embers.

“We didn’t mean to spoil your date,” said Draco quietly. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You should be sorry about all of it!”

“Well, don’t blame Harry. It was my idea!”

“It was your idea to go to Hogsmeade to buy Harry a Teddy bear? Really,” Snape sneered. “I thought even you had better judgement than that.”

Draco swallowed, and after a moment, weakly offered, “Impulse control?”

“A lack thereof, I presume you mean?” asked Snape darkly. “You tempt me to demonstrate such a lack of my own!”

“It was kind of the Room’s idea for us to go to Hogsmeade,” Harry said, sighing. “I think it was trying to cheer me up.”

“That infernal Room,” Snape muttered. “Well? I presume there is more to the story?”

Draco slouched down even further, though Harry wouldn’t have thought it possible. “I took Harry there to get drunk, all right? Now you know! I just wanted to cheer him up. You were so wrapped up in your lady-love that you couldn’t be arsed to realise that your own son was really suffering!”

“The Room can’t provide students a means to get drunk.”

Draco glared. “Really! That’s the one thing you noticed in what I had to say?” Yeah, Harry had noticed that too! “Besides, it’s not like you’re so careful to keep us away from drink!” he blurted. “You’re always letting us have wine, and just last week it was champagne with lunch. And I know that when I’m upset, you actually ply me with hard liquor!”

It didn’t take long for Draco to take up the theme. “Yes, so pardon us if we’ve internalized the idea that when we’re stressed, we’re supposed to get plastered!”

“This isn’t helping,” Snape said with a heavy sigh as he took a seat at the table, close alongside his son. “Harry . . . I regret that I did not pay sufficient attention to your difficulties in the last days. And I am sorry that you took it so much to heart, my own unfortunate decision to indulge so much, that night.”

Harry felt himself flushing, since that really wasn’t fair. “It wasn’t unfortunate,” he said quietly. “That was probably the only thing that could have got through to me that you really do . . . um . . .”

“Love you?” supplied Snape.

Harry wanted to hang his head, but he forced himself to meet his father’s eyes. “Yeah, that.”

Snape gestured for Draco to join them in the dining alcove, then spoke in an almost academic tone.
“Are the two of you aware that it is, in fact, not safe for you to be wandering Hogsmeade alone under any circumstances? And particularly not when you are, shall we say, in your cups?”

Harry did hang his head then. “Yes.”

Draco just nodded.

“Need I detail the myriad reasons for this? Shall I mention the prospect of torture, Draco? For surely Voldemort will want detailed intelligence concerning one Harry Potter! I had the impression, in months past, that you were actually aware of this most potent danger to yourself!”

Harry glanced upward just enough to see that had Draco hanging his head, too. But Snape wasn’t done.

“And you, Harry! You may not technically remember the details of Samhain, but I do believe you have been acquainted with them in excruciating detail! And no, I do not intend that as a pun!”

“Look, we didn’t mean to end up in Hogsmeade!” Harry objected. “We wouldn’t have gone there if we’d been thinking straight!”

“Precisely why,” roared the Potions Master, “one should not drink to the point of oblivion, no matter one’s personal troubles!” In the next moment, his voice grew gruff. “Notwithstanding my own lamentable incident.”

Draco draped both his arms on the table and cleared his throat twice before he could speak. “I think Harry and I would both agree that going to the Room to get drunk was a mistake.”

“Yeah,” said Harry.

“In retrospect,” added Draco, which got him a glare from their father.

“We shall sort out at another time why the Room is dispensing vice. What matters at the moment is to understand how you could have ended up in Hogsmeade. It was the Room’s idea, I think you said?”

“Well, it was!” said Harry.

“The Room suggested, out of a clear blue sky, that the two of you would benefit from a sojourn into the village,” said Snape, one eyebrow raised.

Harry and Draco glanced at each other, then looked away. Then glanced at each other again.

“Out with it!”

Draco leaned back in his chair, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I . . . I don’t think it was quite like that. I can’t remember, not completely . . .”

“Really.”

“Really! I’ll take Veritaserum if you want!”

“You’re far too eager to volunteer for that,” said Snape disparagingly.

“Hey!” objected Harry. “You told me, you promised, you weren’t going to hold that over him!”

“Au contraire, I was merely counselling that Potions, much like liquor, are not to be abused. But
back to the matter at hand, what can you remember about how you ended up in the village?”

Draco and Harry exchanged another uncertain glance. “Um . . . I think we asked for a way to get there?” Harry offered after a minute, blushing to have to say it again. “Because I wanted a plushie.”

“And the Room Apparated you there? If so, we must inform the Headmaster at once. Such is not supposed to be possible within the wards.”

“No . . .” Draco’s brow furrowed for a moment. “I think a tunnel opened up. Harry?”

“Yeah,” said Harry slowly. “A tunnel. That seems right. It went on for a bit, and it came out behind a painting, um, upstairs in that place where Dumbledore was working--”

“That. Was. Not. Dumbledore,” grated Snape. “You would be cognizant of such had you not continued to drink until I arrived on the scene!”

Harry blinked. “But, you called him Dumbledore--”

“Merlin preserve me from dunderheaded teenagers,” muttered Snape. “The owner of the Hog’s Head is Aberforth Dumbledore! Not the headmaster!”

Draco lifted his chin. “Ah. Well I did think it a tad in bad taste for the Chief Mugwump to be working a second job at all, and in such an establishment--”

Snape rolled his eyes, looking like he wanted to invoke Merlin again. Instead, he rose to his feet, his profile chiseled with determination. “I must go and see about securing this tunnel so it will no longer appear in such a cavalier fashion. I also need to determine at once why the spells recently added to the castle failed to alert me when you and your brother vanished from the grounds. It may take some time as I am far from an expert on the castle’s ancient magics.” His gaze at his sons became slightly caustic. “I may even need to involve the Headmaster in the endeavour. Need I express how little I look forward to that conversation?”

“Sorry, sir,” said Harry, looking away from those dark eyes that seemed to see right through him. He didn’t see Snape approach, but he couldn’t miss the finger under his chin. “Severus, Harry,” the man said softly as he tilted Harry’s head up until their eyes met. “Or Father. Even now.”


Snape nodded. “We will speak of Miss Lovegood when I return. As well as your apparent longing for a plushie.”

Harry gulped again. “No, that’s all right, I don’t need one, not really, I don’t know what was wrong with me--”

“He wants a dragon and a unicorn,” said Draco brightly. “And a Teddy bear too.”

Snape gave Draco a critical look. “And this was reason enough to end up in Hogsmeade, was it?”

“No, but . . .” Draco lowered his voice. “You should have heard him. He really wanted them.”

“Shut up,” moaned Harry, but then he rallied. “It’s not like you don’t have one!”

“Do tell,” murmured Snape. “I will return as soon as I am able, and we will finish this discussion, gentlemen. In the interim, stay here. And stay out of trouble.”
“We know,” said Draco. “You mean ‘be good.’”

“I mean stay out of my liquor cabinet,” retorted Snape, but there wasn’t any anger in the remark. It was more like dark humour. But then, just before he swept out the door in a billowing sea of black robes, he did say one thing more.

“Be good.”

As soon as Snape had left, Draco moved back to the plush chair in the living room area. Plonking his feet on the coffee table there, he stared grimly across the room at the low flames burning in the fireplace.

It wasn’t hard to figure out what was on his mind. “Ten million lines, you think?” asked Harry, trying to lighten the mood.

“I think this is beyond lines,” muttered Draco.

Harry snorted. “It’s worse than leaving poisoned fairy cakes out for people to eat?”

“Yes, and I wish to Merlin I’d never told you that story.”

“No, you don’t, not really.” Harry moved to the sofa, then, stretching out on it and gazing up at the ceiling. “I needed to know everything if I was going to feel like your brother.”

“A brother I’ve now endangered. That’s what makes it worse.” Draco shuddered, looking a little green, the way he had when he’d emerged from the loo. “This time, I practically flung his most beloved son straight into the path of Death Eaters!”

“There weren’t any Death Eaters in Hogsmeade—”

“There could have been! For all we know, those dodgy characters could have been!”

“Yeah, but nothing happened—”

“But it could have!”

Harry didn’t know what to say to that, since Draco was right; something truly terrible could have happened. It was only then, though, that the rest of what his brother had said registered. “Oh, no. Draco . . . don’t say that I’m Snape’s most beloved son. I’m positive that’s not true.”

“Ha.”

“I’m not!”

“You were the son he chose to adopt,” said Draco, sighing heavily before shoving his hands deep into his pockets. “Me, it was just the circumstances forcing his wand—"
“I think there were some compelling circumstances in my case as well,” said Harry dryly. “Or so I’ve been told.”

“That was different. He really meant it. I’m like the unwanted step-child in this arrangement.”

Harry rolled over so he could look at his brother, propping himself up on one arm. “You probably don’t realise, but that’s a huge insult to Severus. Draco . . . I’ve been the unwanted step-child. Do you have to sleep in a cupboard? Do you get enough scraps to eat only when you’ve finished hours of chores in the hot sun? Does Severus tell all the neighbors that you go to a school for criminals?”

“He could hardly do that, could he . . .”

“I’m serious!”

Draco sat up a bit straighter. “Yes, I see that you are. Though I’d like to point out that you weren’t a step-child, either.”

“Close enough.” Harry thought a minute, then drew in a breath. “The point is that I was unwanted. But you aren’t, and besides, here . . .” He smiled. “We’re equals.”

“Equals with Harry Potter,” scoffed Draco. “Help me with my Dark Powers and my wandless magic, would you?”

“Equally Snape’s sons, you prat,” laughed Harry. “You know that’s what I meant.”

“Yes, well I also know that we’re going to get vastly different punishments for today’s disaster.”

Harry almost denied it, but really . . . “Er . . . maybe so, but not because he loves you less. It’s just, you know . . . You did start the whole thing.”

“I was not the one whinging on about needing a plushie to the point where the Room offered us a route to the village!”

“No, but you were the one who decided we should both get drunk. And you provided the liquor.”

“We’d have been perfectly safe in the Room!”

“Yeah, but we didn’t stay in the Room! Because you got us both so drunk we didn’t have a speck of common sense left!”

“Oh, I got you drunk, did I?” Draco raised his chin and sneered. “I can’t quite remember that. Did it hurt when I forced you to your knees and pried open your stupid Gryffindor jaws and poured the whiskey down your throat?”

Harry decided for once to ignore the stupid Gryffindor remark. “Draco,” he said instead, aiming for a calm tone, “You know I wasn’t planning to drown my troubles in drink--”

“Right, you’re perfect Potter. Sorry, I forgot!”

“--It was my decision to do it, though. I accept that. You didn’t get me drunk, not like that. But for all that . . . none of this would have happened if not for you.”

“I was worried that if you didn’t untwist your robes somehow, you might end up doing something far more desperate!”

Harry swallowed. “Oh. Were you really?”
“Yes. Some, at least.” Draco glanced over at Harry's arms. “You . . . you don’t want to, do you?”

Harry shook his head. “I guess I can’t fault you too much, then.”

The other boy sniffed. “Well, maybe I wasn’t that worried. I just . . . I wanted to cheer you up for a bit, that’s all. It seemed the brotherly thing to do.”

Harry nodded. “Parts of it were great fun. You did cheer me up. I mean, when I wasn’t thinking of Luna.”

“Or plushies.”

Draco got a cushion thrown at him for that.

“Oh, fine. In the interests of family harmony I shall desist from all such reference.”

“You’d better. Um . . . and speaking of harmony, you know how you were saying how you felt, er, like you rate second with Snape? I think, er . . . um . . .”

“Do you? Think, that is? I can’t see much evidence of it.”

What a complete prat.

“I think if you take your punishment graciously this time, even if it seems one-sided or unfair, then that’ll do a lot to earn the man's respect!”

“Quite likely true. Hmm, this is quite the turn. It’s not often you urge me to play the good son.”

Was that what Harry was doing?

“I’ve often thought that you gloried in hogging the role all to yourself,” mused Draco. “Not today, though?”

"All I’ve ever really wanted is to be just Harry. Do you know me at all?”

“I think it’s more a case of knowing my own insecurities.” Draco dragged in a breath, then gave a definite nod. “You’ve given me good advice, though. I shall try to remember it when Severus announces my doom. And in the meantime, I suppose it would be a sound idea to be doing something responsible when Dad returns. Accio Transfiguration notes!”

Good idea, right, thought Harry at once. They had ten inches due on Monday, on Riffenstaler’s theory of partial transfiguration and why it could only apply to animals with a central nervous system. Harry almost stuck out his tongue in dismay; the topic was that boring.

Draco, of course, was enthused by it, moving to the dining table at once but then jumping up to grab books from Snape’s shelves from time to time as he scrawled out at least fifteen inches, just like a regular Hermione. Or maybe he was just trying to distract himself from more dire thoughts.

“Well, I must say, that was fascinating,” he declared at last, stretching his arms high above his head. “And it’s quite late now, I see. I suppose I can wait until tomorrow to have my enchanted quill copy out a final draft. How is your essay coming along, then?”

Harry grimaced. “Well, you’d think rereading the same five pages for sixteen hours would clear things up, but no, seems not. I really do hate Transfiguration. And you’re bloody brilliant at it, so where’s your insecurity now?”

“Don’t be dramatic,” said Draco lightly. “It’s been six hours at the most, and now that my own essay is done, I’ve loads of time to tutor you. Like the good old days!”
“I don’t remember them,” said Harry sourly. “But yeah, thanks. I mean, I do know about them. You made sure I would.”

Draco joined Harry on the sofa and lazily summoned some of the books he’d been consulting. “The first thing we should clear up is precisely what is meant by partial transfiguration. It’s not as straightforward as it sounds.”

They’d barely scratched the surface of that notion when a sudden chiming noise rang inside Harry’s head.

He didn’t understand it at all until Draco sat up sharply at the same instant, his eyes narrowed. “It’s quite late for visitors. I wonder who it is.”

Harry gaped. “That’s a doorbell? Why not just have it ring out loud?”

“There’s a place for cunning.” Draco smiled a little as he got up, pulling Harry to his feet as well. “I suppose I neglected to mention the door parchment during our little sessions. The wards alert us when someone wants entrance, and record the name for us to see—”

He suddenly staggered, one hand splayed out right alongside the parchment he’d been describing, his breathing gone ragged.

Harry saw the name in the next instant and swallowed hard, a sudden sense of doom flowing over him.

Narcissa Malfoy.

“Mother!” cried Draco, lurching toward the door.

Harry didn’t even stop to think before planting himself square in front of the door. “No, Draco!”

“No? But it is my mother! The parchment can’t lie, it sees through Polyjuice and glamours and human transfigurations—”

“Even if it’s her, we can’t let her in!” shouted Harry, grabbing Draco by both shoulders to shake some sense into him. “We don’t know why she’s here! She might want to snatch me for Voldemort!”

Draco reached up and flung his hands away, his eyes so wild he looked feral. “It’s all about you, is it? My whole life, every scrap of it, all about you!”

“Think!” yelled Harry. “It’s could be like that Warsdate bloke you told me about! Lucius was behind that, remember?”

“I’m the one who does remember, you fucking amnesiac! The door won’t let her in at all if she’s going to hurt you!”

“Warsdate!”

“Darswaithe! You don’t remember enough about our protections to decide this!” Draco brandished his wand and pointed it straight at Harry’s heart. “Oh, fuck this. Out of the way, Potter!”

Harry didn’t waste time arguing; the things Draco had drilled into them during DA sessions had his own wand practically leaping into his hand. No matter that he didn’t need it. “No. And don’t duel me,” he said in a low voice.
“Accio red ribbon sweets!” screamed Draco. “There, we’re even now! You think I can’t best you when we’re both using normal magic? Get the fuck away from the door so I can let my mother in or you won’t wake up for a week—”

Which just proved that Draco really didn’t want to hex him, since if he did, he wouldn’t waste so much time getting to it. Harry was sorry to be the one to cast first, he really was, but there was no way he was letting a possible Death Eater into Snape’s quarters—

Just at that instant, though, the Floo flared up, brilliantly glittering green flames roaring as Snape stepped out of the fireplace. He took in the situation in an instant, and unlike both his sons, didn’t hesitate. “Expelliarmus!”

As his wand was ripped out of his hand, Harry very nearly dove headfirst for Draco so he could grab for one of the sweets that had come flying at the other boy. Thankfully, reason prevailed in time. Now that Snape was here, Harry wouldn’t have to manage alone.

“She’s my mother!” gasped Draco, not even objecting to losing his wand as he stumbled over to their father and clutched at the folds of his robes. “It’s my mother, she’s at the door, and Harry’s being his usual idiotic self—”

“Yeah, I’d prefer not to be killed, thanks very much!”

“You think she could kill you now that Dad’s here? He was a Death Eater! All she’s ever been is a wife!”

“A Death Eater’s wife!” shouted Harry, still in position to block the door. He managed to lower his voice for the rest of it. “Severus. Tell Draco there’s no way in hell that woman’s coming in!”

“She’s my mother!” screamed Draco, letting go of Snape to launch himself at Harry.

“Gentlemen!” thundered Snape before the fisticuffs could get out of hand. “Both of you! Away from the door, this instant!”

Harry gave Draco one huge shove to get him away, then did as his father had said. He trusted Snape to handle this. And to handle Draco.

His brother was slower to obey. His hand actually reached out for the doorknob, trembling—

“Draco!” snapped Snape. “Think for a moment! And consider that I might, just possibly, know what I am doing!”

Draco bit his lip, looked longingly at the door parchment, and shuffled his feet. But then he did step away as his father had asked.

Snape strode to the door in a few long strides, tucking both boys’ wands into a deep pocket as he advanced, his own wand swishing to and fro. “The door parchment alerted me as well,” he said. “Both Lucius and Narcissa were put on a watch list for the wards over a year ago.”

He swished his wand back and forth before the parchment, then cast what looked like several other spells upon the door itself and the surrounding walls. At one point, a brightly glowing green fog appeared to ooze across the stone, before fading away in ghostly wisps. Harry shook a little, remembering when he’d seen that fog before, back when he’d been begging Snape to agree to a mutual repudiation of the adoption. What had the man said? The wards here are very strong, designed specifically to deny entrance to those who wish you harm . . .
“Nothing about the wards has been tampered with in any way,” Snape announced. “Now, to see what we can determine about the corridor’s occupant . . .”

More magic danced through the air, Severus murmuring the incantations this time. After a long moment, his features grew thoughtful. Or maybe, troubled.

“Draco . . . it is indeed your mother waiting for entrance. But . . .” He laid a soft hand on the boy’s shoulder. “I am sorry to tell you that she seems to be quite seriously ill. Or cursed, rather.”

“We have to let her in--”

“Oh, no, we fucking well don’t!”

Snape sighed. “Harry, she can’t come in at all if she means you harm. And you may rely on my wandwork; the woman is in no state at all to try something nefarious from the hallway.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. He’d been sure, completely sure, that Snape was going to side with him on a thing like this. Wards or no wards, that was Narcissa Malfoy out there, a woman who’d sided with her husband when he put out death threats against her own son!

“Maybe she’s here to hurt Draco! The wards wouldn’t help in that case, would they?”

“She can’t hurt a flea, the state she’s in.”

“Send her to the hospital wing!”

“Merlin’s tits, I swear I’m going to send you to the hospital wing, Harry! How would you feel if your mother was dying in the corridor and your arse of a brother wouldn’t even let you open the door to talk to her!”

“She’s not dying!”

“I think she very well may be;” murmured Snape, which made Draco bite his own fist, hard. “Harry, stand back further. Draco, come here. And both of you, here are your wands back. Though truly, I am certain that Narcissa cannot summon any offensive magic at all.”

“Oh, God,” moaned Harry, even as he took his wand back and moved across the room as his father had said. “You’re really going to . . .”

“We are going to open the door so Draco may speak with his mother. Narcissa will not be able to cross the threshold if she harbours nefarious intent toward you.” Snape gave him a close look. “Breathe, Harry.”

Good advice, though it didn’t really make Harry feel much better about this.

As Snape nodded to Draco, the boy flicked his wand in one swift motion. "Abrire! Come in!"

After that, there was no question of denying Narcissa Malfoy entry. As the door swung on its hinges, she stumbled and then fell headlong into Snape’s living room, crashing into the floor with a crunching noise that sounded grotesque even though it was very faint. She was shaking violently and emaciated beyond belief, bones protruding everywhere beneath skin that was very nearly the color of the stones on which she lay.

And one thing more.

Draco’s mother was very, very pregnant.
Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Forty-Seven: Wasting Time

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
Draco was gentleness personified as he scooped his mother into his arms and settled her lengthwise onto the sofa. Only then did he speak, his voice a low, intense whisper of agony and need as he knelt close alongside her and bent low over her fragile frame. “Mother?”

No answer as Narcissa lay against the soft cushions, her body no longer trembling. Now, she was as still as death. As far as Harry could tell, she wasn’t even breathing.

Leaning even closer, Draco lifted his wand and ran it parallel down the length of her body, his lips murmuring something Harry didn’t catch. Wisps of coloured light rose out of her grey skin, all the shades muddied hues of brown and green and orange. Harry recognised the charm, then; they’d practiced it in DA a few weeks earlier. It was a battlefield scan designed to give you basic information about internal injuries. But the results were supposed to blaze in rainbow hues; dirty colours like these gave no real information at all, except to testify of Dark Magic.

Draco’s wand hand clenched, a low keening noise emerging from the back of his throat as he gasped out, “She needs the hospital wing--”

Snape flicked his wand, a single swift motion that had a silver deer leaping from it to bound over Narcissa’s unmoving form and through the wall separating his quarters from the corridor. In the next instant he was kneeling beside Draco, both his hands reaching out to grasp his son’s wand arm and hold it still. “No more magic until we know more about your mother’s condition.”

Draco nodded, the motion very slight as he kept all his attention on his mother. “You just summoned Madam Pomfrey?”

Snape’s hair swayed as he shook his head. “The headmaster.”

That cause Draco’s gaze to snap up, his eyes suddenly a blaze of silver almost as bright as Snape’s Patronus. “He’s not a healer!”

“No, but we must consult him,” said Snape, quiet insistence in every word. “We must,” Draco, he repeated when the boy made a move as though to shake off his hands. “The headmaster will decide whether your mother should be healed in the castle or at St. Mungo’s.”

“Or not at all,” spat Draco, his lips curling with hatred as he tried once more to shake off his father’s grasp. “After all, she’s just a Death Eater’s wife, isn’t that what Harry here thinks? Why should the head of your precious Order think any differently?”

“It’s your Order too,” Harry said, taking a few steps closer. The look on Draco’s face made him stop in his tracks.

“Yes,” said Draco coldly. “And it will continue to be. But if all these delays mean that my mother
dies, then I’m going to hate you, and you, forever and ever.” His gaze sought out Harry’s first, and then Snape’s.

Harry gulped, but whatever he or Severus might have said was cut off by the whoosh of the Floo as green flames reared up to fill the fireplace. Out of them nimbly stepped Albus Dumbledore.

“Headmaster,” began Snape, but he got no further. Draco violently convulsed, yanking himself free from Severus so he could throw himself across the room towards Dumbledore’s feet. There he knelt, wrapping both his arms tightly around the man’s legs as he cried out, “Please please please, don’t let my mother die! Please, Headmaster! I’ll do anything! I’ll give the Order every last Galleon in my vault, I’ll kiss your robes, I’ll be the Order’s loyal slave until the day I die—”

“Draco, Draco,” Dumbledore lifted the trembling boy to his feet, and when Draco just kept on babbling out barely coherent promises, he gently laid a finger crosswise over the boy’s lips. That motion had Draco going utterly still.

“Of course we shall help your mother,” said Dumbledore in a soothing tone, his finger moving to wipe away the tears silently trailing down Draco’s cheeks. “Of course we shall. Severus?”

“We know almost nothing of the circumstances that have brought Narcissa to my door. The best option would be to summon Poppy to treat her in secret.”

“I will fetch her at once.” A flash of green fire engulfed him as he stepped into the Floo again.

Draco clenched his fingers over his stomach like he was struggling not to vomit.

“Come and sit by your mother,” said Snape softly, summoning a chair to a location close alongside the sofa.

Draco sank into it, his eyes haunted. “What if—what if— but what if she—”

“Breathe,” advised Snape, one hand lightly squeezing Draco’s trembling shoulder. “Poppy will arrive in a moment, and after that we will know more.”

Draco bit his lower lip. “She’s so terribly thin . . .”

Snape nodded. “Harry, as soon as the Floo is available, contact the kitchens and request some clear broth under a holding charm so it will be ready the moment it might be needed.”

Just then, Madam Pomfrey stepped from the fireplace, the headmaster arriving directly after, and bustled over to where Narcissa lay.

“Dark Magic, that’s all we have been able to ascertain,” announced Snape.

“Quite likely a curse, possibly dealt by Voldemort himself,” added Dumbledore. “She went missing for weeks after having last been seen in Wales in the company of two Death Eaters who spoke of bringing her before their master.”

Harry thought that was rather a lot of information to be giving out to someone who wasn’t in the Order, but then, what did he know about magical healing, or Dark curses? Maybe the smallest detail could make a difference.

Pomfrey gave a sharp nod and went to work, wand flicking to and fro, her brow wrinkling more than usual as she cast spells far more advanced than the one Draco had taught the DA. Harry
watched for a moment, anxious much more for Draco than for his mother, but then he remembered Snape’s instructions and went to order the broth.

When he turned back to the living room, a quill was dancing through the air, recording words onto a parchment that hung suspended over Narcissa Malfoy’s bulging belly.

Harry sidled closer, trying to get into a position where he could read it, but without distracting the mediwitch or drawing Draco’s attention. He needn’t have worried about that, though; his brother had all his focus squarely on his mother as he sat on the chair beside her, one of her hands lightly clasped between both of his.

*Four broken knuckles,* read the scroll, and Harry wondered if that had been the horrid crunching noise he’d heard as the woman had smashed into the floor. *Bones severely pitted. Organ function minimal. Nineteen fresh cavities. Blood flow sluggish . . .* On and on the list of problems went, until finally at the end, *Normal, healthy placenta; eight months pregnant with thriving ???”*

Harry blinked and peered closer, but yes, that last notation really did have question marks at the end.

Poppy pocketed her wand.

“What’s wrong--” started Draco at once.

“We’ll talk after,” said Pomfrey briskly. “I must bring through quite a few potions without delay.”

Draco gave a vague sort of nod to that, his features just numb by then.

“I have many of the basic healing elixirs here--”

“Not these ones, Severus.” With that, Madame Pomfrey was gone.

“She healed her broken hand,” said Draco, staring blankly at the headmaster.

“And she will do her very best with all the rest,” Dumbledore assured him, summoning another chair so he could sit next to Draco.

Draco closed his eyes and sucked in a bracing breath, though his grasp on his mother’s hand remained loose and gentle. “I’ll-- I’ll go to Gringotts the moment I can, I swear, but I don’t want to leave my mother just yet . . . and, and I don’t know that the goblins will accept such a large vault draft unless I personally bring in the key . . . or perhaps I need to retain a solicitor . . .”

“Oh, Draco,” said the headmaster sadly, the floppy hat atop his head seeming to go even flatter as he spoke. “Can you really trust us so very little?”

Draco gave a frantic little shake of his head, and then a jerky nod, finally opening eyes that looked bleak, clear through. “I don’t know.”

“Perhaps in time, you will.” Dumbledore patted Draco on the shoulder three times, the old wizard’s touch lingering longer with each repetition. “Now, no more mention of Galleons, my boy, not a single word. I’m pleased if we can assist your beautiful mother, and that’s an end to all such talk.”

“Thank you,” said Draco in a low voice as he turned back to gaze down at Narcissa.

Dumbledore turned his head to the side. “Severus, perhaps Harry could assist you with the required alterations to your quarters. I can’t imagine that even Poppy’s magic touch will resolve this in less
than a day.”

“We can see to that later, Headmaster.”

When Dumbledore pursed his lips slightly, Harry caught on. Huh. He wasn’t sure which was more puzzling, the fact that Dumbledore wanted to speak to Draco alone, or Snape’s reluctance to let that happen.

True, he had been hanging back slightly while Dumbledore spoke with Draco, but that didn’t mean much when he could still hear every word. Now he came forward, a small vial clasped in his hand. “You look as though you need this.”

Draco glanced at it briefly before downing the contents. Invigoration draught, Harry assumed from the slight peppermint scent that wafted through the air. And from the way Draco sat up straighter afterwards, his whole attitude suddenly more alert.

The Floo whooshed again as Pomfrey returned, the potions in her basket clinking together as she hurried across the room. “Back away, all of you, I need plenty of space.”

Harry had never been terribly fascinated by healing, but this was an attempt to cure Dark Magic, so he watched with interest as the mediwitch cast spell after spell, interspersed with one potion after another. Some of the spells were spoken, but most of them seemed to be wordless. Some of the potions were spelled directly into Mrs. Malfoy’s stomach while some were rubbed into the pulse points on her neck and wrists. Still others were trickled into her mouth, after which Pomfrey would spend long minutes massaging her patient’s throat to encourage her to swallow. Draco tried to help with that, only to frown when he was sternly shooed away.

Harry turned his back when Pomfrey began smearing her hands with a tar-like blue potion and asked Draco to lift his mother’s robes past her knees. Snape did too, he saw. The two of them exchanged a long glance, a single word seeming to pass between them. Decorum.

Then the moment was over, but Harry felt warmed by it, brief as it had been. He was sure he hadn’t imagined the approval he’d seen lurking in those dark eyes.

“Well,” said Pomfrey at last, causing Harry to glance over his shoulder to see if it was safe to turn around. “That’s the last of the lot. Her breathing is better and her blood’s finally flowing at an acceptable rate—”

She suddenly stopped speaking, a chagrined look crumpling her features for an instant as she pivoted on a heel to look directly at Draco. “Oh. I do apologize, Mr. Snape. I’ve been rather untoward thus far. Would you prefer that we discuss your mother’s condition in private?”

Draco picked up on the implication at once. “No. Everyone here may know. Please continue.”

Pomfrey gave a brisk nod. “You can see how much better her colour is, but don’t let that mislead you. All I’ve managed to do is alleviate some of her symptoms. Your mother is still under a serious curse, and her condition won’t truly improve until the underlying Dark Magic has been eradicated. Until then . . .” The mediwitch gestured at the basket of potions, sighing. “Every time you use those, they will do less to help.”

Draco gave a sharp nod. “How long can we hold the curse at bay?”

Pomfrey frowned. “Dark curses are always insidious, but this seems more so than most. I can’t say for certain. Weeks, perhaps.”
“But if we can find a counter-curse,” prompted the headmaster.

“That would be the only true cure.” Fishing through her basket, Pomfrey lifted out one vial or flask after another, explaining the use of each. As she spoke, the instructions wrote themselves down upon a fresh sheet of parchment hanging in the air. Draco snatched it as soon as she’d finished, his eyes rapidly scanning it to review all the details again.

“But of course I’m shall come again at once if you should need me,” she assured Draco, lightly smiling. “I want you fully prepared to care for your mother yourself because that’s simple prudence. It doesn’t mean that you’re on your own, not at all.”

“Thank you, Madam Pomfrey,” murmured Draco. “And the baby? Your diagnosis spell indicated it was thriving . . . how can that be possible?”

“Oh, the wee one appears to be fit as a fiddle. That’s as it should be. When a pregnant witch is cursed, her magic will strain itself to the point of no return seeking to protect the child.”

“But what can you tell us of the curse itself?” asked Severus.

Pomfrey drew in a breath, her features suddenly grim. “Very little, unfortunately. It seems to be a Dark wasting curse, but I’ve never seen its like before.” The mediwitch frowned as she tucked her wand into an apron pocket. “The pregnancy is making the wasting effects all the more powerful. Every time the curse crests inside her, your mother’s magic blankets itself around the child to shield it. This leaves the rest of her body defenseless.”

“So then,” said Dumbledore delicately, “it would seem that the best course of action would be to encourage Mrs. Malfoy to give birth—”

Madam Pomfrey’s voice turned frosty. “When you are qualified to dispense medical advice, Albus Dumbledore, I shall let you know! That would be the worst course of action, bar none! At this very moment, Narcissa Malfoy is alive against all odds only because her magic has a child to shield!”

“My apologies,” murmured the headmaster, shaking his head sadly.

Pomfrey turned once more to Draco. “When your mother wakes up, she will be beyond exhausted. Don’t bombard her with too many questions, but do try to find out as soon as possible what she might remember.”

“The incantation,” gulped Draco.

“Yes, exactly. We must hope that the casting of this curse wasn’t wordless. In the meantime, I will research her symptoms to see if I can determine more that way.”

“Would it be acceptable to use Legilimency when she wakes?” asked Snape.

Pomfrey snorted. “In her condition? I think not.”

“A Pensieve, then?”

Pomfrey paused to consider the suggestion. “That strain her less, since you could examine the memory at length without forcing her to relive it.” She gave a brisk nod. “And do let me know whatever you discover. I fear my research will go nowhere until I have better direction. Have you any other questions, then?”

She glanced around, then pocketed her wand and headed for the Floo.
Dumbledore nodded at the three of them, though his gaze lingered most on Draco. “I will search for answers as well. Perhaps the Restricted Section or my own private library might shed some light on what has happened to your mother.”

“Thank you, Headmaster,” said Draco faintly. “I . . . I just hope she wakes up soon.”

“As do we all, my boy. As do we all.”

With that, Dumbledore made his way over to the Floo, gesturing for Pomfrey to leave first before he followed her in a burst of emerald flame.

Draco sighed. “Why don’t you two work on the alterations, now?” asked Draco, his tone short. “I could transfigure the sofa into a bed, but I still think my mother will be more comfortable resting in a room of her own.”

“Excellent notion,” said Snape crisply. “Harry?”

Harry didn’t want to leave Draco alone with the woman, even if her condition meant she couldn’t do much to him. Draco was glaring at him, though, so Harry reluctantly followed his father down the short corridor that led to his bedroom on one side and his office on the other.

Instead of entering one or the other to transform it, however, Snape brandished his wand at the blunt end of the corridor and began chanting. The stones began shifting, retreating before the magic. Harry expected him to keep going, but after a moment, the man paused. “Rock magic responds well to synergy -- two wands working at the same time. Join in when you’re ready.”

Harry listened more closely that time and realized that the incantation wasn’t terribly complicated, though it was a little on the long side. The wand motions were a bit trickier to master, but in a few moments he was able to add in his magic and see the stones retreat at a much faster rate, shrinking back until he and Snape had hollowed out a cavern about the size of Harry and Draco’s own bedroom.

Snape transfigured a door next, a heavy oaken one on iron hinges. Only after he had closed and warded it did he turn to Harry with an expectant look on his face. “It should be safe to speak, now, though we’ll hear your brother if he calls for us.”

The trouble was, Harry didn’t know what to say. She’s going to stay here? would be redundant, not to mention rather arsehole-ish, considering that they were talking about Draco’s dying mother.

“I don’t trust her,” Harry said instead, his voice pitched low.

Snape sighed. “Nor I, but there’s nothing else to be done at the moment. Both the hospital wing and St. Mungo’s are far too public, and we don’t yet know if keeping her cursed state a secret could work to our advantage.”

Tactics, right. Slytherin ones. You are imprudent to exclude any battle tactic that might win this war, whispered Snape, deep inside his mind . . .

“A safe house, then,” suggested Harry. “Draco could go with her--”

“And if this is all a plot of Voldemort’s to finally get Draco where he may be vulnerable?”

“I said safe house. You know, with wards?”

“The strongest wards of all are here.”
“But those protect me, not Draco.” Harry swallowed, easily reading the look on Snape’s face. “Right. Anyone Voldemort sent to hurt Draco would have evil intent towards me as well.”

“And Narcissa doesn’t, or the wards would have blocked her entry.”

“Then how could this be a plot of Voldemort’s . . .” Harry swallowed suddenly. “Oh. If she’s just his unknowing pawn. That wouldn’t trigger the wards. I guess. Except . . . she was unconscious when she fell through them, you know.”

“That would make no difference to the wards. They had ample time to assess her state of mind towards you.”

Harry blew out a breath. “Well, I still don’t trust her.”

“I trust the wards.” Snape shrugged a little. “Perhaps I will feel better about her presence here once I’ve seen her memories. Now, for furnishings . . .”

In just a few minutes he had transfigured or conjured a wide bed hung with deep mauve curtains, along with a small table and two chairs. Once those appeared, Snape wasted no time sinking down into one, gesturing for Harry to take the other.

“Shouldn’t we tell Draco that we’ve finished?”

“In a moment. I should like to speak with you more, first.”

Harry crossed his arms in front of his chest. “About Mrs. Malfoy staying here? I don’t like it, but I’m not daft enough to think Draco would stay here if we didn’t let her remain. Besides, I understood why you consulted the headmaster, you know. It’s Order business at this point.”

Snape’s dark gaze sought him out. “All true, but we have more than Narcissa Malfoy to discuss, don’t you think?”

Oh. “I guess so,” muttered Harry, looking away. “Draco and I were stupid to get so drunk, all right? We know that already, so there’s not a lot more to say. Just tell me how many lines to write. The way I hear it, that’s your favourite punishment.”

“I have something besides lines in mind,” said Snape, his long hair swaying as he shook his head. Draco’s harrowing description of drinking poison came straight to mind, but Harry couldn’t believe the man meant that. “Scrubbing cauldrons, then? Or, I mean, detentions?”

“Indeed not.” Snape’s dark eyes sought his out, his gaze seeming to blaze, somehow. “I do believe that you should resume regular sessions with the good doctor.”

Harry sputtered. “Therapy? That’s my punishment?”

“You’re the one who keeps using that word.” Snape shrugged slightly. “I won’t deny that I was very angry with both you and your brother, but this is no punishment, Harry. I’d rather try to solve this problem than merely react to it.”

“Solve what problem?” scoffed Harry. “So I had a few drinks! It’s not like I’m an alcoholic!”

“That is not what I meant. I have been remiss in letting your therapy become such a hit-and-miss affair this year.”

“I don’t need therapy--”
Snape’s features went taut. “No? You need to speak with someone skilled about your anguish over Miss Lovegood, for a start. Drinking yourself into oblivion to feel better is not an acceptable coping mechanism, no matter that your brother had the best of intentions.”

Probably true, but . . . “To start?” croaked Harry. “Do you mean the needles, because I haven’t had an urge, honestly I haven’t.”

Snape leaned forward over the table. “I mean unresolved issues from your childhood.”

“So they weren’t the best guardians, so what? I don’t need to talk about that!”

“Harry,” said Snape calmly. “It would be my pleasure to buy you a Teddy bear, but I don’t believe that merely having one will heal that place inside you that spent years feeling unloved.”

Oh, God. Harry could feel the blush rising from his collar all the way up to his fringe, his face blazing with embarrassment. He shook his head a little to make his hair fall down some, but it didn’t help; he still felt horribly exposed. Not even turning his face away made a difference. “I don’t-- I don’t need a plushie.”

“Perhaps not, but you do need to speak with someone trained to help with such matters.” Snape reached across the table as though to pat his arm, but stopped when Harry scooted backwards in his chair.

“I don’t! I won’t!”

Snape frowned. “You’ve never refused like this before.”

“That was when she was supposed to help with amnesia, which her stupid advice didn’t even do! Or when I was sticking myself, Draco told me. Which is serious!”

“Drinking to drown your troubles is also serious!”

“Yeah? Well, I wouldn’t have gone to the Room at all if you hadn’t cancelled our Potions session!”

Snape drew back sharply against the straight wooden back of his chair. “Do not blame me for your own lack of sound judgement!”

“Fine, I won’t! Just forget it, forget the whole thing!” Harry shot to his feet. “Let’s cancel all the rest of them, right now! See if I care!”

“The rest of them,” said Snape, very slowly. “Ah. I hadn’t realised.”

“Right! When you wrote that letter you had no idea that you were cancelling on me, sure!”

“I had no idea that you were looking forward to the tutorial,” corrected Snape. “How could I? You have never given the impression that you appreciated the fine art of brewing.”

Harry almost didn’t say it, but on the other hand, he didn’t really want to let that idea stand. Not when he’d told himself he was really going to try to make this father-son thing work, strange as it was for him. “It wasn’t the brewing I was looking forward to, you stupid, stupid . . . don’t you get it? It was time with you!”

Snape’s hands on the table shook, just slightly. “Ah.” He said again. And then after a long moment of tense silence: “I had no idea that meant so much to you, Harry.”

“I don’t know why not,” sniffed Harry. “We had a pretty good time brewing together last Saturday-
“Yes, but it hasn’t been long since you were doing anything you could to avoid me. Things have been better since Christmas, but even now . . .” Snape looked away to speak in a low voice. “I am usually the one seeking your company.”

That was true enough, so maybe the man couldn’t have known how Harry felt. Except, he was perfectly aware of some things, wasn’t he? “Well, you knew I was upset about giving up Luna, and you still decided your time was better spent with--”

Shite. That had come out wrong. Now Snape would think that Harry wanted him to break off the engagement. Which he did, sort of. Except he didn’t, because he didn’t want to be the kind of person that would deny a happy marriage to his own father!

Especially not now that Harry knew first-hand just how horrible it was to have to give up a person you really, really loved.

“I did not believe that my time was better spent with her,” said Snape, this time reaching across the table and catching one of Harry’s hands before he could pull away. “I thought she needed me more at that precise moment. Maura . . .” Snape sighed, very slightly. “She was feeling rather gloomy, and I hoped that getting out of the castle would prove a distraction.”

“I guess it did that,” muttered Harry.

Snape gave him a wry look. “Indeed. Still, I would never have cancelled our brewing session had I realised that you were still so very unhappy over Miss Lovegood.”

“Oh,” said Harry, a little chagrined when he thought back on the past week. “Well, maybe I can’t blame you for that. I’ve been trying really hard for, uh . . . nonchalance, I guess. Luna’s idea. So it won’t look to people like she ever mattered to me, you see? So Voldemort is less likely to figure out that she still does.”

Snape’s fingers pressed in against his own. “A sound strategy, no doubt. But surely here at home you wouldn’t feel a need for such pretense.”

“At first I couldn’t pretend here,” sighed Harry. “You saw that. But then I started trying my best to, because otherwise you were going to think my horrid mood was about . . . something else.”

“And instead of understanding all this, I cancelled our time together to take Maura out,” said Snape, every word laced with regret. “I am very sorry, Harry.”

“Well, at least when I got your note I didn’t know you’d cancelled for that,” said Harry, determined not to let any more bad attitude show. Really, best to get Snape’s thoughts onto something else as soon as possible. “Er, what was Professor Morrighan so upset about, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“She would like to announce our engagement.” Snape’s lips curled up a little bit. “Even though the colour gracing the pledging glass should be proof enough that my feelings for her are as deep and strong as ever. Still, she is anxious for this interminable delay to be over.”

“And you just wanted to cheer her up.” Harry nodded, a good idea suddenly capturing his attention. A great idea, even if he wasn’t sure it would work. “Well, you can’t blame yourself for that.”

“For overlooking my son’s needs? I certainly can!”
“No, no, you meant well, I can see that now. Even if it didn’t turn out the way you planned, the part that matters is that you meant well. That’s all that counts. I . . . uh, I forgive you, Severus.”

Uh-oh. Maybe that last bit had been too much. Snape didn’t exactly look suspicious, but he had his eyes narrowed like he hadn’t been expecting Harry to say such a thing.

Well, nothing for it but to press forward. “But I want you to forgive Draco,” he added. “He meant well, too. He was just trying to cheer me up.”

“His method leaves a great deal to be desired,” said Severus dryly. “Are you familiar with the term ‘false equivalence,’ Harry?”

“I can figure it out. But it’s not false that Draco feels like the bad son all the time, you know. So if you’re going to punish him, then it should probably be exactly the same as mine. You know, the therapy?”

“You need to stop regarding that as a punishment. It’s not.”

“Well, then have him go because he needs it too!” snapped Harry. “Just don’t give him a billion lines to write!”

“Do you truly think that I would do that now?” hissed Snape, drawing away from him. “With his mother wasting away from a dark curse?”

“I suppose not,” said Harry slowly. “What are you going to do, then?”

“Forbid him alcohol whilst he remains a student, no matter that he is of age.”

Harry gaped. “That’s it?”

“For the moment, yes. And I suppose you’re forbidden it too, since we wouldn’t want your brother to feel that I regard him as the bad son, as you say!”

“But I don’t even like wine with dinner!”

“Then you won’t miss it.”

“That’s the point! It’s not a punishment for me!”

“You also won’t be allowed any adulterated tea!”

Harry blinked. “How did you know that we were having tea?”

Snape rubbed the side of his long nose. “You left the Room in an absolute shambles. I counted no fewer than six teapots, each one of them reeking with liquor, with several more smashed! Not to mention the puddles everywhere and the toast soldiers marching through them, getting bogged down in the mire!”

“I . . . uh . . .” The truth was, Harry hadn’t once thought about the way they’d left the Room. “I guess I thought it would reset itself . . .”

“It was waiting for you to return from the village,” said Snape in a disgusted tone. “In case you wanted more tea, I imagine. Your mess has been cleared away, and Albus has persuaded the Room to exercise better judgement in future.”

There was something else Harry had wanted to ask. Not about the Room, exactly . . . “Oh!” he
exclaimed as it suddenly came to him. “Why aren’t the spells working, the ones that were supposed to alert you if Draco or I went missing?”

Snape’s upper lip curled in disdain. “They are working. They’re keyed to react if you vanish from the grounds. Apparently, when the castle itself has provided you the route, it doesn’t perceive you to have vanished.”

Harry bit his lip. “Well, I’m sorry we left the grounds. I know that something really bad could have happened. But, uh . . . at least I did have some of those ribbon sweets on me. I mean, I carry some around almost all the time, now. Just in case I need to cast in Parseltongue.”

Snape’s tone grew caustic. “And had you been attacked, would you have remembered to eat one in time?”

Good point. “Um . . .”

“It takes only an instant for Petrificus or worse to land on target!” Snape’s fingers tightened on the arms of his chair. “Can you truly tell me that in your drunken state, you would have retained enough presence of mind to—”

“All right, no!” shouted Harry. “I wouldn’t have!”

Snape’s tense grip relaxed, just marginally. “Your dark powers are beyond impressive, but you must not begin to believe yourself invulnerable, Harry. It will cause you to make mistakes that you can ill afford, such as this unescorted trip into the village.”

Harry swallowed to try to dispel the thick feeling in his throat, but it didn’t help. “I know. I understand. But I don’t think I’ve ever thought I was invulnerable. I mean, the sweets alone would prove I’m not. I guess . . . I guess I should work on that. But I don’t really remember being able to cast in Parseltongue without some kind of help, you know.”

“You always did need to touch or see a snake, or at least the representation of one,” murmured Severus.

“I don’t think that will change. But do you think that Parseltongue spells will come more naturally if I just practice a lot more?”

Snape lifted his shoulders. “That might help. As might speaking it at length without the aid of sweets. As I recall, you used to spend a fair bit of time conversing with your pet snake.”

And lately, Harry had hardly seen Sals at all.

“I’ll do that,” decided Harry.

“And the therapy?”

Harry huffed a little. He still didn’t want to go. What would be the point? Talking about what a lousy childhood he’d had wasn’t going to change the past, after all.

Snape gave him a longish look. “You have accepted that we are a family, you said.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to take your advice on every last thing—”

“A pity.”

“Don’t joke!” snapped Harry, nostrils flaring. “I don’t care what went on last year, this father
business is all pretty new to me, and I’m not going to back to Marsha just because you say so!”

Snape regarded him for another long moment, then inclined his head slightly. “I understand. But I must confess that your attitude does puzzle me. Notwithstanding her advice about amnesia, you seemed to be learning quite useful things from the good doctor. Your point about my . . . projection, for instance.”

Harry glanced away, not wanting to allude to the terrible abuse Severus had suffered as a child. In the next moment he was wondering, though, if the man was bringing it up for some Slytherin purpose. Was he trying to hint that since his own childhood traumas had shaped his adult attitudes, the same thing was probably true of Harry?

The hell of it was, it probably was true. But that didn’t mean he wanted to agree to more therapy.

“I would ask you to think a bit more about why you are so reluctant,” continued Snape. “What is your concern?”

It didn’t take Harry long to figure it out, once he asked himself the right question. Whether he wanted to talk about it to Severus was another matter. On the other hand, the man did obviously care about him. And strange as it sometimes still seemed . . . he really did regard himself as Harry’s father.

“Luna,” groaned Harry. “Marsha’s going to try to convince me I’m wrong, I just know it. That it’s not ‘healthy’ to let my saving-people thing make me give her up. But she’s the one who’s wrong. I don’t care how often she reads the *Prophet*, there’s no way a squib could possibly understand how dangerous Voldemort can be!”

“Actually, she may regard the matter much as I do.”

“Oh, that it could mean my memory’s sort of returning?” Harry stopped to think about that. “Is that why you haven’t told me I was wrong to break it off with her? I mean, you’re not letting the war keep you from getting married.”

“No, but Maura and I have already waited twenty years to get to this point. Perhaps it is as your godfather keeps insisting about fate. It is our time.”

Well, at least Snape hadn’t said something stupid, like that Harry was too young to be so serious about Luna.

“And there is one thing more.”

Harry braced himself.

“That is an adult decision, and you are an adult,” said Snape in a low voice. “And what would happen to *us* if I persuaded you to abandon your resolve and the worst came to pass?”

Harry hadn’t even thought of that. That Snape had . . . it touched him, on some deep level. “You’re afraid I’d hate you.”

Snape pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing deeply. “Your brother just threatened the same over something much less egregious, a short delay in obtaining help for his mother.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

“Perhaps not.” Snape rose to his feet. “At any rate, we should go and see how she fares.”
“And how Draco is doing,” added Harry, standing up as well.

“I do believe those two things will be inextricably linked for the foreseeable future.”

“Probably true.” Harry sighed, uneasy about the whole situation. He didn’t care what anyone said about the wards, he didn’t trust Narcissa Malfoy. And he was never going to. It was as simple as that.

Somehow, though, he doubted that Draco was ever going to see things the same way.

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Harry blinked with surprise as soon as he set foot in the living room again. Dumbledore’s imposing stone Pensieve now stood mid-way between the dining table and the living room area. Snape took one look at it and snorted, a reaction Harry didn’t understand at all, but he was hardly going to take the time to ask when it was clear that Narcissa Malfoy had awakened.

Draco’s mother was as still as ever, but now, her eyes were open. Stepping closer to the couch, Harry could see that her pupils were tiny pinpricks, barely visible. Even more alarming, the colour in her eyes was almost completely washed out, the irises a shade so close to white that she looked more like a wraith than a living person.

Draco was leaning over her, stroking her face with the back of his hand, slowly drawing his fingers down her cheek, over and over as he murmured words of comfort, telling her that she was safe now and that everything was going to be all right.

Harry backed up a little, suddenly feeling like he was intruding on something very private.

Snape, on the other hand, obviously felt that this was not the right moment for decorum. “How long has your mother been conscious?”

Draco kept his voice low and soothing. “Not long.”

“No, and we aren’t going to bombard her with questions. Why do you think I didn’t call you? She’s not strong enough to talk.”

Narcissa tried to prove that wrong almost at once, however, turning her face slightly to catch more of his touch as she groaned, “Dragon . . .”

It sounded like her vocal cords had been dragged through with knives, her voice was so shredded. Harry didn’t like her, and he sure as hell didn’t trust her, but he still winced in sympathy, hearing her obvious pain.

“Shhh, mother,” soothed Draco, his free hand taking up one of hers and lacing their fingers together. “It’s all right. You’re safe now, at home with me--”
“My treasure,” moaned Narcissa, her lips cracking as they moved. “Dragon . . . my treasure--”

“Hush,” urged Draco. “Don’t worry about a thing. I’m going to take care of you, Mother. But you need to rest. Don’t try to talk.”

He stopped stroking her face, drawing his wand to cast a quick spell that left him with a tiny bit of salve on the tip of his thumb. Draco showed it to her, and when she gave a slight nod, gently applied it to her cracked lips. “Are you hungry?” he asked next. “Severus had Harry fetch you some broth to start with--”

“Severus,” Narcissa croaked, her white-on-white eyes widening as if she’d just that moment registered his presence. “I must-- I must-- the werewolf, Severus, he came--”

Snape stepped close, his features tense; Harry clenched his fists, thinking of Remus lying senseless in a safe house all this time. What was Narcissa Malfoy trying to tell them?

Whatever it was, she was in no state to say. Draco had been right that his mother wasn’t strong enough to talk. Before she could say another word, the woman fainted dead away.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Forty-Eight: Black Magic

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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Thanks ever so much to my new beta, Maple in the Moonlight! He's actually been with the Family project from the beginning and not only did he step up to beta, he's largely responsible for encouraging me to come back and finish the series!
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Special Note: This chapter is dedicated to Vita, who calls herself my "oldest fan," seeing as she is in her eighties. Her request that I finish the story "while she can still see" has really touched my heart. Vita, I will do my best to get back on track with posting updates regularly. I want to see this finished, too!

“She must mean Remus!” gasped Harry.

“We’re not waking her up to ask,” snapped Draco. “I told you she was too weak to talk!”

“You told her that as well,” murmured Severus. “And she didn’t listen, so I can only surmise that your mother believes she has something important to impart.”

“That doesn’t mean we should interrogate her--”

“We will request her memories,” agreed Snape, still in that calm, low tone.

Draco’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Yes, fine. But you ask her, Severus. You saw . . . she wasn’t listening to me.”

“She wanted you to know that she loves you. That was all that was on her mind until my name triggered a more specific memory.”

“Well, she should be worried what I might think after all this time. After she sided with Lucius against me--” Draco gave a long sigh. “But then, she did try to make sure I’d have a vault of my own . . .”

It took Harry a moment to make sense of that comment. He thought he was the one who had given Draco a vault so he wouldn’t be destitute after he’d been expelled. But then he remembered something Draco had explained, months ago in the Room of Requirement. Another Black relative, that was it. He’d agreed to leave Draco some money but he’d been worried about dying in suspicious circumstances and then he had suddenly died, right after making the bequest--

“You’re mother murdered her own uncle!” said Harry. “For money! My God, how can you trust her at all?”

Draco leveled a glare at him. “She was just trying to help me!”

“Well, what if she wants to help you next by snatching me for Voldemort?”

“The blood wards let her through the door!” Draco bared his teeth. “Severus, fetch Harry some potion to make him think straight, since he’s clearly incapable of it on his own!”
“Fuck you!”

“Gentlemen,” said Snape, raising his voice. “None of this is helpful. Harry . . . Draco is not wrong to be concerned about his mother. And Draco . . . Harry is not wrong to be concerned about what her sudden appearance here might mean. So desist, both of you, if you would!”

Harry ground his teeth together to stop from replying.

Draco glared at him once more, but then his attention was captured again by his mother, who’d evidently been roused by the loud voices. She was lifting one trembling arm very slightly toward the ceiling. “Draco . . .”

Snape moved at once to kneel beside the sofa. “Don’t try to speak, Narcissa. You may very well lose consciousness again if you push yourself too hard. If you wish to communicate something, you need only think it, hmm? We have a Pensieve.”

As Severus lifted his wand level with her eyes, Mrs. Malfoy’s hand fell back down to the couch with a distinct thud, as if her muscles had suddenly given way completely. But then she managed to jerk her head up and down a mere fraction of an inch as her spookily white eyes seemed to plead with them. For what, Harry didn’t know.

Pensare non pensatum,” incanted Snape before touching his wand tip to her temple, where he pulled out a long translucent strand of memory. It wafted over to the Pensieve, clearly drawn there by some elemental force. Harry nibbled on his lower lip as he wondered what the woman had just shared with them.

“Is it for me alone, Mother?” asked Draco, feathering his fingers along her cheekbone again. “Or for Severus to see?”

Her gaze sought out each of them in turn, still clearly beseeching them.

“We should all go in, then?” asked Draco, turning to Snape only after his mother had given another one of those miniscule nods. “I don’t want to leave her unattended. You and Harry go in first, and then I’ll take a turn.”

“A wise precaution,” murmured Snape as he drew Harry over to the Pensieve. “Do not hesitate to pull us out if needed.”

Draco gave a sharp nod and turned back to the couch. “Now, you’ll feel better with some warm broth in you,” was the last thing Harry heard before he plunged into the memory with his father.

Narcissa Malfoy was her usual rail-thin self as she stood just inside the front doorway of a narrow three-story house. Her brow creased with worry, her lips tightly pressed together, she stepped onto a wide terrace decorated with fancy scrolling whorls of wrought iron tinted in pale shades of green and silver, then turned to point her wand at the house itself.
Her lips began moving, just slightly, but no sound emerged as she walked three times around the perimeter of the house, casting something on every door, every window, even those far above ground level. She even cast the spell upon the walls themselves, it seemed to Harry.

Snape moved closer as she worked, his dark eyes intent on her looping wand movements and then her lips as she continued the incantations. The same incantation over and over, Harry was starting to think; every time she took a step to the left, her wand would spin slightly in her hand before she began moving it again.

“Can you tell what she’s doing? Some kind of ward?”

Snape’s glance at him was grim. “It would seem so. I’ve only managed to make out a few words. *Lupus meum,* possibly *argenti* . . .”

Harry’s Latin wasn’t stellar like Hermione’s, but the first part seemed clear enough. “My wolf?” he asked. “Unless that’s a glamour hiding her pregnancy, she’s not very far along at all. And she already knows she’s living with a werewolf?”

“So it would seem.” Snape paused to study her silently moving mouth again. “Yes, *argenti.* Latin for silver, Harry.”

“She’s warding the building against werewolves,” said Harry flatly.

“So it would seem,” Snape said again, but that time his voice was very faint.

Harry thought he knew why. “This is why Remus has been unconscious for weeks, I bet! He came here like she said and crossed these wards! So how come nobody has thought of that, it’s pretty ruddy obvious, isn’t it, that anti-werewolf wards wouldn’t do a werewolf much good!”

“Such wards are entirely unknown,” retorted Snape. “Werewolves wouldn’t be considered so dangerous if one could simply ward them off with a clever bit of wandwork.”

That was true enough, Harry thought glumly.

“Watch,” said Snape suddenly as the world around them shifted slightly.

*They were still outside the same house, but now the shadows were deeper and a chill wind was lifting tiny tufts of snow from the frozen ground. Lucius Malfoy was winding his way through the formal garden, a cane in one hand, his wand at the ready as he approached the terrace. As he came closer, the entire building seemed to shimmer in undulating waves, like a veil was trying to obscure it from view.*

“All right, Harry?” asked Snape, and no wonder, since Harry had started shuddering. Seeing those features was making his skin prickle all over, even though he truly couldn’t remember the way Lucius Malfoy must have sneered at his agony on Samhain.

“Yeah,” he said shortly. “I’m telling myself it’s Remus, so . . . yeah.”

*As Lucius got closer to the house, it snapped into full existence with a pulse of magic that washed out over the grounds, actually wafting his blond hair away from his shoulders.*

“Those are the Malfoy wards recognising him as master, I expect,” murmured Snape. “Did Draco explain how we managed that?”

Harry gave a jerky nod, remembering vague details he’d been told. A Portkey imbued with Lucius’
magic. Dark Marks taught to absorb it to fool not just wards, but Malfoy house-elves as well. The details seemed scattered over the surface of his mind, though. All he could really think about was one thing. Not Lucius, not Lucius, not Lucius . . .

Snape abruptly took his hand and held it firmly in one of his own. Harry stumbled even though he was standing still, he was so shocked. After a long moment, though, he realised that he appreciated the support. Or maybe, he liked having someone who could tell he needed it.

Narcissa was suddenly outside the house, pale yellow robes billowing around her in a way that made it difficult to see much more than her face. She waited to speak until her husband had reached the low terrace on which she stood and spoke in a voice almost completely without inflection. “Husband. What brings you here?”

Remus-as-Lucius didn’t reply, or at least not immediately. Instead, he stepped closer to her and lifted first one of her hands, and then the other, to his lips.

Narcissa gasped and took a shaky step back, shaking her head.

“I think we understand one another,” said Lucius in his smooth, cultured tones. “I come with a warning, my dearest one. The Dark Lord desires your presence.”

Narcissa took another step backwards. “What are you playing at, Lucius?”

Remus-as-Lucius twisted his lips and stepped towards her, advancing steadily in a way that reminded Harry of a viper poised to strike. “You should have hidden yourself better, Narcissa.”

Another step backwards had Narcissa crossing back over an ornate doorway. Her robes abruptly stopped blowing, hanging instead in clean lines that clearly outlined her swelling belly. With a gasp, the woman flicked her wand to cast a glamour that concealed her condition. “Leave here,” she said in a low voice, almost hissing. “Leave and don’t return. I can’t go before the Dark Lord. I think you know why!”

Lucius flared his nostrils. “The Dark Lord expects obedience from his servants and all their family, my dear darling wife! Our former son has disgraced me enough for ten lifetimes, and I will not have you do the same!”

“Leave here,” Narcissa said in a low voice, almost hissing. “Leav e and don’t return. I can’t go before the Dark Lord. I think you know why!”

Lucius flared his nostrils. “The Dark Lord expects obedience from his servants and all their family, my dear darling wife! Our former son has disgraced me enough for ten lifetimes, and I will not have you do the same! You will come with me, now!”

One more step forward, and Remus-as-Lucius was stepping across the threshold.

“No!” shouted Narcissa in clear panic. “Don’t enter! You mustn’t enter!”

Remus didn’t. As his foot crossed into the interior, he abruptly screamed and fell to his knees just outside it, his facial features contorting with both pain and something else. His face was changing as Harry watched, but not back into his own, familiar features. Or not that Harry could tell, anyway. The transformation was rapid, Lucius’ features flickering almost the way old movies sometimes did when the projector ran out of film, but in between the lightning-like shifts of appearance, Harry could almost make out a horrid snout, and tufts of fur . . .

“Oh, God,” moaned Harry inside the memory. “It’s his wolf, trying to break free . . .”

Snape’s fingers tightened on his.

“It’s her ward, though,” wondered Harry. “Didn’t she know it would do this and she’d end up with a werewolf prowling outside her house?”

“The wolf is dormant when it’s not the full moon,” murmured Snape. “Narcissa must have
anticipated having to deal with a werewolf in a coma. But it seems that the modified Polyjuice is complicating matters.”

*Remus was on his back by then, flailing and screaming and contorting, his robes starting to shred. A paw here, a claw there, but only in fleeting glimpses, with Lucius’ appearance flickering ever faster in between, it seemed.*

*He suddenly went still, his whole appearance snapping into his familiar guise as Remus Lupin. Narcissa’s wand was out and trained on him, even as she stayed behind the protection of her own threshold.*

“Why?” croaked Remus, his fingers twitching as if seeking for a wand. Lucius’ abominable snake-headed one had ended up some distance away. “I never harmed you, never threatened you—”

Narcissa didn’t respond to that. From her position inside the house, she just kept her wand trained squarely between Remus’ eyes.

And then it was too late for her to do anything. Remus vanished in a whirl of colours, a low moan echoing on the terrace for the long moment it took for him to disappear completely.

*Narcissa collapsed against a three-legged table, nearly toppling it as she struggled to regain her balance. In the next instant, however, she was a blur of motion as she summoned and pocketed Lucius’ wand, keeping her own at the ready all the while.*

*Then she vanished too, leaving behind nothing but a slight cracking noise as she Apparated away.*

Narcissa Malfoy looked a bit less ill when Harry and Snape emerged from the Pensieve. She was propped up against some plump pillows, slowly sipping broth from a spoon that Draco was patiently lifting to her lips, over and over.

Draco turned slightly towards them. “And so?”

Harry wasn’t sure where to start, but Severus had no such trouble. “Your mother appears to know a ward against werewolves,” he said, eyes narrowed to watch Narcissa for any reaction.

Draco blinked. “You can’t be serious.”

Narcissa cleared her throat a little, the sound thready and frail. “Y- yes. Family m- magic—”

Draco set aside the spoon and bowl he’d been holding; the broth was nearly gone by then. “Why wasn’t I ever taught this ward?”

“Black, Bl- black magic—”

Draco straightened in his chair, his chin tipping up with pride. “So? I’m a Black! Is it a spell one can only learn after coming of age, though? But I could learn it now—”
“No,” said Narcissa quietly, though by then it looked like she was sinking back into complete exhaustion. “Family magic, Dragon my treas...”

“I suspect it’s akin to a lineage potion,” said Snape slowly as the woman’s voice faded off. “Only someone bearing the required name can cast such magic. Would that be the case, Narcissa?”

She gave a miniscule nod, her pale complexion going slightly grey by then.

Harry's brow furrowed. "But wait, if Sirius knew of a ward against werewolves, he’d have used it that night when we were trapped in the Forbidden Forest with Remus in his wolf form!"

Narcissa sent a pleading look at Snape, who seemed to understand what she wanted, staring at her fixedly for a long moment. Then, he sighed.

“Sirius never learned the spell. It was developed by Narcissa’s father, Cygnus Black, and he shared it only with his three daughters.”

“Madame Pomfrey said no Legilimency!” Draco shot to his feet, his wand in a tight grip, though thankfully not raised as if to cast.

“Your mother invited me into her mind,” said Snape calmly. “Nevertheless, I shall be more cautious in future.”

Draco’s answer was slow, even grudging. “All right.”

Harry blew out a breath, his gaze seeking out his Snape’s dark eyes. “Well that answers how Remus got hurt, but we still need to counter whatever this fucking ward did to him--”

Draco curled a contemptuous lip. “She wanted to defend herself against one of the most dangerous creatures known to wizard! Defend herself and an unborn baby, I might add! It’s not her fault she ended up living with a werewolf, you know!”

“Remus wouldn’t hurt her!”

“And how was my mother supposed to know that? Assuming it’s even true! The whole problem with werewolves is that they can’t control themselves during a full moon!”

“Lucius,” Narcissa suddenly said, the word distinct, as if her brief rest had given her a little more energy. “Moon? Still Lucius.”

Now Harry was the one blinking. “Wait. Remus wasn’t transforming during the full moon, do you mean? He still looked like Lucius?”

Snape sighed. “I told you I was working on improving the Wolfsbane, Harry. What do you think occasioned such research, if not the discovery that my modified Polyjuice could sometimes repress the transformation?”

“Yeah, I don’t remember you mentioning improvements to the Wolfsbane Potion,” said Harry, eyes narrowed. “Maybe because I have amnesia?”

It was kind of interesting watching a dull flush of colour rise up to tint the Potion Master’s cheeks, he thought a second later. Satisfying, too, in some weird way. Maybe because Snape forgetting something for once made him seem more human.

Then again, he seemed human to Harry most of the time, now.
“I remember Lupin saying that he’d stay away from the manor when the moon was full,” said Draco. “There was some talk of contingencies, such as if the Dark Lord summoned him at such a time, but nobody said a thing about you having cured lycanthropy!”

“It’s far from cured,” scoffed Snape. “And how could Remus Lupin have told you anything more than his initial plan? He hadn’t yet begun to consume the modified Polyjuice around the clock for weeks on end.”

“He could have mentioned something since,” muttered Draco. “To Harry, maybe. They’ve had a chance to talk since this masquerade began. I would have liked to know that my mother was in no danger of being mauled.”

“We were quite clear on that with you from the very start,” said Snape crisply. “And neither I nor Albus believed it was best to speculate about the Wolfsbane research and the direction it might take.”

His tone said more than his words, at least to Harry. This is not the time to discuss Order business.

Draco must have got the point, since he dropped the subject. He gently grasped one of his mother’s hands again and bent over the sofa where she lay. “I want to understand everything clearly, but don’t speak if it’s too much for you,” he urged. “Just give a little nod if I’ve got things right. And don’t move at all if the answer’s no. All right? So . . . you knew that the man appearing as Lucius was an imposter? And you knew the imposter was a werewolf? Even though he wasn’t transforming? So you went to the Continent to get away from him? Because he might hurt you and the baby?”

Narcissa gave tiny nods to every question except the last one.

Draco brought up his free hand to lay it on her shoulder. “You wanted to get away from him, but not because you were afraid of him? But you were afraid?” Draco’s brow furrowed as he tried to puzzle it out. “That he’d take away your baby, then?”

No, said Narcissa’s utter stillness.

“That . . . he’d try to be a father to it?”

No.

Draco was clearly lost at sea. “Er, that he’d tell the Dark Lord you were with child?”

Her glance instantly shot to Severus, but this time she didn’t seem to be pleading for Legilimency, but for something else. Something Snape would have that Draco lacked, maybe.

“Ah,” said Snape, pulling up a chair to sit alongside Draco. “The Dark Lord, Narcissa? That was your concern?” He paused for a moment after her slight nod, trying to work it out. “You were afraid of the Dark Lord, but not because you were with child.”


“A wife should know her own husband,” Snape tried, going on after she’d indicated he was on the right track. “You knew you should have reported such an imposter. You left England to avoid having to do that.”

“Should have,” said Narcissa.
Harry saw red. “You think you should have turned Remus in?” he shouted, stomping forward.

As she shrank back from him, Draco turned and bared his teeth.

“Should have known,” whispered Narcissa, tears slipping from her eyes as she weakly turned her head to face the wall.

That stopped Harry from wanting to yell something else. “But she did know,” he objected, not sure if he was talking to Snape or Draco. Or maybe even her.

“Of course.” Snape leaned over Narcissa and with one finger on her chin, gently turned her face back towards them. “Once you realised that a stranger was impersonating Lucius, you had few viable options. If Voldemort learned of the imposture, even from you, he might well claim that you should have reported it sooner. Your best recourse was to absent yourself so that if the worst came to pass, you could claim that you had no way to know anything, since you’d been abroad the whole time.”

“But it didn’t work,” added Draco, waiting for her nod before continuing. “This is why the Dark Lord cursed you? It was just as you feared; he was furious that you didn’t tell him that ‘Lucius Malfoy’ was an imposter.”

“Said . . . I should have known,” Narcissa said again, her cheeks glistening with tear-tracks.

“Well, nobody will hurt you now,” vowed Draco in a fierce voice. “I won’t let them. You’re safe here with us.”

A slight shudder crossed through her. “Bella,” she moaned, more tears escaping her eyes as she clenched them shut.

“Aunt Bellatrix won’t hurt you. Nobody will.”

Narcissa looked like she was trying to say something more, but she couldn’t form the words.

Draco laid her hand back at her side and levelled a fierce glare at Harry. “So now we know,” he almost spat, “and I hope you’re satisfied. She’s in this state because she tried to protect your precious Lupin.”

Harry almost argued with that; hadn’t Draco’s mother just explained that she’d been protecting herself? He didn’t think it would do much good to point that out, though. At least not right now. Besides, other things were far more important at the moment.

“It sounds like this Black family magic means she’s the only one that can help Remus now,” he said instead.

Draco’s gaze glittered with scorn. “And is that your demand for her surety here, that she drains what little magic that’s still keeping her alive? And if it kills the baby as well, that’s a fair trade I suppose!”

“I didn’t mean that!” exclaimed Harry. “But just like you care about her, I care about him, that’s all!”

“It’s not the same. You’ve only known Lupin for four years, Harry! This is my mother. Little wonder you can’t really understand—”

“That’s right, make fun of me like you always used to, make fun of my mum and dad dying!”
“Gentlemen,” interrupted Snape. “I suggest we don’t rehash the past. What matters now is the present—”

“And my mother’s in no fit state to cast countercurses!”

“Germanium,” whispered Narcissa, weakly lifting a hand from the sofa. She was only able to keep it raised for an instant before it fell to the cushions with a thud. “Salt.”

“More broth?” guessed Draco. “That would have some salt? But geraniums? Do you mean you want some red ones for good health?”

She didn’t nod that time. In fact, she glanced at Snape, her gaze beseeching again.

“Would you like me to read your thoughts, Narcissa?”

“No. Absolutely not!” erupted Draco. “We shouldn’t even have talked with her like this, we should have just asked for another memory!”

“Pensieves don’t work that way and you know it, Draco,” Snape retorted. “They can only help one view an event. I somehow doubt your mother explained in detail to anyone her internal state of mind concerning her fears and motivations when she realised she was living with an imposter. However, you may have a point regarding whatever she wishes to tell us now.”

Snape turned his gaze downward and spoke very gently once again. “Can you think of a memory with the information?”

She twitched her chin up and down, adding, “You. Alone.”

Snape nodded. “As you wish. Pensare non Pensatum.”

Another curling fog of memory made its way over to the Pensieve. Before stepping away to plunge into it, Snape gave his sons a critical look. “I don’t want to emerge and find you two arguing. Or duelling, Merlin forbid. Is that clear?”

“As Lubaantum,” said Draco, lifting his chin a bit higher.

“Yeah, fine.”

Snape hesitated a moment, but then strode over to the Pensieve and thrust his head within.

Draco, meanwhile, shot Harry a nasty glance before rising to ask the elves for more broth. Harry was left alone with Narcissa, who gazed up at him with an expression somewhere between blank and bleak. Harry didn’t know what to make of it. He wasn’t even completely sure how to feel. He didn’t hate her, not really. He didn’t think she was a good person, but he didn’t want to see her suffer like this. The fact that she was . . . it didn’t excuse the other things she’d done. How could it?

He was only sure of one thing: He didn’t trust her.

“Here,” said Draco, sitting down with a small lidded pot, this time. “It’s more of a thin soup, really, with a few minced sprouts and some tiny bits of chicken. I asked for extra salt.”

Narcissa made a sound that might have been a laugh strangled at birth, her eyes softening as Draco began to help her eat.

Severus made his way over to the sofa. “That memory contained the counter to Lupin’s condition,”
he announced. “Which thankfully, is a tincture that anyone can wield regardless of their affinity for Black family magic. Powdered germanium mixed into salt water.”

Harry’s whole body jerked in place. Almost afraid to hope, he couldn’t stop himself from asking. “How many flowers, how much salt, and can it do him any harm if it’s done wrong?”

On the heels of that thought came a nagging doubt that the counter was worthwhile at all. What if Narcissa was trying to trick them somehow?

Though that seemed rather unlikely. She wasn’t stupid, and she was dependent on their good will for the foreseeable future.

“Germanium,” stressed Snape. “It’s a form of metallic rock, not a flower. I’ve just watched Cygnus Black explain the counter in detail to his three daughters, in case they wished to rouse a captured werewolf once his moon time had ended. I shall communicate the solution to the mediwizards caring for Lupin.”

Harry couldn’t stop second-guessing himself. “But what if--”

Snape laid a calming hand on his shoulder. “It’s all we have,” he said, deep tones seeming to reach inside Harry to reassure him. “It’s natural to have concerns, but truly, Harry . . . it’s all we have. Already Lupin has been lying insensate longer than is advisable, even with magic.”

Harry gave a reluctant nod.

“And when Remus Lupin emerges none the worse for wear,” added Draco, “you’re to remember that it was my mother who saved him. She didn’t have to tell us the counter!”

“It was your mother who cursed him in the first place,” mumbled Harry. “Though . . . I suppose she did try not to,” he added, thinking of the way she’d told “Lucius” not to cross her threshold. Though, that was in her best interests too, wasn’t it? She hadn’t wanted her “husband” revealed to be someone else, since that could lead to Voldemort blaming her for not reporting the imposter sooner! She’d probably known that her werewolf ward would strip away whatever magic was making the man look like Lucius Malfoy!

“She tried not to curse him?” asked Draco brightly. “That’s good to hear. Severus, can you remove the tichte memory now, so I can go into the other one? But . . . why didn’t she want me to see the tichte one? It sounds rather innocuous . . .”

“I would imagine that she had her reasons, and that should I now know them, she would not welcome my sharing them,” said Snape dryly. As he spoke, he removed the memory as requested, pulling it across the room with his wand before tapping it to Narcissa’s temple so it could waft back into her head. “Trust me, though. It was indeed innocuous.”

Draco nodded and continued to help his mother eat while Snape disappeared down the hall. Harry assumed he was sending a silver message to the safe house where Remus was, and he didn’t want Narcissa to know its name or location. He highly approved.

When Snape returned, he gestured for Draco to take his turn at the Pensieve.

“She’s not quite done with the soup,” murmured Draco. “Would you like to assist her, Severus? If not, I can put it under a holding charm.”

“I need to see to other matters,” announced Snape. “Let your brother help.”
Draco twisted a lip. “I hardly think that’s appropriate.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Harry. “I’m not going to poison her, you know!”

“You didn’t even want to let her in! And what has she done since then, I ask you? Just make sure we know how to cure your werewolf friend! We still don’t know anything more about the wasting curse she’s under, and why is that? Because she’s chosen to prioritize your precious Remus Lupin!”

“Well, there might be another reason,” said Harry, even though he couldn’t think of one. Why wouldn’t Narcissa put herself first? Or her baby first?

Instead, she had made sure that Remus Lupin would recover.

“And you want me to let Harry anywhere near her,” mocked Draco.

Snape ignored their squabbling this time. “Narcissa, is it all right with you if Harry Potter assists you for a few minutes?”

She looked relieved, of all things. Harry couldn’t understand it. He hadn’t exactly kept it a secret that he was suspicious of her presence here. Still, she nodded.

“Harry, are you likewise willing?”

“Oh, sure,” he answered in a jolly tone, hoping Draco got the point: Harry was trustworthy even if Narcissa wasn’t. “I’d love to.”

Draco pursed his lips, looking in frustration from Harry to Snape and back. His obvious concern abruptly killed Harry’s desire to rub it in.

“Go,” he said, voice subdued that time. “I’m the one with the saving-people thing. I’m not about to hurt your mother.”

Thank God Draco didn’t say what Harry started thinking about in the next instant. Because saving-people thing or no, he had killed Draco’s father, hadn’t he?

*He stopped being my father long before Severus adopted me*, whispered Draco, somewhere deep down inside Harry’s mind, or maybe his forgotten memories. *Severus is my father.*

Draco gave him one last, long glance, then handed him the soup and made his way over to the Pensieve.

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Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:

Chapter Forty-Nine: Unwelcome News

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

---------------------------------------------------------------------
"Lupin has awakened," said Snape, rubbing the side of his nose as he turned away from the Floo. Harry jolted awake, though he'd only really been half-dozing as he sat slumped in the living room, waiting for news. "Is he all right? I mean, really all right, can he remember everything and talk and--"

"It would appear so." Even Snape's voice was weary. "The Headmaster has communicated to me a message from Lupin to your brother."

That had Harry sitting up completely. "What is it?"

Snape crooked a finger, beckoning Harry to follow him down the corridor to the new room they'd crafted together. Draco had levitated Narcissa into it some hours earlier, after announcing in a frosty tone that his mother needed a proper sleep, not more questions.

Draco hadn't closed the door, but the curtains he'd added to her bed were shimmering with the faint glow of a privacy ward. He was sitting on the bed, still holding his mother's hand, his eyes ringed with exhaustion as he glanced up at Snape's footfall. "My classes today can sod off," he said, each word clipped. "I'm not leaving her."

"It is Sunday."

Draco scowled. "Breakfast can sod off, then."

"Nobody is suggesting that you should leave your mother's side."

"Good, because--" Draco closed his eyes, his features almost collapsing with strain. "Forgive me, Severus. I'm obviously on edge. It's just, I've never been in a situation like this before, and what if she dies, and I keep going over and over those instructions of Pomfrey's but I know there's nothing in them to cure her, they won't even stop her from getting worse, not for forever, and I don't know what to do, and where the hell is my grand intuitive grasp of magic, I'd like to know, and--"

He stopped when Snape curled a hand around his shaking shoulder. "Breathe, you idiot child."

Draco drew in a jagged breath, and then another, both of them too fast. But then he seemed to relax a little. "Wonderful, I'm babbling like a Hufflepuff. The two of you must think I'm an imbecile. Well, not you, probably," he added, glancing sideways at Harry. "You actually like Hufflepuffs."

Harry just shook his head at that. "Severus has a message for you. From Remus."

"Do tell," murmured Draco, shifting away from Snape's hand on his shoulder. "Well?"
Snape cleared his throat. "Lupin has spoken at some length with the Headmaster, Draco. And when informed that your mother was here at Hogwarts with us, he wanted you to know most specifically that he is not the father of her child and that just as he assured you, he has never once touched your mother in that manner."

Draco's face seemed to clear of all expression for a long moment, and then he lifted his chin and made a slight sniffing sound. "I should most certainly hope not!"

Harry hardly wanted to make things worse, but he couldn't stop the question from surging up his throat. "Then why does the medical scroll say that your mother's pregnant with a thriving question mark? Like the diagnosis spell wasn't even sure if the baby was human?"

“I had no idea you considered Remus Lupin to be non-human,” murmured Draco.

“I didn’t mean that! But, you know, I have seen his wolf form up close. He's not exactly human during his moon times, so what else was I supposed to think when I saw a notation like that?"

"Maybe you were supposed to do the math, Harry. Eight months; my mother was still living with my . . . the real Lucius when this child was conceived. And besides, don’t you think this is what he was talking about at the end of last year?"

“How should I know? I can’t remember the end of last year!”

“Right. Sorry.” Draco dragged in a breath. "After you killed Lucius, his portrait came to life and told me I’d never inherit a single Malfoy Galleon, not even if my mother wanted to pass some of Lucius’ wealth to me. Or her own considerable riches, for that matter. It had all been settled elsewhere already, he claimed. Irrevocably. And then he spoke of replacing me with one more worthy. So clearly, he must have known that he was going to have another heir."

Harry gulped, visions of the Dursleys suddenly flashing through his mind. He'd always known that everything they had would go to Dudley. He'd always known that everything they had would go to Dudley. He'd concluded a long time back that his name wouldn't even appear in their will, just like they'd never had a nephew at all. They'd certainly never wanted one. But for Draco's parents to do something similar? That was awful. He hadn't grown up knowing he wasn't loved.

"Harry," said Draco softly. "Lucius put out a death warrant on me last year. I told you that. Being disinherited isn't much compared to that. Besides, I knew when I stole your wand that I was going to lose everything."

"Harry," said Draco softly. "Lucius put out a death warrant on me last year. I told you that. Being disinherited isn't much compared to that. Besides, I knew when I stole your wand that I was going to lose everything."

It was more than a little disconcerting to realise that Draco could read his expressions so well. "I'm surprised you stole it, in that case," Harry muttered.

Draco lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "I shouldn't have said everything. I thought that on your side I was a lot less likely to lose my dignity and freedom. Not to mention my life. But enough of that. The point is that eight months ago, Remus Lupin hadn't yet started his masquerade."

“But then, why did that diagnosis parchment label the baby with question marks? Is it, er, another part of this curse she's under? I mean, what if your mother gives birth to . . . er . . .” Harry shuddered, his mind skittering in a dozen different directions, all of them foul.

"Harry, this is hardly helpful," said Snape. "I do believe Draco has enough to worry about, without-."

"No, it's all right," said Draco, sighing as he lowered his mother's hand to the bedcovers and leaned back in his chair. He glanced down at her for a long moment before looking back up at Harry. “I've
been warned for years to expect a notation like that when my wife and I are expecting. It's just a
lineage restriction to keep the parents from knowing the gender of an unborn child. My mother is
carrying a thriving boy or girl, but our family magic makes it impossible to know which until the
child is born."

Harry grimaced a bit. "More Black magic?"

"They wouldn't warn me about it in that case, would they? I was never named Black, and lineage
potions and the like link more to rightfully borne names than to actual bloodlines. It's Malfoy
magic."

Harry blinked, still not convinced. "Well, if those question marks are because of Malfoy blood
magic . . . Lucius is long dead, so would it really still hold sway over your mother? I mean, she's
not really a Malfoy at all--"

"Rightfully borne names," repeated Draco, his nostrils flaring. "You are aware that her name is still
Narcissa Malfoy?"

"And that mocking tone of yours is likewise not helpful," said Snape.

Harry ignored that. He didn't need his father fighting his battles for him. Besides, he didn't care if
Draco was snooty. It was very Draco, and even if it wasn't, his brother was worn thin with worry at
the moment. "What's the point of not knowing if you're having a baby boy or girl, though?"

Draco made a careless gesture. "Avoiding infanticide, is that cause enough for you? You see, we
Malfoys used to terminate a pregnancy the moment it became known that a firstborn child was
going to be a daughter. Until the 1400s, when one of my ancestors decided the practise was a tad
barbaric. He cast a lineage spell over the main bloodline to obscure such knowledge, and ever since
. . ."

Harry made a face. "That's sick and twisted."

"The practise, or the spell to stop it?"

"You know what I meant!"

"Perhaps it's less than enjoyable listening to you discourse on how very evil my family is!"

Well, Harry knew what to say to that complaint. "We're your family." And then for good measure,
"You idiot child."

A hint of a smile lifted the corners of Draco's mouth. "So you are. Thank you, Harry. But perhaps
you could try to refrain from insulting my forebears? Adoption or no, it's not lost on me that their
blood still runs in my veins."

He glanced at his mother as he said the last few words, which brought Harry up short. It wasn't just
their blood Draco was talking about. It was her blood. Narcissa's blood.

Harry understood, then. He wished he'd understood earlier. Draco loved his mother, of course he
did. Maybe Harry had been slow to truly grasp that because he had no real idea what it would be
like to have a mother to love.

But Draco did love her, and because he did, when Harry openly questioned her motives or her
loyalty, it hurt Draco.
Harry nodded and told himself that if he had to say anything bad about her in future, he'd talk with Snape in private. Or the Headmaster, maybe. But he wouldn't speak in front of his brother, not if it could be avoided.

"Right, I understand," he murmured. "Um . . . sorry about before. I shouldn't have said not to let her in. She's your mum. I . . . er, I wasn't thinking of her like that. Stupid of me, really."

Draco peered closely at him. "Sudden change of heart, is it?"

Harry felt his face heating. He didn't really want to explain more, but nothing for it, right? "I'm barely used to having a father, Draco. You know I can't remember having a mother. And I don't mean the amnesia."

"Yes, well . . ." He glanced at Snape, then. "Truthful Dreams again?"

Snape's long hair swayed as he shook his head. "We were warned against using magic to bring forth Harry's memories, if you recall."

"What's this about?" asked Harry. "What truthful dreams?"

"It's a potion to help you remember," explained Severus gruffly. "When you used it last year, you could recall fragments from your early childhood. You could remember your parents . . . you emerged from your dreams knowing how much they loved you."

"I've known that for years. I mean, they did die for me--"

"Yes," said Severus, his voice shaking a little this time. "But with the potion, you felt loved. And that seemed to heal something deep inside you, Harry."

"Oh . . ." Harry bit his lip, suddenly hopeful. "Maybe it'd be all right to give me the potion again, Severus. We did already decide that Marsha was wrong to keep people from telling me things."

"You decided. You and your brother." Snape sighed. "Harry, if you remember on your own, you will recall your truthful dreams as well. If I give you the potion, there is no guarantee you will have the same dreams. And it might interfere with your ever remembering on your own."

Harry scowled, but he could see the logic in that. He needed not to think about it, though, or he knew he'd been tempted to steal a certain potion. "Yeah, all right. Well, we're none of us going up to the Great Hall, I don't think. Anybody else interested in some breakfast here?"

Snape gave him what Harry could only interpret as a grateful look. "Yes, why don't you see to it for the three of us?"

"Nothing for me--"

"For the three of us," Snape repeated.

Harry blinked. "Wait, that's a thing with you, isn't it? I think you did it to me too, made me eat when I was upset? And I ate a cookie even though you'd brought me a proper dinner tray. Did that happen?"

Snape's dark eyes were glimmering. "Indeed it did."

"What was I upset about? I can't remember that part."

"I had just recently adopted you and one of your friends was reacting rather badly."
"Ron or Hermione?"

"Could we cut short the stroll down Memory Lane?" asked Draco. "I need to talk to Dad about how we're going to counter the curse cursing my mother! And I fancy a bite to eat after all, so go order breakfast!"

"Right, sorry," said Harry, turning toward the open door. "See you in a bit." With that, he left his father and brother alone. Hopefully they could figure something out.

Hopefully in time for it to make a difference.

Even Harry had to admit that the breakfast table ended up looking a bit ridiculous. He hadn't meant it to be, but he also hadn't wanted to interrupt Snape and Draco's conversation about countercurse theory. From time to time he could hear them murmuring, the talk sometimes growing slightly heated before descending back into a low thrum of barely discernible noise.

He'd ordered food straight away, and then as he waited for Snape and Draco to emerge, he ordered more. And more. After all, maybe the two of them didn't want orange juice. So ... grape juice too. And pomegranate. And apple. And come to think of it, crepes with just one kind of topping was kind of dull, so he asked for a few more. Then it occurred to him that Snape would want them to have some protein, right? Actually, the cookie memory he'd dredged up sort of hinted at that; Harry was almost sure that Snape had flat out told him to eat some protein. What kind for breakfast, though? He ended up with bacon, ham, and bangers.

Plus eggs. What was breakfast without eggs?

Several kinds of eggs.

Harry finally stopped when he ran out of ideas for fresh fruit and had started to contemplate vegetables. To keep himself from ordering more food, he threw himself down on the couch Narcissa had lain on for hours and grabbed a Potions journal from a side table.

It was dead boring.

"All right, but only if Madame Pomfrey agrees," Draco was saying as he and Snape finally emerged. "Because I'm not about to-- Merlin, Harry. I said I fancied a bite, not a banquet!"

"Yeah, sorry," said Harry as he tossed the journal aside and rose to his feet. "I was trying not to interrupt. Guess I got a little carried away."

He saw Draco mouth A little? at Snape.

His father, though, didn't comment on the food, merely saying, "You were quite welcome to join our discussion."

That he could say so only proved he hadn't noticed Draco's clear request to talk with him alone. Or
maybe it proved that Snape had noticed but didn't want Harry excluded. Or maybe it proved that Snape was more exhausted than he was letting on. Or maybe Harry had no idea.

"Shall we?" added Severus as he sat down and poured himself a cup of tea. Thankfully, Harry had had enough presence of mind to restrict himself to one teapot. No need to remind their father of the drunken mess they’d left in the Room of Requirement.

Draco opted for coffee and croissants, though toward the end of the meal he also spooned himself some shirred eggs. Harry had a little bit of everything. He had to, after asking the elves to go to so much trouble.

When the Floo whooshed to life, Draco jumped to his feet, clearly expecting Madame Pomfrey. But it was the Headmaster who arrived, a folded copy of the *Daily Prophet* in hand, his face heavily lined with strain.

"Well," said Dumbledore. "It seems that your sons have placed this school and quite possibly the Order in a rather untenable position."

Standing, Snape took the broadsheet the Headmaster held out and sighed. Less than ten seconds later he was sighing again as he sank back into his chair. "That damnable witch."

Dumbledore snorted. "That's all you have to say?"

"My damnable sons," snapped Snape. "Is that better, Headmaster?"

"What?" asked Harry and Draco, almost at the same time.

Snape flung the *Prophet* to the table, scowling. "See for yourselves!"

Draco snatched it first, but when Harry objected, held it so they could both read.

*Hogsmeade in Uproar!* read the headline in large font, directly above a photograph of the Hog's Head, its sign swinging wildly in the wind. And beneath the image, a by-line that made Harry's blood run cold with dread: *A special report by Rita Skeeter*

"Harry and I hardly caused an uproar, I quite assure you--"

"Read!" growled Snape.

*Innocent passers-by in Scotland's only full-wizarding village were nothing short of horrified yesterday afternoon by the drunken and impertinent carousing of two Hogwarts students who decided to frequent the Hog’s Head after causing a ruckus in both Zonko’s and Honeydukes. Word on the street is that more than a hundred Galleon's worth of sweets were actually stolen, with even more than that trodden underfoot by the students, who according to all reports were swilling Ogden's directly from the bottle as they crashed through one display after another with nary a thought to the consequences for respectable business owners doing an honest day's work in hopes of an honest day's gain!*

"Scoundrels, they were. Right scoundrels!" was the judgment of one eyewitness who prefers to remain anonymous for fear of repercussions from the school, for who can doubt for a single instant that Albus Dumbledore himself must have had a hand in these inappropriate goings-on? Surely not a single person in the British Isles could believe that mere students could slip away from such a venerable school entirely
unnoticed, which can only mean that the Hogwarts Headmaster has actually endorsed this shocking behaviour.

But who were these students, you ask? No-one knows for sure, but this reporter certainly has her suspicions. They came in close contact with an honourable businessman enjoying an afternoon's repast at the Hog's Head; according to his information, one was tall and fair with gleaming white-blond hair and the look of quality that only comes from long acquaintance with heaps of Galleons, while the other was a somewhat shorter, scruffier teen with black hair so messy it probably hasn't seen a comb since the days of Merlin.

Can there be any doubt, dear reader, that the culprits raising mayhem in the village were none other than one Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter, both of them the adopted sons of none other than Hogwarts Potions Master Severus Snape? The implications seem clear enough to any right-thinking person. Apparently, the sons of a certain professor are allowed to indulge in the kinds of dissipations that would see any other student expelled! And what other license are these boys offered, I ask you? Are they allowed to disregard their studies? Are their marks always Outstanding no matter their actual accomplishments? Are all the other professors in cahoots with Severus Snape to favour these boys, perhaps at the command of the corrupt Headmaster himself? I am afraid, dearest reader, that one must conclude the worst, the very worst -- for let us not forget that it is one Harry James Potter who has actually been made a Slytherin Prefect by his adoptive father, coincidentally the Head of Slytherin empowered to make such a decision, and this despite the fact that the boy has never even been sorted into that House, and indeed, held it in disdain for most of his school years! And perhaps still does!

(And let us never allow ourselves to forget that Potter was even given the Prefect position left open by the suspicious and mysterious death of Pansy Parkinson, which more than one student has whispered came at the hands of rejected beau Draco Malfoy himself! But I digress -- the point is that Harry Potter was allotted a position ever heretofore reserved for a Slytherin of the feminine variety. Either Professor Snape is more outrageously biased than even this reporter has long supposed, or Harry Potter must have . . . inclinations, shall we say?)

But let us not descend too far into speculation, my dear and most faithful readers. Oh, no -- for this reporter has far more evidence than a mere dozen reports and interviews from the denizens of Hogsmeade. She has her own eyewitness testimony to add to these most interesting developments. For whom should she see with her very own eyes wandering the village yesterday, several hours after the events herein described? Yes, you have guessed it, my clever readers: none other than Narcissa Malfoy herself, come to Hogsmeade no doubt to rebuke her wicked, wicked son, or perhaps to pay restitution to the shop-keepers forced to endure his odious presence!

I tell you the truth -- the woman looked distraught. Nay, she was positively grey with distress as she stumbled up the path to the castle, no doubt to speak with her erstwhile son whose behaviour in the village has so humiliated her. For yes, she did disown him to these many months ago, but yet a mother's love ever does run pure -- as pure as the very blood that flows in her most aristocratic veins. I can only hope that her love and obvious care can turn him away from his evil ways of late and back to the righteous, honourable path long followed by all Malfoys.

At this writing, dear reader, it appears that Narcissa Malfoy may yet have that chance.
She yet remains in the castle and may do so for some time to come, urging and cajoling her prodigal son to see the error of his ways and leave behind the ill-considered and perhaps even malicious guidance of his "father," not to mention that "father's" own mentor, Albus Dumbledore.

How long will it be until the Governors convene a meeting to discuss these shocking events? How many more children must wander drunkenly into Hogsmeade before we begin to have a care for the future of our youth? I believe that children are the future; treat them well and let them lead the way!

"The blithering idiot got my name wrong," said Draco as he flung the paper away. "Draco Snape, it's public record!"

"That's all you have to say, is it?"

"She doesn't have any real proof it was us, just speculation," said Harry. "I mean, there weren't loads of eyewitnesses like she says. We didn't even go to Zonko's! That tunnel took us straight to the pub, and we stayed there until . . . um, you found us."

"Best not to remind me of how I found you!" thundered Snape. "And do you mean to tell me that nobody but Aberforth saw you? Because I somehow doubt he was the one to contact the press, not with his own storied history with scurrilous accusations!"

"No, there was another bloke--"

"Aberforth," murmured Dumbledore, right on top of Harry's words.

"My idiot children were so sloshed that they thought your brother was you," said Snape, disgust twisting his mouth.

"Well, that is neither here nor there," said Dumbledore, his tone suddenly much brisker. "This other wizard who did see you didn't know your identities. I shall adhere to that if questioned on the matter. After all, the article is so full of baseless innuendo that I can hardly be expected to take anything it says at face value."

Snape scowled a little, but inclined his head in assent.

"The more pressing matter, Draco, is that your mother's presence in the castle is now public knowledge," continued the headmaster. "I had thought to keep that a secret even from the Order."

Draco shoved his hands in his trouser pockets. "Well, that's not my fault, surely? I can't help what some stupid reporter writes!"

Snape advanced a step, but was brought up short by Dumbledore's raised hand.

"No?" questioned the Headmaster, his tone a strange cross between gentle and stern. "Do you suppose that Rita Skeeter was lurking about in Hogsmeade for no reason at all?"

"Maybe--"

"Or could it be that this 'bloke' went to the Prophet to tell tales of two Hogwarts students reeling with drunkenness in the village, hmm? And based on the descriptions he could offer, Skeeter's interest was piqued enough to go to Hogsmeade to investigate?"

"Which puts her presence in the village directly at your doorstep!" added Snape.
His raised voice was directed at Draco, which Harry thought unfair, especially right now, when Draco was already under more than enough stress. "And mine," he insisted. "We went there to get a plushie for me, don't forget!"

"The bigger question is how to handle this revelation of Narcissa's presence," said Dumbledore. "Voldemort will now know her whereabouts, and as he has apparently already cursed her into this state?"

"Be realistic!" snapped Draco. "He probably had a tracking spell that traced her to the castle. And anyway, that's just more reason why she has to stay here. There's nowhere safer!"

"Earlier, I did not want her in the Hospital Wing because we were keeping her arrival here a secret, but now, she would most likely benefit from Poppy's constant watchfulness--"

"I can watch her," said Draco, sighing. "She has to stay here, behind the wards. They'll keep out Voldemort himself. He's not having another go at her, and that's final."

"Severus, your thoughts?"

"My thoughts, but his mother." Snape rubbed a long finger along the side of his nose, up and down as though warding off a headache. "In this matter, I must accede to Draco's wishes."

"Very well," murmured Dumbledore. "Now, as I'm certain the Governors may want to say a word or two regarding this morning's Prophet, . . ."

He gave both Harry and Draco a speaking look, but flooed away without another word.

"I hope it is clear to you just what your lamentable judgment has brought us to," sneered Snape as soon as the green flames died away. "Whatever advantage secrecy may have gained us is lost! We caught a rare stroke of luck that your mother arrived by black of night when no students were about, and likely entered the castle through an obscure passage she knew about from her school days! But now our advantage has been lost!"

"Yes, I gathered that!" snapped Draco. "Sorry!"

"Are you?"

"Yes!"

"Good."

Draco sighed. "I really am sorry, Severus. It was stupid, all right? The whole thing. Damn . . . if only my mother hadn't been quite so ill, she'd have been able to Disillusion herself from nosy reporter types!"

"It wouldn't have mattered," said Harry, resting a hand on his brother's arm. "I mean, not with Rita Skeeter able to hide right in a person's own hair."

Snape suddenly went unnaturally still, his blacker-than-black gaze boring into Harry's. "What did you just say?"

Odd question, since Harry was pretty sure he'd been paying attention. "Um, Skeeter is an Animagus, right? And her form is a beetle, just about this size--" He held up his thumb and forefinger spaced a scant distance apart.
Snape's voice was a low, harsh whisper. "And you have known this for how long?"

Harry winced, suddenly getting it. "Um, years?"

"Years," repeated Snape. "Years, and you never thought to tell a responsible adult? Even when inducted into the Order, it still never dawned on you to tell someone how very easily we could be spied upon by an unscrupulous reporter absolutely lacking any shred of discretion?"

"I didn't know any responsible adults!" protested Harry. "I mean, I did, but I didn't think I did! Not at the time. And it wasn't top of my list of things to do, not when we had it under control!"

Snape snatched up the Prophet from where it had landed on the table and shoved it toward Harry. "Control?"

"I thought it was! We were . . . um, blackmailing her not to print any more stupid stories . . ."

"Teenagers," muttered Snape. "Well, I can only hope that you will trust me in future should you discover any other information key to the Order's security. As for now, I must inform the Headmaster at once."

"I'll go with you," said Harry, not looking forward to Dumbledore also knowing what an idiot he'd been.

"You'll stay here to assist Draco," corrected Snape. "He may need help with Narcissa should her condition worsen again."

Harry could see the sense in that. "Yeah, all right."

Snape looked from him to Draco and back, then strode to the Floo and disappeared in a welter of green flames.

"Come on," said Draco as he poured a measure of pomegranate juice into an empty teacup. "I want to be at her side when she wakes up."

Nodding, Harry followed his brother down the corridor.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Fifty: More Black Magic

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------
More Black Magic

Chapter Notes

My beta, Maple in the Moonlight, really knocked it out of the ballpark on this one. We brainstormed together for hours and wouldn’t you know, it was Maple who came up with the solution to a VERY thorny plotting problem I’d been struggling with. Yay, Maple!

"Here, mother," said Draco softly as Narcissa lay on her side and keened, the sound like a tiny kitten's mewl. "I brought you some juice. Pomegranate, your favourite. Wouldn’t you like to drink, just a bit? I'll help you..."

By the end, his voice sounded like pure coaxing.

Narcissa didn't respond, though. Sighing, Draco set the cup aside for the tenth time that hour and started re-reading Pomfrey's instructions. Again.

"You have them memorized by now, I'm sure--"

"Pardon me if I don't care to bet my mother's life on it," muttered Draco, scowling as he dragged a finger along the parchment as if trying to underline a key instruction. "She could die, Harry. Die! And she's my mother, mother--"

He suddenly jerked his head up and stared at Harry, his face stricken with what looked like grief. Terrible, soul-crushing grief. His normally perfect hair was uncharacteristically tousled, as if had been running his hand through it, and his robes were distinctly unkempt, the fabric badly wrinkled where he’d been wringing it with his hands.

Harry, taken aback by his brother's appearance, scooted his chair closer and laid a palm atop his forearm. "Don't look like that, like there's no hope and she's already--" Clearing his throat, he started over. "She's here with you. Alive. And we're going to keep her that way."

Draco stared for a moment longer, then yanked his face away to stare at the wall instead. "I . . . I . . . I don't know how you can say that. To me, of all people!"

"Because it's true," said Harry, bolstering his tone with as much confidence as he could manage. "We'll work and work until we figure out how to reverse this wasting curse, and we'll--"

Draco suddenly burst into tears, huge loud gasping sobs that emerged so violently that they shook his whole body. Harry didn't know what to do for a few seconds. He didn't think he'd ever seen anybody cry quite like that. Certainly not Draco. But then the noise of his crying got even worse, reaching a positive wail, and after that, Harry didn't stop to think about how to react.

"No, Draco, no!" he shouted as he lunged toward his brother, snatching him up from the chair in a close, fierce hug as he kept talking. "We'll help her, we'll all help her! It'll be all right!"

Draco stopped wailing, but he didn't stop shaking. Tears streamed down his face as he hung in Harry's embrace, letting himself be hugged. Then a new sound started, the gulping noise of someone trying to swallow, over and over. It seemed to go on forever before Draco managed to
speak. But what he said made no sense at all.

"I . . . I don't know . . . how you can stand the sight of me!"

His robes weren’t *that* rumpled. In fact the complaint made no sense at all. "Um . . . well . . . what on earth do you mean?"

Draco shoved a bit to step back from the hug, then. He looked a mess. Though it was hard to get a good look at his face since he was resolutely staring at the stone floor instead of at Harry. But something about his posture . . . he didn’t seem to be grieving so much any longer. Instead, he looked to be deeply, deeply ashamed. Harry couldn’t imagine why.

But then, after another long moment of still and silence, Draco began to speak, his voice so low Harry had to lean forward a bit to catch the words. "I didn't know, Harry. It's no excuse at all, but you have to believe me that I didn't know. When I . . . when I used to make fun of you all those times for having a d- d- dead mother, I didn’t . . . That's a horrible thing to say. Horrible. Horrible horrible horrible--"

Oh. Harry paused a moment to think. "Yeah, it was. But you hadn't seen death yet, Draco, so of course you didn't know. I understand that. You didn't have any idea just how horrible you were being. So . . ." Harry didn't really want to say that it was all right, because comments like that weren’t. Probably he shouldn't point out, either, that the dead-mother jibes weren't even the worst thing Draco had done. "It just seems like a long time ago."

Draco glanced up. "I'm not daft. I know you forgave me that, just like you forgave . . . everything. But I didn't really understand, not until just now, exactly how cruel I'd been to you."

Harry gave a slight shrug. "If it's any consolation, I don't think I did either. I mean, I didn't much like those comments, but they didn't make me feel like you're feeling now. 'Cause . . . I can't remember having a mother, can I? Your own lying there so ill, and you being afraid what it might come to, well, it’s just . . . I grew up knowing I’d once had a mum, but the idea always just seemed, I don’t know. Theoretical? I mean, I never really did feel like I’d had a mother. Aunt Petunia certainly didn’t try to be one to me."

"That sounds worse, actually." Draco lifted a hand and rubbed at his cheeks until they were dry, but it didn't do much good, really. His puffy eyes remained. "Well, Harry, I am sorry. I’m very sorry. I would never have said such a terrible thing if I’d had the slightest notion. Or rather, I’d like to think I wouldn’t have. If I’m honest, I have to admit that maybe I would still have have taunted you the exact same way. I really wasn't a very pleasant child."

His glance collided with Harry’s again, almost as though he were seeking reassurance.

“No, you weren’t.” But Harry shrugged as he said it. Strange, wasn’t it, how he could even smile at those memories now? They just didn’t seem to matter much any longer. Which told Harry, probably more than anything else, that he truly had accepted the other boy as his brother.

Draco’s lips, the lower one looking a bit chewed from his crying fit, twisted a little. “Nice of you to agree so readily, Potter.”

*Potter.* So he was feeling disgruntled. Harry tapped his arm lightly and smiled a little. “Don’t worry about it, eh? I like you loads now.”

Draco lifted his chin, abruptly shoving his hands down into his pockets, a gesture that had Harry suddenly flashing through about a hundred memories of him doing the same thing. Image after
image, Draco looking much the same though his clothing and surroundings varied as a blur of moving pictures whirled through his mind. It was a bit dizzying.

“Well now,” Draco’s voice broke across his thoughts. “I feel absolutely awful about everything. Can I . . . can I do something to make it better? I feel terrible. I need to do something!”

Harry was going to refuse, he really was. But Draco's last, almost frenzied claim, made him think twice. Maybe he really did need to make amends somehow. Harry almost said to get him a plushie. But no, that was silly, even if it had a strange appeal he couldn’t really justify. Snape had been right. A simple purchase wouldn't heal that place inside Harry that had always longed for a mum and dad. And it wouldn’t help Draco move past his guilt, would it?

Neither would telling him he could make amends by apologizing to Ron, too, for all the quips about his family being poor. Harry was ashamed that the thought had even crossed his mind. Even coming up with it was too Slytherin for his taste.

"Um, well . . . maybe you could . . . I can’t think of anything, Draco!”

The other boy sniffed, his hands still firmly lodged deep in his trouser pockets. “Then that means you don’t really forgive me. Not completely.”

Oh, for pity’s sake. “Fine,” said Harry after a moment. “You know what I want, what I really want? Treat Hermione right, even now.”

Draco’s eyebrows drew together, the skin between them puckering. “What are you on about?”

Harry planted his feet a bit further apart, his own eyes narrowing. “This is about how you treat people. Your mum’s here now, and just because you have a new mindset about Muggle-borns doesn’t mean she will. So if you want to make up for being so cruel before, you can be considerate now. To Hermione.”

By the time Harry finished, Draco was glaring. “I hate your amnesia, you know. It makes you a right tosser half the time. If you could remember, you’d believe that I fell headlong for a full-on Muggle! And you never trusted me to treat her right, either! You thought I’d hex her to death just for being a Muggle! And I didn’t! I still loved her! And now I love Hermione and you still don’t trust me!”

Well, at least he’d got over his bizarre aversion to the word Muggle.

Harry relaxed his stance and gave a brief shrug. “I think you haven’t had time to think through what your mum might say about Hermione if, I mean when, she gets better. And you’re Slytherin, aren’t you? Is it so unlikely that you might decide to avoid the argument? Except, with your history with Hermione, she’s only going to see that as you being ashamed of her blood status.”

“Oh.” Draco’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Fuck.”

“You have to think about what to do,” Harry urged. “Really think, so you’re prepared. Because . . . no offense, but you’re a bit over-emotional right now.”

Draco gave a sharp nod. “I suppose I am, indeed. But fine, I accept your terms.”

Terms? Dealing with Slytherins could really be depressing at times. What he’d asked for, he hadn’t meant it as a contract. Which made him think he’d better . . . “I wasn’t trying to say you couldn’t break up with her, Draco. But don’t do it because someone else might care that she’s Muggle-born. Only do it, if, you know . . . she’s not the one.”
Draco’s eyes glittered silver. “Oh yes, I care so very much what others think of my love life. But that’s right. You weren’t there, were you, when I decided to redecorate my house!”

That he’d managed to allude to that night with the portrait without letting slip that Lucius was in fact dead told Harry a lot. He wasn’t risking the Order’s secrets in front of Narcissa, not even now when his emotions were all over the place. So maybe he had more impulse control than Severus thought.

“And she is the one,” Draco added. “Now that I’ve had a mere crush I can tell the difference. I just have to convince Hermione that I can.”

Rhiannon had been a mere crush? That was news. Harry had to grin at the last bit, though. “You can’t convince Hermione of anything, Draco. Nobody can. She makes up her own mind. Trust me on that.”

Draco sighed. “She may be a swot, but I want her to be my swot. If only I was still in line to inherit the Malfoy library. Hermione would love it so much. Damn, I’m an imbecile. I should have sent her books instead of all those stupid flowers!”

Harry laughed. “She’s a swot, but she’s still a girl, Draco! Once you talked and she understood what the flowers were really about, she was very touched.”

“I can see it’s going to be just lovely, having her tell you everything about us. But I suppose it’ll be worth it. Ha. If I can get her past what happened in Potions.”

“What did happen?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You kissed? In Potions class?”

“Did I say that?”

“Fine, don’t tell me,” sighed Harry.

Whatever Draco might have said next was cut off by the whoosh of the Floo roaring to life. Harry tensed, wand at the ready, but it was just Snape. He strode into the room a moment later, his dark glance taking in everything at once, just before he frowned. “Draco, has your mother taken a turn for the worse? You should have summoned me here at once.”

Flushing, Draco smoothed down his hair and cast a charm across his face to wipe away all trace of his crying jag. “No, she’s the same,” he murmured, stepping to the bed and stroking her cheek with the tip of one index finger as he looked down at her. You couldn’t tell any longer that he’d been wailing, but he still looked sad. So very sad.

Snape raised an eyebrow and opened his mouth to ask something more.

Harry quickly shook his head and mouthed brothers stuff, though he wasn’t sure Snape could read lips. So he changed the subject. “So what about Skeeter, then?”

Maybe he could read lips, Harry thought, from the way that arched eyebrow went even higher. But then he dropped the subject. “Your information came years too late. If we’d known earlier, we could have had her magically restricted from writing for publication based on her unethical journalistic practice. Alas, she’s a registered Animagus, now.” The man’s voice slid towards snide. “Perhaps you could inform the Order, or possibly even your father, should you happen across such
Harry knew what would make him lose the sneer. “Do I have to choose? I thought my father was in the Order.”

An instant later he felt a low heat rising up into his neck, since he’d said that in front of Narcissa. Though maybe it didn’t matter much. She probably couldn’t hear them, and even if she could, Snape’s loyalties were hardly a secret these days.

Snape must have misunderstood the colour flooding his cheeks. “You idiot child,” he said softly as he stepped closer and gave Harry’s shoulder a series of pats. “If you like having a father, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Oh, God. Harry didn’t want him thinking that. “No, I’m fine with it, and um, liking it. Liking you, even. Really, Severus. It’s just . . .” He dropped his voice to a bare whisper as he gestured toward the bed. “I mentioned, you know. The um, old crowd?”

The man’s hand patted him a few more times. “I do believe she is insensate. But thank you for explaining. It’s good to see you more at ease.”

Harry nodded. “It took a couple of hours just to check the Animagus registry?”

“That was in the last few minutes. First, the headmaster and I layered additional wards onto the castle and . . . other key locations.”

“Now we’ll never get to see Zabini manage his transformation all the way,” snorted Draco, proving he was following every word. “And I did long to see him become the worm he is.”

“Students are exempted from the wards, as are registered Professors. But that is no matter. My last task was to stop by the infirmary to inform Pomfrey of what we’ve learned.”

Draco’s jaw dropped. “You aren’t serious. It’s not relevant, what happened on the Continent. She was cursed in Wales! And Pomfrey’s not in the . . . old crowd, was it?”

Snape was at the bedside in three long strides, his dark eyes sweeping over Narcissa from head to toe. She was on her back by then, panting lightly, a fine sheen of sweat beading on her forehead and wrists as she lay almost perfectly still. “I said nothing of that. But I thought to mention that your mother had invited me to read her thoughts.”

“Which you did,” said Draco, almost baring his teeth. “Against medical advice! For that werewolf!”

Harry clamped his mouth shut and dropped into a chair for good measure.

“And it’s as well I did,” retorted Snape, “since now, the medical advice has shifted.”

Draco stopped stroking his mother’s cheek and took her hand in his, carefully lacing their fingers together, even as his free hand flicked his wand to summon a handkerchief which he started using to dab at her damp brow. “And so?”

“I have Pomfrey’s blessing to use Legilimency again, and at greater length, but . . . not to force it on her.”

Sort of sickening that Pomfrey would have to add that, Harry thought. But considering Snape’s Death Eater past? Probably necessary.
And then, just like clockwork, it happened again, another headache suddenly blooming behind his eyes, the light in the room seeming to surge in intensity until it was almost blinding. Harry clenched his eyes shut and hissed in pain as he pushed his tongue up against the roof of his mouth, trying not to vomit.

Snape’s voice was grim. “We must find a way to get you beyond this.”

Draco’s own tone was lost. “What? Harry?” A scrape of a chair against the stone floor meant that the other boy had turned suddenly to look his way.

“Since that bludger, your brother reliably gets a headache whenever he starts to contemplate my rather storied past.”

“Storied past,” scoffed Harry, but with bitterness, not humour. “You could sound less nostalgic, Professor. That might help.”

“I am not nostalgic. Accio headache draught!”

“Summon some draught of Little Hammer,” moaned Harry. “This one’s bad, bad. I think I’d rather never feel my head again.”

Snape recast his spell and held the vial to Harry’s lips, whose teeth were chattering by then, though he wasn’t cold. “Yes, all of it.”

Strange how he could tell just from the man’s tone that he was staring at Harry with concern, and the swoosh of his robes against the stones meant he’d leant down, close. It was just like when he’d been in the Hospital Wing, blinded, and he’d learnt to decipher the smallest change in his surroundings from sound alone.

“I can remember being blind,” Harry said as the pain vanished clean away from his head. Along with what felt like his head, but at least he’d expected that this time. The words came out in a monotone, like he was upset by this development, when he wasn’t at all. It was pretty huge, really. But it didn’t feel huge to him. It just felt . . . distant. Probably the draught.

He opened his eyes and looked into Snape’s, which were even closer than he’d supposed. And full of questions. “Yeah,” said Harry, blinking a little. “I remember hearing everything instead of seeing it, but understanding maybe better that way. I remember being held. And held and held. And your voice was so soothing. And you said you didn’t hate me, not at all.”

Snape was the one who blinked, then. “Draco could not have told you that. Unless you had confided it to him at some point?”

“No,” said Draco in a low voice from Narcissa’s bedside.

“I’m remembering bits on my own sometimes--”

“If Harry’s headache is gone, can you two discuss this at some other time? Every time I look at my mother it seems like her breathing is even weaker.”

Snape nodded to Harry in a way that seemed to say later and then turned his attention to Draco. “Certainly. Additional Legilimency does pose some risk, I am informed, but given what has transpired thus far, it should be within the margin of safety.”

“Oh, that’s just comfort itself. Some risk is still risk, so I don’t think so, Severus. And I’m the one who should decide.” By the end, Draco’s voice was thrumming with determination.
“Then decide based on all we know,” said Snape calmly, banishing the damp, stained handkerchief Draco was clutching. “Your mother invited Legilimency and then tolerated it without incident. She was also able to offer up memories for us to Pensieve, more than once, which also speaks to her comfort level with mind magics, even ill as she is.”

“Then we’ll ask her to give us the memory of being cursed so we’ll know what to do!” shouted Draco. “Though why she didn’t do that first of all is a fucking damned good question!”

Narcissa shifted on the bed, but didn’t appear to wake.

“She clearly wanted Remus Lupin seen to before herself. And now we must see to her. And Draco, you know that Legilimency is the more reliable route. With a Pensieve we will only see what she can give us and not one moment more. With Legilimency I seek out answers from any point in time, should more be needed.”

“None of that will matter if she dies when you-- when you--”

“She won’t,” Harry suddenly announced. “I remember that too. Snape knows how to be really gentle when he’s entering your mind. It’s like drifting in the middle of this huge river of cool water. Except the water’s soft, like melted butter. But still cool. It’s hard to explain. But I was drunk at the time, so . . .” Harry shook his head. “You gave it to me. Muggle whiskey, I think. And then you’re surprised we thought it was all right to drink?”

Snape had a question of his own. “So you remember everything now?”

“No, it’s just flashes of this and that. Context seems to bring them up. Kind of like I said it would?”

Snape ignored that too and turned back to Draco. “What Harry is recalling was more properly Occlumency than Legilimency. But Draco, I do know how to be very, very gentle. You can trust me with your mother.”

“I trust you. But I still think that Legilimency is too dangerous. You might have to stay in her mind a while. What if her psyche can’t handle it?”

“Legilimency unlocks memory, not psyche,” Harry blurted. That one came to him without anything to explain it. But it was a memory, he was sure of that much. “And a pensieve shows me what I know I remember.”

“More things I told him last year,” murmured Snape. “But Harry is essentially correct. Legilimency can help me learn what has happened that your mother may not consciously recall. A tiny detail of the wand movement as she was cursed. The exact intonation of the incantation. Things that can make a crucial difference. And . . . I am sorry to put this to you so bluntly, Draco, but protecting her from Legilimency at the cost of her life is a fool’s bargain.”

Draco pressed his lips tightly together, shaking his head. But not to refuse, it turned out. “When she wakes, then. She has to agree and be prepared for it.”

Snape pulled him up into a brief embrace. “Yes. I know this is a difficult decision. I am proud of you, Draco.”

Draco Malfoy is a proud and intelligent young man . . .

Draco went stiff for a moment and then abruptly slumped, relaxing into the hug, his perfect posture collapsing completely as a low gasp parted his lips. “I . . . I . . . I . . .”
Harry had never thought of himself as particularly intuitive, but for some reason, it seemed so obvious what Draco was trying to say. And obvious why he couldn’t say it. “You love him too, you mean,” he prompted. “Go ahead. You can say it. Come on, it’s just three more words and he knows anyway.”

Draco jerked his head to the side to **glare**, but then he did say it. “I love you too, Severus.”

“Call him Dad,” said Harry. “Like you told me. Wait, sorry, that one came back jumbled. I think it was Dudley who told me--”

“Harry.” Snape waited until he had his attention. “Much as it gratifies me to see you remembering more, you might want to give some thought to considering the need for--”

“Pick your moments better,” Draco interrupted. “**Dad** and I were having one of our own, if you hadn’t noticed!”

“I noticed. Sorry. This is kind of new, so I’m not used to--” He stopped before he rambled on for five minutes. “Sorry. Have your moment.”

It seemed that the moment had passed, though. Draco awkwardly stepped away from Snape and resumed his vigil at his mother’s bedside. “It’s time to renew some of the charms Madame Pomfrey recommended, and she’d due for three more potions doses. I’m going to see to all that and then wait for her to wake. But she’s having some nourishment to get her strength up a bit before . . . I’ll let you know when. You two go and work on that headache thing. Or whatever.”

Snape hesitated slightly, but when Draco made a shooing motion, he strode from the room and Harry followed him out.

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They sat down in the living room, Harry taking the couch while Snape sank into a wingback chair, his fingers steepled in front of his face as he regarded Harry with dark, impenetrable eyes. He didn’t say anything, though, so Harry took the lead.

“Um, so memories.” Better that than talk about his aversion to Snape’s **storied** past. “After Draco started telling me things, I was remembering bits and pieces on my own, right up until the Yule Ball. After that, the past all seemed locked away until pretty recently. But these surges, they’re new. One memory after another, for not much reason? I mean, I’m not straining to remember, not even trying at all. Then some word or idea seems to trigger it, and bam! There it is.”

“Well, I can’t dose you daily. That draught isn’t even safe to take unless one has a splitting headache. I trust I am making myself clear?”

“Oh, the Little Hammer? You think that’s why?”

Snape winced.
“What?”

“Lillehammer, since you ask.”

Harry waved that away as unimportant. “It didn’t work like this when I took it before. When you told me about the chameleon?”

Snape rubbed the side of his nose with one long finger. “Perhaps it was too soon after Yule and whatever may have happened then to impede your progress. Or the content of our conversation may have precluded the memory flashes.”

*Traditional Yule decorations are based on plants . . .*

Harry ignored that flash as useless, even if he’d heard it in Snape’s voice.

He thought back to the conversation about the chameleon. Finding out exactly why his parents had died, and Snape’s role in it, and then learning those horrid things about the man’s childhood . . . maybe that had been so much to take in that there was no room for random flashes.

Or maybe it was something about the Yule Ball that was really the problem. “Seeing Remus looking like Malfoy, you think? My mind couldn’t handle it and backed off to keep from remembering, um—” He had to force the word out. “Needles?”

“*Conjure needles, my Lucius,*” Voldemort harshly whispered, *his hand stretched out like he was expecting to be worshipped.* "*The boy hates needles, as you well know.*"

Harry bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. He didn’t feel anything, though, not with the potion currently erasing his head.

“Another surge?”

“Yeah,” muttered Harry. “N- needles. I guess, I thought the n- needles were Malfoy’s idea. But now I can hear Voldemort telling him to conjure them. And *now* I can see you conjuring that whiskey you had me drink for that Occlumency lesson in Number 12, and *now* you’re yelling that I’m a fool and of course Lucius looks like he should when it’s my memories that made him. That one I don’t understand.”

Snape sighed. “We were arguing about whether you’d seen Lucius himself or a Polyjuiced imposter in a dream.”

Can’t *Polyjuice Potion mimic the signature?*

“*What the fuck* does Polyjuice have to do with signatures?” Harry exploded. “I’m getting pretty sick of this! It’s fucked up, all these memories slamming into me just because somebody said a bloody word!”

*I expect you’ll know the answer to that once your memories are back in place . . .*

“It must be frustrating—”

Harry almost bared his teeth. “You *think?* And did I have amnesia last year too? Because you just bloody well said inside my head that I’d know something once my memories were back in place!”

“I said that after you had provided me with memories to view in a Pensieve.”

*But the picture you’ve built up since looking in that Pensieve? It’s not a good one . . .*
“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Harry shouted. When he heard Narcissa’s door slam closed, he somehow forced himself to calm. “Sorry. I don’t mean you.”

“Not present me, at any rate.”

“Well, hearing past you in my head, that’s not your fault. Though it was your potion.”

“Which brings us back to your headache issue,” Snape observed.

“Oh, fucking great,” groaned Harry. “I get to choose! Feel my brain explode, or drown in one random memory after another. I mean, I know I wanted to remember, but I’m going to end up a total nutter if this keeps on!”

*Are you a nutter? Lucius Malfoy doesn't wear jeans . . .*

Hearing Ron in his mind was a change, but the comment was so weird that Harry just hung his head, wishing that it had vanished completely instead of only feeling like it had.

“In the alternate, we could strive to ensure the headaches themselves cease.”

Yeah, that didn’t seem too likely.

“Or you could research the *Lillehammer* to find out why it’s triggering these surges, and make a formulation that can help me remember without it being so . . . so scattered and random?”

“I could try,” acknowledged Snape. “But I doubt the resulting potion would be safe to take unless you actually did have a headache.”

“ Fucking hell!”

Snape sighed as he bent forward to lean his elbows on his knees to meet Harry’s gaze. “This is your home, yes, and how you speak is of very slight importance compared to other matters. But Harry? I would appreciate it if you would moderate your language.”

He was right, it was totally fucking unimportant. But then again, it was Snape’s home too. “Yeah, all right,” he mumbled, his gaze sliding away. Probably a bad habit anyway. He might get kicked straight out of Auror training.

*He did the work of an Auror, though he refused all pay . . .*

“I will look into your idea for the draught,” Snape assured him. “In the meantime, can we try to address the root cause of your headaches?”

“I’d really rather not,” said Harry dryly. “I’m pretty sure the headaches themselves are proof of that.”

“But it is not so very Gryffindor to run from your troubles, is it?”

Considering that Snape had insulted Gryffindor in Harry’s presence at least ten million times, Harry was about to let fly with a few choice words, *fuck* among them. Thankfully, Snape’s voice in his head stopped him before he could get started.

*My own son, whom I chose to be my son, is a Gryffindor.*

“Funny how you want me to be a Gryffindor when it’s convenient,” he said instead.
“You’ll always be a Gryffindor,” replied Snape in a level tone. “Which is not to say that you have no Slytherin tendencies, Harry. Very few of us embody the traits of one house exclusively.”

Harry didn’t reply.

“Are you willing to address the cause of your headaches with me, Harry?”

He didn’t want to, but better now than without the potion, he supposed. Maybe it was even good that the flashes kept distracting him. “Fine, whatever. So I don’t like to think of you being a Death Eater. Is that such a huge fucking surprise?”

Snape didn’t comment on the profanity. “Of course it isn’t. But previously, it didn’t bother you to this extent.”

“Maybe it did. I mean . . .” Harry cleared his throat. “It’s pretty clear to me that the way you’d talk about Gryffindor bothered me loads me last year. But I decided not to make a fuss. Seems like I was afraid of losing what I had, something like that. This could easily be the same thing. Assume I was always on edge about you having followed Voldemort. And now, my brain is making sure I don’t just push my feelings to the side.”

“I can’t change what I was,” said Snape bleakly. “Or what I did. Or what it made me.”

“And I can’t help if it gives me a headache, and I can’t take the Lillehammer if it’s going to drive me spare.”

Don’t feel you must spare my feelings, Harry . . .

Well, he wasn’t doing too much of that. Not any longer, anyway.

“There’s nothing to be done,” Harry said, every bit as bleakly. “Bit ironic that I can’t just forget you were once a Death Eater. But, um, you and Draco could try not to refer to it, I suppose. And I can try not to bring it to mind.”

“I am not at all certain that pretending the past never happened is the best way,” murmured Snape, his lank hair swaying like a dark curtain of denial as he shook his head. “And it may well not be possible, Harry. Quite often, the more one tries not to think of something, the more such thoughts recur.”

“Well then, I’m sure I don’t know what we’re going to do!”

“I think perhaps the opposite. Conversation instead of silence. So you can . . . integrate past-and-present-Severus-Snape into a single wizard inside your mind. Eventually.”

“While I scream with headache pain the whole time? Or listen to phantom voices every five seconds?”

“I’m sure I don’t know what else to do, Harry,” Snape said, echoing his wording.

Harry didn’t care if his tone was vicious. “And there I thought you were supposed to be so clever! If you are, you’ll think of something better!”

The slight noise of a throat being cleared cut off whatever Snape might have replied.

“I know I’m interrupting,” said Draco quietly from the edge of the room. “But, my mother’s awake. And . . . ready, I think. She’s had some food, and the juice, and her midday potions, and
I’ve explained, and she’s . . . ready,” he said again.

Snape looked once more at Harry as he rose smoothly to his feet. “I will think on the matter, Harry. You have my solemn word.”

Harry gave a sharp nod. “Thank you. I know you have to . . .” He waved a vague hand. “I’ll stay here, I think.”

“No, please come,” urged Draco, coming forward more to clasp his hand so he could pull him off the sofa. “Please, Harry. I need us all there. We’re a family!”

*We are a family, gentlemen.*

“I can’t be any help to Snape with Legilimency--”

“You can be there for me.”

*We are a family, gentlemen.*

Crap. Because they were. “Fine,” said Harry, letting Draco drag him to his feet.

*We are a family, gentlemen.*

“Fine, *fine!*” Harry gave up and screamed directly at the voice. “We’re a fucking family!”

He saw Draco and Snape exchange a worried glance, but ignored that. Head held high, he led the way as he strode back toward Narcissa Malfoy’s room.

“*Yes,*” said Narcissa, the word one long, slow slur. She was propped up on pillows, with Draco more-or-less beside her as he helped support her in a loose embrace. Snape was sitting on the edge of the bed on the other side, positioned so that just by leaning forward he would be able to gaze deeply into her eyes.

“It will feel odd, but try to stay relaxed,” advised Snape. “But don’t try to remember that you want me to do this. Instead, focus on the one memory, or possibly two, that will best help us understand your curse. That’s all we want, Cissa. The information that could lead us to a countercurse.”

She gave a dazed nod, her blue eyes already locked to Snape’s dark ones.

Snape leaned forward and stared at her even harder. Draco began cradling her closer, not holding her tightly or restraining her in any way, but trying to help her feel safe. Protected. Loved.

From his position in the corner, Harry shivered. Not from what he was seeing, but from the voices in his head. They seemed to be coming faster all the time.

*Aran’s odd desire for a conference with Lucius instead of myself . . . Keep your focus. Centre*
yourself in the fire... That won't produce a teacher fully trained against the Dark Arts, there to safeguard you when the next hex or curse comes your way... Information he's passed to Albus Dumbledore about You-Know-Who's activities, for example. Specific information...

It was just as well that Legilimency was a silent business.

But of course, it couldn’t last forever. It didn’t even last very long, since Snape was intent on minimizing the chance of worsening Narcissa’s condition. And no wonder. If she ended up dying because Snape had persuaded Draco to allow the Legilimency... Harry shivered again.

Snape sat back and rubbed his temples, groaning a little, his eyes finally closing.

Draco remained where he was, though now he was stroking his mother’s shoulders and gradually easing her down into a better position for sleeping. She was still conscious though, her eyes glittering brightly as though with fever as she raised a fluttering hand before letting it fall to the sheets with a soft thud.

“It’s all right, Narcissa,” rasped Snape, his voice so rough that Harry had to wonder if Legilimency was far more difficult when done gently. That might explain some things about his Occlumency lessons back in fifth year--

*I would like to believe that my own Occlumency is skilled enough that the Dark Lord never sees the image I use to withstand him...*

Occlumency!

Harry had to wonder why he hadn’t thought of that earlier. Maybe because he already did Occlude all the time; he didn’t even notice doing it any longer. Or more likely, because all the memories surging forth were just so damned distracting that he could barely follow a conversation, let alone figure anything out.

But he tried now, clenching his eyes shut and drawing hard on his mental fire, sort of shoving it at what felt like the bottom left-hand area of his mind, where the surges seemed to come from. He tried to wall them off, and when the next one still oozed through, he doubled the wall. Then tripled it.

And then inside his head, there were no more voices.

But there were some outside his skull, he abruptly realised. Two.

“Harry? Harry!”

Oh, and somebody was shaking him. Pretty violently. Strange that he hadn’t noticed.

He opened his eyes, wincing a bit at the light, but that was just instinctive. He didn’t have a headache. Still couldn’t feel his head, in fact. “Yeah, I’m all right. If you could stop shouting, though? Yeah. Thanks.”

“What sent you into a trance?” asked Severus.

“Just me. I was adjusting my Occlumency to block out my stupid memories.” Wait, that sounded daft. He wanted to remember, after all. “Well, they were like bats in the belfry. I had to do something.”

He glanced from Draco to Snape, but neither one looked like they quite knew what to say in reply.
Snape shifted from foot to foot, restless instead of still, which Harry could only think meant he was deeply troubled.

“Um, how did the Legilimency go? Is your mum doing all right?”

“No, but she wasn’t before, either,” said Draco, slouching with dismay as he stood there. “And now she’s probably even more exhausted. She drifted off straight away.”

“And?” Harry turned to Snape. “Did you find out anything useful?”

“You missed every word Severus said?”

“It is no matter,” announced Snape. “Draco, cast a signal charm to alert you if your mother stirs, then join us.”

A moment later, all three of them were choosing seats in the living room. Harry avoided the couch this time, and so did Draco. Snape gave them a wry glance, but then he took the hint and lowered himself to the sofa instead of a chair.

“Lie down all the way, Severus,” urged Draco. “I know that wasn’t easy, being so careful.”

Another wry glance, this one accompanied by twisted lips. “Would one of you pour me a measure of Galliano? I think I could do with something to bolster me.”

“I’d love to,” said Draco promptly, sounding oddly cheered about it.

Snape growled, low in his throat. “And no, you and your brother may not help yourselves to my liqueurs or anything else, not after the insane stunt you both—”

“I wouldn’t even dream of asking,” Draco murmured, cheek in every word. “I was just going to mention that it’s warded, so I’ll need the password.”

“Why, you—”

“No, don’t get up,” Harry said. “Just tell him the password. He’s not going to abuse your trust right after you exhausted yourself helping your mother! And I won’t either,” he quickly added.

“Fine,” snapped Snape, a quick flick of his wrist tossing his wand to Draco. “It won’t open to yours, and I’m in no mood to cast anything unnecessary. Pipsissewa.”

“Wouldn’t have been one of my first ten guesses,” murmured Draco. He had the cabinet open in a flash and was pouring out what looked like a very generous measure of liquor to Harry. But he’d splashed it around liberally at their tea party, too, he supposed.

Instead of taking the drink to Snape, he handed it off to Harry to deliver. And then he waited until the man had downed three healthy swallows before asking, “Pipsissewa? What does that mean?”

A dull flush of colour rose up Snape’s pallid face to reach his cheekbones. “None of your sodding business!”

“Touchy, touchy.”

“Shut up!”

“Jesus, Draco, give it a rest,” said Harry. “He’s not in the mood.”
Snape was in some kind of mood, though, because he decided to needle Draco. “Thank you, Harry,” he said, his voice almost oozing with affection. Once, Harry wouldn’t even had recognized that tone as Snape’s at all, it was so loving. “Very considerate. You are such a good son.”

“I’m going to assume that’s the liquor talking,” said Draco stiffly.

Harry was going to assume that *pipsissewa* was highly personal. Oh, God. Maybe it had something to do with the awful things Severus had let slip about his childhood. That didn’t seem too likely though. Why would he want a reminder?

“Don’t ask about that password again! I’ve had enough of you crossing lines and ignoring my clear requests to let a matter drop!”

“You should give it a rest now, too.” Harry gestured toward Snape’s tumbler, which was empty by then. “More?”

“No.” Snape had levered himself up to drink, but now he reclined fully, even putting his feet on the sofa as Draco had said, though he toed his shoes off first. Harry tried hard not to stare. He really shouldn’t. They were a family, and this was their home. But he just couldn’t recall ever seeing Snape behave so casually. He hadn’t even asked for his wand back.

“Narcissa pushed two memories at me. Rather haphazardly, so it was a strain to sort them out. Due to her weakened state, I suppose. But what I understand from her is this: Voldemort did not curse her. He was there, but it was Bellatrix who cast the spell.”

“Which spell?” asked Harry. Why didn’t Draco seem more excited? If they knew the curse, they were probably at least 80% of the way to finding the counter!

“She cast it wordlessly. I feel sure I could accurately recreate the wand motion, but that foul harridan’s lips never so much as twitched.”

“Harridan, ha,” spat Draco. “Bitch, is more like it. Doing this to my mother! Her own sister! Her own pregnant sister! With a baby on the way! A pureblooded baby!”

“I thought you didn’t--”

“Oh, shut the fuck up for once in your stupid life, Potter! I don’t care! But dear Aunt Bella certainly should! What kind of pureblood fanatic thinks it’s a good idea to kill off a Malfoy mother and child in one fell swoop? When any idiot can see that the pureblooded population’s been in serious decline for generations, now?”

“The kind obsessed with Voldemort,” said Snape. “She is almost certainly already his lover.”

Ewww. “That’s gross,” gasped Harry. “I’m never going to be able to get that image out of my mind, I hope you know. And, oh God, it’s really disgusting, and I can’t help but imagine Nagini slithering around them as they-- Wait, wait, maybe I can Occlude this bit away too--”

“Stop that!” Snape must have really meant it, too. He actually hurled his empty glass across the room, the tumbler crashing into the opposite wall and splintering into a thousand pieces. It got Harry’s attention much more than words could have. “You cannot use Occlumency to erase every stray thought you’d prefer to avoid, Harry! You simply cannot!”

“I wasn’t going to!”

“You’re falling into the pattern right before my very eyes,” snarled Snape, before drawing in a deep
breath and speaking more moderately. “Dealing with your potion-induced memory surges that way is acceptable for now. But you must resist the impulse to push every uncomfortable image beneath a mental fire. Occlumency is meant to protect your mind from outside invasion, not from itself.”

“Dangerous?”

Snape’s fingers curled into claws as his mouth became a rictus of worry. “Have I not just said as much?”

He hadn’t, but Harry got the point. “All right.” He needed something different to think about, though. That was certain. “And the second memory?”

“Cousin Sirius,” said Draco.

“Really?” Harry furrowed his brow.

“He and Narcissa were taking tea in the library at Grimmauld Place. They were both much younger; Black looked to be in his first year, or possibly his second,” explained Snape. “Narcissa seemed to be in her fifth year at least. He could hardly get a word in edgewise because she kept prattling on about Lucius and how perfectly wonderful it would be to marry him. And he replied that any wizard would be better than a Black.” Snape shrugged. “That was all she pushed toward me. I searched further, but desisted when I sensed her health begin to falter even more.”

“Why would Sirius mention his family?” Harry asked Draco. “Your mother couldn’t have married a Black anyway. Well, maybe a distant enough relative wouldn’t be incest, but still . . .”

Draco lifted his shoulders. “Well, Sirius’ own parents were second cousins. There’s a lot of that sort of thing in the Black family tree.”

“Yeah, I remember the tapestry,” murmured Harry. “It’s strange that she would point us to Sirius, though. It’s not like she would realize we have a way to talk with him. Unless she’s just guessing that he ended up here as a ghost?”

“She may have been pointing us to specific information, rather than to Sirius himself.”

“What information, though? That it was good she didn’t marry into her own family?” Harry sighed. “Well, thank God we can ask Sirius. Maybe he’ll know why she thought that conversation could be a clue to the wasting curse.”

Snape sat up in one smooth motion and tried to draw his wand, but then fished about for his shoes instead. “We may know that already. Narcissa was intent on bringing our attention to her Black heritage, so Draco and I think the curse is bloodline linked. Most likely, only someone legitimately named Black can cast it.”

“Or undo it!” exclaimed Harry. “Could Sirius?”

“Not from beyond the Veil. But he may at least know the countercurse.”

“Draco can do it, then.” Harry nodded. “I remember you told me your adoption name. Some huge long thing. It’s still got Black in it, doesn’t it?”

Draco crumpled right before Harry’s eyes, even though he remained standing upright. “I never had that to start with. But I could have added it and I didn’t, because I’m an imbecile! What the fuck is wrong with me? *Draco Alain Gervais Malfy Snape*, there’s plenty of room for a Black in there! I’ve got ancestors with ten or twelve names, five is nothing! And now my mother’s going to die a
horrible death and it’s all my fault, every last stinking bit!”

“You didn’t curse her, Draco!” exclaimed Harry, rushing across the room to grab his brother’s arm.

“You didn’t Avada Sirius into the Veil, Harry,” Draco sniped right back.

“Yeah, I didn’t. That was Bellatrix. This is Bellatrix,” retorted Harry. It was strange, how quick he was to get the point this time. He still felt guilty about being stupid enough to rush off to the Ministry that night, but for maybe the first time since it had happened, he didn’t feel like he’d literally killed Sirius.

“That was Bellatrix,” he said again, this time in a tone more like wonder. “Oh, my God. Bellatrix killed him. Bellatrix killed him. I... You know, I don’t think I really quite grasped that before now. Not where it counted.”

Severus rested a hand atop his shoulder. “It’s good to see you lay down one of your burdens, Harry. Very good. Try to leave it where it lies. Don’t pick it up again.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll try. I mean, I will. I think I can... it helps that Sirius seems so content. And that he never blamed me.” He turned back to his brother, then. “It’s not your fault in any case, Draco. But you can still be the one to save her. Just change your name again.”

“Weren’t you listening? When a spell is bloodline linked you have to legitimately bear the right name! You can’t just sign a paper! The magic has to really believe you are, Harry!”

“But you are! You’re half Black!”

“I’m a Black without the name!”

“So we’ll find some other Black—”

“In the right degree of affinity? Aunt Andromeda gave up the Black name when she married. Tonks is like me and never had it! But fucking Aunt Bella, she must have kept it, even though she added Lestrange onto the end!”

Harry was just trying to help, but he was doing the opposite. His suggestions were making Draco grow more and more hysterical. Fortunately, Snape had a much better idea.

“We know almost nothing about this spell, and absolutely nothing about the counter,” he said, sharply cutting across their argument. “All we really have are assumptions. It’s time we followed the one clue Narcissa was able to give us. Harry, fetch your broken mirror. Draco, summon some of Harry’s ribbon candies. Oh, and give me back my wand.”

A moment later, the three of them were headed down the corridor to the chamber where the Mirror of All Souls awaited them.
“Sirius,” said Harry warmly as his godfather’s friendly form swam into view.

“Parseltongue,” laughed Sirius, shaking his head.

Well, they were used to that. Harry had lost count of the number of times he’d sat and chatted with Sirius since he’d got the mirror working on Christmas. Sirius would usually regale him with amusing tales of his parents at Hogwarts while they waited for Harry’s English to return. And then they’d talk, sometimes for hours.

But this time would be different. Harry shook his head and stepped to one side, beckoning Snape and Draco to come closer, trying to gesture to Sirius that one of them needed to take over the conversation.

“Cousin Sirius,” said Draco rather formally, slicking back his hair as though he were nervous. “I do hope the hereafter finds you well. We are in difficult straits and were rather hoping you could lend us your invaluable assistance.”

Sirius’ teeth glinted as he flashed a grin. “Be happy to, Cousin Draco, just as soon as you yank that broomstick from your arse.”

Draco blinked. “What?”

“Stop talking like a hundred-and-fifty-year-old!”

“Fine,” said Draco, huffing a little, his hands clenching just before her shoved them into his trouser pockets. “My mother’s taken a curse. We need to undo it, and we think you might know how.”

“She always was too good for that Death Eater she married,” snarled Sirius. “Though I’m sure I don’t know why you think I’d be the best person to ask! Wouldn’t you know more about the spells your father tends to use?” He glanced at Snape, then. “His other father. You know who I mean.”

Snape merely inclined his head in answer.

“Oh, no, no, Lucius has nothing to do with this,” Draco rushed to explain. “It was Aunt Bellatrix who cursed her. With Black family magic, we think. Something bloodline linked.”

“That hardly narrows it down. Which curse did Bella use?”

“We were hoping you could tell us,” said Snape, moving to stand closer to Draco. “Narcissa is too weak to say much, but she shared her memory of the spell being cast. Bellatrix moved her wand thus . . .” Snape executed a series of spirals, each one larger than the last. “There was no spoken incantation.”


“So you know of it,” said Draco, his voice lilting with hope. “We know it’s going to be a bit tricky finding a Black to cast the counter, but--”

“Draco,” interrupted Sirius, something absolutely awful in his tone. Something final. “The only person who could counter a Withering Witch cast against Narcissa would be her husband. But the truth is, Lucius simply isn’t black enough.”

“Lucius wasn’t a Black at all. You aren’t making sense,” complained Draco.
“He doesn’t need to be named Black, he just needs to be black. Black-hearted, that is. Dark.”

Sighing, Sirius started over. “The Withering Witch was invented by my family, true. But it isn’t bloodline-linked. It couldn’t be literally bonded to the bloodline because the countercurse needed to be marriage-linked. Those two don’t mix well.”

Draco nodded. “Right. That makes sense.”

Maybe to someone with an intuitive grasp of magic, thought Harry. He didn’t think he could speak English yet, though, so he raised both his hands in the air, a little outstretched, as he widened his eyes, trying to communicate confusion.

Snape got it, at least. “Explain in more detail, Black. Harry didn’t grow up immersed in our culture.”

Sirius pursed his lips briefly. “And he knows I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s all right—” Nope, still Parseltongue. He could tell from the way all three wizards were looking at him.

“So, marriage-linking,” said Sirius, briskly that time. “If a woman’s been cursed with the Withering Witch, only her husband can cast the counter. That’s the whole point. It’s been used for centuries in my family to force women into marriage. The curse will eat away at a witch’s magic and life force until she dies, and the only way to stop it is for her to marry the Black asking for her hand. And no matter how much he loves her, he can only counter the curse after she’s been bonded to him for life.”

That was completely sick, thought Harry. Evil, even--

“That’s . . . that’s sick,” breathed Draco. “That’s evil.”

Harry almost snorted but managed to stop the noise in time.

“From start to finish,” agreed Sirius, grimacing. “That’s why the curse takes a long while to kill, so the witch has every chance to change her mind and give in. It’s also why anyone black enough can cast the curse, but the counter it can only come from the wand of a bonded-for-life husband.”

“So a relative can curse the woman even if the man who wants her won’t do it.” Draco yanked his hands out of his pockets and started wringing them together instead. “And fucking Aunt Bella knew, she knew when she cast against my mother that she didn’t even have a husband any longer! She knew it was a slow death sentence and she did it anyway!”

“Draco!” snapped Severus. “Discretion!”

Draco suddenly gulped, then immediately tried to backtrack. “Oh, um . . . yeah. Impulse control?” he offered feebly. “But look, Dad--”

“Oh, it’s Dad when you’re trying to wheedle your way around me,” scathed Severus. “You should not have said such a thing!”

Draco managed to rally a bit. “But Sirius was in the Order both times around so it ought to be fine if he knows . . . right?”

“Don’t act like you’re the one with amnesia!” barked Snape. “We discussed this very point. He’s not in the Order any longer! And beyond the Veil, Obliviate isn’t even an option!”
Sirius was ignoring their squabbling. His dark eyebrows drawn tightly together, his forehead furrowing, he was working through Draco’s words on his own. “I remember Narcissa’s wedding. She was bonded for life. She wouldn’t hear of using one of the lesser bindings. She thought Lucius was her very own Slytherin prince. So if she doesn’t have a husband any longer, she can’t possibly be divorced, and that can only mean . . .”

“Yes, Black,” said Snape in a tone that was supposed to come off as bored, Harry felt certain. It missed the mark, though, and mostly just sounded petulant. “Lucius Malfoy is dead. Pray do us the courtesy of keeping that information to yourself no matter whom you might encounter in the afterlife. I would ask that you not even inform Harry’s parents.”

“I can keep a secret.” Sirius snorted. “Harry’s life would have been considerably better if I’d been less able to. But I’ll keep this one, Snape. You can bet your greasy hair on it.” He raised an eyebrow, then, leaning in closer to the shining surface of the mirror. “Though it’s not so very greasy just now, is it? Finally found out about shampoo?”

“That’s enough, Sirius,” said Harry, a bit disgusted that the man would resort to stupid insults now, when Draco was frantic over his dying mother. From the looks he got in response, he could tell his English was finally back. “So do you know the countercurse?”

Sirius bared his teeth. “Of course I know it, Harry. I’m a Black. But I wouldn’t be able to cast it--”

“Right, right,” said Harry, feeling cheered for the first time in hours. “We’ll get somebody on this side of the Veil to do it. Somebody who’s not her cousin! All they have to do is marry Narcissa first, right? You can teach the counter to Draco and he can teach it to . . . well, I’m sure we can find somebody--”

“You’d have to get a wizard black enough,” snapped Sirius. “And you won’t find one, because--”

All at once he stepped back from the mirror’s surface, and then back again, almost receding into the darkness the lurked deep beyond the frame.

“Sirius!” shouted Harry. “Come back! Don’t leave, I only had two shards left when I called you tonight, and now I’ve only got one--”

Sirius’ hazy form went still for a long moment, and then he slowly stepped forward again, until Harry could see him clearly. But he stood there silently, his gaze drifting from Draco to Snape.

“Could you explain now?” asked Harry. “Who do we have to get?”

“You aren’t going to like it,” he warned. “Especially not you.”

He was looking at Snape as he said it.

“Somebody really black, you said,” prompted Harry. “You meant dark that time, right? It wasn’t a name?”

“Dark, yes.” Sirius lapsed into thought for a moment. “The Blacks couldn’t link the curse to their name, but they did want to keep it to themselves. And being paranoid bastards, they weren’t about to rely on secrecy alone. Anybody who ever wanted to cast or counter it had to prove that they truly were black at heart. So the spell was forged in the first place with a . . . a ceremonial requirement.”

A chair suddenly appeared behind him. Sirius sank down into it, resting his elbows on his knees and peering out at Harry with eyes that somehow looked old, sad, and wise, all at once. “Haven’t
you ever wondered why I ran away from home?"

“Your family, they were Dark wizards and they’d wanted you in Slytherin--”

“Exactly why?"

“I was always sure you had perfectly good reasons, Sirius.”

“Ha. Yes, I did.” The man in the mirror drew in a long breath. “I was tired of being harassed every holiday. They wanted to be sure I would participate in the traditional Black ceremony when I turned seventeen. Black ceremony, indeed,” he said, a bitter laugh breaking across the last word. “Every Black wizard was expected to embrace it, though it was optional for witches. Narcissa didn’t have to do it. Andromeda refused to do it. Bellatrix, of course, could hardly wait. ‘Can I have a child?’ she used to ask. She would actually rub her hands together at the prospect. ‘Can I have a baby?’” Sirius shuddered, his head dropping down until it was practically level with his knees.

“I don’t understand, Sirius,” said Harry softly, scooting right up to the mirror and dropping to his knees to get as close as he could to the man. He played a hand against the surface, trying to rest it on Sirius’ knee. But of course all he felt was the smooth glass surface, threaded through with tingles of magic.

“You don’t,” returned Sirius softly. “You can’t. I know your life with the Muggles wasn’t good, Harry. But . . . wizarding culture isn’t always something worth having, either.”

“Obviously it was evil, this ceremony,” said Draco when Harry had no reply. “But my mother’s facing certain death, and her unborn baby along with her, Sirius. She’s eight months along! So if the choice is between marriage, even with someone horribly dark, or the both of them lying dead in the ground . . . tell us!”

Sirius looked up, a strange grin twisting his features. “Oh, it’s not so very bad, Draco. Not for you, and probably not even for her, all things considered. You might even really like the idea.”

“What? Like the idea of my mother bonding for life with some sick fuck that does things evil enough to put him in Aunt Bella’s league?”

“Yes,” said Sirius, still with that twisted grin. “Well, here it is, then. The Black family ceremony, the one that enables a husband to counter the Withering Witch. It can only take place at your coming-of-age, when your magic first reaches its full adult peak. But what you have to do is actually very simple. It’s just murder, Draco, and it doesn’t matter who. A wizard, a witch, a Muggle, an adult, a child, anyone. Why, you could even kill . . .”

He sat up in the chair and lifted his chin to look straight at Snape, his voice dropping into soft accusation. “Your own father.”

Draco stared in apparent incomprehension for a long moment, and then covered his mouth with one hand as he turned around to face Snape.

“There’s no requirement for an Avada, either,” Sirius went on, relentless. “It doesn’t matter how you killed him, Snape, it only matters when. And you marvel that I kept on hating you, even after you were in the Order and James seemed to think you’d turned out all right? But I knew better. Regulus made sure I knew. You were more a Black than I could ever be. What I rejected as too depraved for words, you actually embraced.”

Snape stood through all that stone-faced, his black eyes like chips of obsidian. And when he finally
spoke, it was without emotion, almost without any inflection at all.

“You . . . are . . . lying . . .”

“Would you like me to be?” Sirius stood up and raised both his shoulders in a shrug. “But then
she’d die. And young Draco here would probably rather follow her than stay your son.”

Snape shifted on his feet, just slightly, his features twisting into a sneer. “It’s too convenient. The
Black family ceremony just happens to be the very thing Voldemort inflicted on me upon my own
coming-of-age? You cannot expect me to believe in such a coincidence!”

Sirius shook his head. “What happened to that brilliant analytical mind of yours, Snape? Does it
only work for potions and spycraft? It’s not a coincidence at all! Regulus had already joined the
Death Eaters. Not yet seventeen, but so intent on impressing his ‘Dark Lord’ with his
qualifications. He told him all the Black family lore and begged him to attend his own coming-of-
age. And what did Voldemort say in reply? Only that it was a lovely tradition, and it would be ideal
for your seventeenth birthday, for he had already planned to mark you then, so of course a death
would be necessary—”

Sirius abruptly drew in a long breath and blew it out through his nostrils so fiercely that they flared.
“I’m not lying, Snape. You’re probably the only wizard alive who can save Narcissa from the
Withering Witch. But to do that, you’re going to have to get married. A real marriage, too. In every
sense of the word.”

Draco almost choked, his face flaming a red so bright that his hair looked like ghostly wisps
alongside it. “Married,” he repeated, the word sounding almost like a vow as he stared up at Snape
like the man was his only hope.

But of course, Snape was exactly that.

“Bonded,” added Draco, still in that same hushed, reverent tone. “For . . . for life.”
Impulse Control

Chapter Notes

My beta, Maple in the Moonlight is the *best*! So great to have someone who’ll talk for hours about what’s going on with our boys, and who can spot the obvious things I’ve missed!

Snape stared down at Draco for a moment that seemed to stretch out into eternity, then suddenly whirled on a heel and strode out, his robes billowing behind him like great black storm clouds.

Draco lunged as though to follow him, but was caught short as Harry lunged too, grabbing him by both arms before he could get far. Thankfully, the move hadn't taken them out of the mirror's field of view.

"Sirius," gasped Harry as he grappled with Draco, who was struggling and cursing and trying to go for his wand. "Good, you're still here--"

"Calm down, Draco!" shouted the man in the mirror. Of course that didn't help matters. But Sirius' next words did. "You won't save your mother this way!"

Draco went still in Harry's grasp, before slowly shifting toward the image of Sirius.

"I can see it in your eyes," said Sirius, so close to the mirror's surface by then that it looked like he could simply step through and join them. "You're frantic. You'll do anything, anything, to get Snape to marry your mother. You'd even force him at wandpoint if you could manage it."


"Of course you would," said Sirius soothingly, a tall glass of water appearing in his hand as he shot a glance at Harry. Nodding that he'd got the message, Harry let go of Draco and quickly conjured one of his own and handed it to Draco, who began sipping at it even as he stared over the rim, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the mirror.

"You love your mother," Sirius was continuing, still in that soothing tone. "But it's because you love her that you must control yourself, now. Remember what I said. This has to be a true marriage, or Snape won't be able to counter to the Withering Witch."

A dull red wash of colour tinted Draco's cheeks.

"There's more to marriage than that," said Sirius, lips twisting wryly. "I'm talking about his vows. Snape has to commit himself, Draco. If he goes into this because you've badgered him until he feels coerced, he might emerged married to your mother yet unable to cast the magic needed to end the curse."

Apparently it was just fine to coerce the woman, thought Harry, grimacing. But like Sirius had said, that was the whole point of the wretched spell. "It's like you told me about bloodline curses," he said to Draco after a moment. "Remember? The magic has to believe that somebody has the right name, that it's not being tricked? Well in this case the magic has to really believe that Severus means his vows."
Sirius nodded. "And that will only happen if Snape comes to this decision on his own."

Draco's legs almost buckled. Harry saved him from falling by quickly shoving a chair behind him, knocking it into the back of his knees. He'd drunk half his water by then, but he still sloshed some out of the glass as he stumbled, falling into the chair. "But . . . he can't. He . . . won't. He's in love with somebody else."

Sirius raised one eyebrow, arching it so high that his forehead became a mass of wrinkles. "Snivellus is in love?"

"Sirius!" barked Harry.

"Sorry. Habit."

Harry could think of a few choice things to say about that. Like how he knew how awful it was to be bullied and how he hated the thought that anybody he admired had once been just like Dudley. Or how being fifteen and an idiot wasn't an excuse when you were pushing forty, even if you were dead! But there were more important matters to focus on, so he shoved his discomfort back behind the mental fire at the lower left edge of his mind.

"Yes, he's in love," moaned Draco. "He's actually engaged, Sirius! And the pledging stone turned a deep gorgeous crimson, it did! You know what that means, there's not a snowball's chance in Hades that Severus is going be willing to abandon his one true love and--"

Draco suddenly surged to his feet. "Wait, wait-- You said this spell wasn't linked to the Black family like one would expect from a curse of this sort. The family magic can't keep it going in that case, so really, all we have to do is kill fucking Aunt Bella!"

Harry swallowed hard, a riot of conflicting emotions warring inside him. Longing, for one. How many times had he wanted to end Bellatrix LeStrange, once and for all? Too many to count. But Draco's words were also causing an icy hand to clutch his heart. He didn't want his brother to murder his own relatives, even if Bellatrix was the worst sort of witch imaginable. Even if the war might make her death inevitable in any case.

He didn't want Draco to be the one to kill her.

"How would we even find her in time?" Harry asked instead of going into all that. "Sure, she's probably wherever Voldemort is, but we've lost our only way to know where he might be--"

"It wouldn't matter," said Sirius, sighing. "My ancestors were as evil as the night is long, but they weren't idiots. The Withering Witch wouldn't be very effective if to end it, a woman's relatives merely had to massacre any likely Blacks until they killed the one that had cast the curse. Starting with the proposed groom, of course. That would hardly result in the desired marriage."

"Fuck!" screamed Draco. "It's not even tethered to Aunt Bella any longer, is it? It's latched onto my mother's own magic! It's blackest magic, a vampiric spell! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

A slow, silent nod from Sirius.

"Vampiric?"

Sirius turned to look at Harry. "The spell at this point is powered by Narcissa's own magic and her life-force. The more it drains her, the stronger it becomes. That's why it takes months to reach the final stages. Making it a vampiric spell served a dual purpose for my ancestors. Not only did it help protect them from outraged relatives, it provided plenty of time for the witch to agree to the
Something was wrong with that explanation, thought Harry. "Draco's mother looks like she doesn't have long at all, Sirius. But she wasn't cursed months ago! It's only been a matter of weeks since she was nabbed by Voldemort!"

Sirius lapsed into thought, his head cocked to one side. "Hmm, that’s quite odd. Then again, Draco did mention that she’s with child. So the spell has had two life-forces to feed from. Perhaps that has accelerated its usual course. Two magical cores--"

Draco started hyperventilating. "My precious little baby brother-or-sister's going to be born a squib!"

That time, Harry managed not to remind him that he wasn't supposed to care about such things.

"I'm going to kill fucking Aunt Bella even if it can’t help my mum!" roared Draco. "Just see if I don't! Merlin's blood, there's nothing worse you can do to a wizard than rob him of his magic, and to do it to a helpless wee one! On purpose! You said she used to ask for a baby to kill, I bet she thought that this would be the next best thing--"

"She did kill a baby at her coming-of-age," said Sirius dryly. "She's insane, Draco. And if you go anywhere near her with wand drawn, you'll end up just as dead as that poor infant. No offense, but you simply aren't her match."

"And you shouldn't want to be," added Harry. "What did you tell the D.A.? We aren't here to learn to wield the Dark Arts."

"The spell could also be moving faster than usual because your mother's magic is trying to shield the baby," added Sirius. "So she's being drained by both the spell and her pregnancy."

"Pomfrey did say something like that," admitted Draco, wheezing a little as he struggled to get his breathing under control.

"In any case, you won't do Narcissa any favours by getting yourself killed." Sirius' voice grew softer as he went on. "The Withering Witch might not be attacking the baby, Draco. It's certainly not designed to. Though, to my knowledge it's never been cast against a pregnant witch before."

Draco sucked in a huge, bracing breath. "The medical scan said that the infant is thriving, actually."

"And your mother's already she's eight months along, you said. So even if the very worst happens, that's far enough advanced for . . ."

Draco had no trouble saying the worst aloud. "For the baby to survive even if my mother dies, you mean."

"Which is all the more reason for you to stay here at Hogwarts where you're safe. Who's going to love and care for this child if your mother does die, Draco?"

"I am, of course," said Draco promptly, as he dropped back into the chair and took a few more deep breaths. Then he rounded on Harry, teeth bared. "And before you start speaking like your usual imbecilic self, no, I'm not going to feel differently if it's a squib! My own child could be a squib and I'd still love it with all my heart, which you'd remember if you could fucking well remember!"

"Hey," said Harry mildly. "I didn't say anything."
"You were thinking it!"

"You said yourself he doesn't remember, Draco," pointed out Sirius, just as mildly.

Draco drained the rest of the water in his glass and set it down on the stone floor with a thud. "Well, this has been less than helpful, no offense, but I know what Marsha would advise. There's no sense in refusing to accept a clear and incontrovertible truth. The best I can hope for is that at least my little brother-or-sister will survive my mother's d- d- death. And not even that much is guaranteed. And then we'll both be orphans, though I suppose I deserve that part for being such an arse to Harry all those times."

"You don't deserve to lose your mother just because you were once a pratty little toerag!" exclaimed Harry.

Sirius sighed. "I know this is a rough turn, Draco, but aren't you forgetting someone?"

"Yeah," added Harry, stepping closer so he could poke Draco in the shoulder. He got a mild glare for his trouble. "I wonder what you'd say to me if I called myself an orphan now. Well, you're no different. Severus adopted you, too, so no matter what happens, you'll still have a father."

"Oh, thanks, that's just loads of consolation," sneered Draco. "I wonder what I'd say to you, now, if it was your mother who was alive but doomed? Would it be great comfort to know that after she was cold in the ground, you'd still have the man that didn't stop her death?"

Harry chewed his lip and decided not to point out that Snape, in fact, hadn't stopped Lily Potter's death. He didn't think his brother knew about their father overhearing the prophecy, or about the chameleon. Though he certainly knew that before all that, Snape had been a full-on Death Eater--

Thanks to the Lillehammer, his head remained pain-free at that thought. And non-existent.

Sirius sighed again. "Well, this is a right awful mess. You know, I almost feel sorry for Snape, and isn't that saying a lot? But this . . . well, I can't withhold the truth from you, Draco. Not when you've done so well and turned your back on your Black and Malfoy roots. Harry vouched for you, but now I can see it for myself. You will love your little brother or sister, squib or no. So I have to tell you. Though I suppose I'd do it for Narcissa in any case. Your mother, Draco. She isn't as doomed as you seem to think."

Draco's head snapped up, a single streak of wetness slashing across his face from eye to chin, his lower lip trembling. "There's . . . another way? Or, you've remembered someone else, someone who committed murder at their coming-of-age?"

"No, as far as I know that will have to be Severus--"

"Then she's doomed, doomed, doomed!" shouted Draco. "Even if he went through with a wedding, the magic would laugh at him! He can't possibly marry her and mean it when he's head over heels for Maura Morrighan!"

"I was trying to explain," said Sirius gently. "When it comes to countering this spell, love is beside the point. Draco . . . plenty of Black men have personally used the Withering Witch to force a woman into marriage. And then they countered it. Are we to suppose that they truly loved their brides? The very brides they were willing to torture to get their way?"

Draco blinked. "No, that's not love . . . That's got nothing to do with love."

"Love isn't what's required to form a marriage bond. Centuries ago when this spell was forged, it
wasn't often even a consideration. Therefore, it's entirely possible for your father to deeply love another--" Sirius' lips twisted a bit. "--and still contract a true marriage with Narcissa. If he's willing to commit himself fully to her, no matter how he feels, the magic should be able to seize control of the curse."

Draco clenched both his fists. "That's even worse, Sirius! Because he won't do it! And I'll be left alone, or with the baby, knowing it's because Snape wouldn't do it!"

Harry couldn't imagine how Draco was feeling, because even he felt torn in two by the dilemma. There was no way in hell he wanted Severus to marry Narcissa Malfoy. Yes, she'd been cursed, and yes, for some inexplicable reason she'd helped them save Remus, but she was still an evil woman. He knew that from the things Draco had told him. Abandoning her rights as a mother? Going along with Lucius’ horrible intention to torture and murder Draco? Committing murder herself, just so he could inherit somebody’s money? There was no way he wanted that kind of witch as a . . . oh, God. She’d be his stepmother!

But there was equally no way that he wanted to see Draco hurting like this. Harry couldn’t blame him for loving his mum despite everything. And now if he lost her, his bond with Severus would never be the same. He’d always feel betrayed.

The other boy suddenly twitched his head. "The signal charm," he murmured. "My mother's stirring, and I don’t know why. I . . . I have to go."

"Me too--"

"No, you need to stay," corrected Sirius.

"I have to make sure Draco doesn't pressure Snape--"

"Oh, that's right," snarled Draco, rounding on a heel on his way to the door. "I'm going to coerce Dad until I send my own mum straight into an early grave! Do I really strike you as that much of a homicidal maniac, Harry?"

Harry flushed. "I just meant, you know, you do have that problem with impulse control, and who could blame you for getting emotional now?"

"I think," said Draco in icy tones as he resumed stomping across the room, "that this will be the one time in my entire life that I can restrain myself."

With that, he was yanking open the door to the corridor.

"Stay," insisted Sirius when Harry started to follow.

"He needs me. They both might need me!"

"They might," admitted Sirius. "But you said you only had one shard left, Harry. If Snape does decide to save Narcissa, he's going to need to know how to counter the Withering Witch. Do you want to use your last shard bringing him here to learn it?"

One shard left. Harry had yelled that out in a moment of panic when he'd thought Sirius might disappear into the mists that lurked behind the mirror. Now, the reality of it started to sink in.

Just a single shard left. Just one.

One more chance to talk with Sirius. One more time, and he'd have to use it to say good-bye.
Harry slowly, sadly shook his head.

"So let's save that one for later, shall we?" asked Sirius. "I'll teach you the counter now, and you can teach it to Snape if it comes to that."

"It's Dark Arts," said Harry dully.

"Technically, it's undoing Dark Arts," corrected Sirius. "Though the Blacks made sure that it took an evil man to even do that much."

Again Harry was grateful he'd had the Lillehammer, because thinking about his father killing his own father was bound to bring on a headache. For all that though, Harry pursed his lips. "Don't say that. Severus isn't evil."

"Not now, maybe."

"Not at his coming-of-age, either," insisted Harry. "I don't know the whole story, but I know enough. And don't ask about it, 'cause it's not your business. But I don't blame Severus for what he did that night."

"You can't be serious. Killing his own father?"

"And I won't blame him if he decides he'd better save Draco's mum," decided Harry, saying it out loud as much for himself as for Sirius. It was kind of like a vow of his own, he thought. It might be really hard to keep it, but he wasn't about to make Snape's burden even worse by acting like a prat. Which was saying a lot. He'd already been a prat over Morrighan, and God knew, she was like the Glinda the Good Witch compared to Narcissa!

"You're a good son," said Sirius, reaching out a hand like he wanted to pat Harry on the shoulder. "James would be so proud. And Lily too, so much. You understand family."

No thanks to Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, thought Harry. Probably not much thanks to Dudley; he wasn't quite as sure about that one. But there was really only one conclusion. "Snape's been good for me."

Sirius tilted his head and regarded him. "Yes, I know. He's not my favourite person. But I've been able to see that for some time."

"And I have to be good for Draco. So . . . the Withering Witch?"

Sirius planted both his feet and nodded. "Wand at the ready, then . . ."

-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------

When Harry let himself back into Snape's quarters, the living room was dark and empty. The only light to be seen was coming from Narcissa's room, and only then because the door was open a mere inch. Bracing himself, Harry knocked briefly and then pushed the door the rest of the way open.
Draco glanced up from where he was holding his mother's hand. He looked about as haggard as Harry felt, which reminded Harry that none of them, Snape included, had had any sleep for . . . no telling how long, really. When he flicked a time spell out with his wand, he saw that it was almost midnight. Which meant they'd all missed lunch and dinner.

Not Narcissa, though. He could tell that from the scattered dishes lying about.

"I didn't want to leave her," said Draco very quietly as he gently let go of Narcissa's hand and settled it on her stomach, which was rising and falling in an uneven rhythm as she slept. "But you stayed behind with Sirius for ages."

He didn't say it like a question, but Harry heard one anyway. "He was teaching me the counterspell to the Withering Witch. So I could teach it to Severus, in case . . ."

"Oh," said Draco blankly. "Thank you, Harry. Bit daft of me to forget that somebody would need to know it."

"You've got a lot on your mind." Harry hated to ask, but he was starting to think he'd have to. "Um . . . so what is Severus saying about . . . um, you know . . ."

"Nothing to me." The sconces were only throwing out a dim light reminiscent of several candles, but even so, Harry could see Draco's nostrils flare. "I haven't seen him."

"You didn't knock on his bedroom door, or check in his office?"

"I'm fairly sure he can find me if he wants," muttered Draco. "And if I go and talk to him . . . I'm not so certain of my impulse control, so best not."

"It'll be all right," said Harry helplessly, even though he was pretty sure it wouldn't be. But what else was there to say?

"Oh, it will not, Potter." Draco sighed as he carefully inched his chair a bit further from the bed. "Well, now I have even more reason not to leave her side for an instant. I have to be here to say good-bye."

Harry nodded, hating this. "I'll go to classes tomorrow and get your assignments--"

"Fine, though I can't imagine spending time on them until-- until--" Gasping, Draco turned his face away, but not before Harry spotted the way his eyes were welling with tears.

God, this was awful, awful. Harry suddenly wondered if Draco had been this torn up with Lucius had died. It certainly hadn't seemed to bother him to talk about it, but maybe when it had first happened? Harry lifted the Occlumency fire in the corner of his mind, just a little, trying to let a memory leak through, but there was nothing. Frustrated, he dropped the special fire wall he'd built entirely, and pushed hard, straining, trying to make a memory emerge.

Still nothing.

"Harry?"

Blinking, Harry brought himself back to the present. "Sorry. I was just trying to remember if . . . er, something, that's all. But I couldn't."

"Well, ask, you dolt."
"It's not a good time."

"I could do with a distraction."

"Not this one."

"Ask!"

Harry thought fast. "Did you kiss Hermione in Potions class?"

As distractions went, that fell flat. "Ask your real question, Potter."

"Fine, but remember I was trying not to. I was just wondering if you were this upset when--" Oh, wait. Just in case she could hear him, he didn't want to say too much. "Um, the last time somebody close to you died."

Crap, that wasn't much better. Wasn't it bad to talk about death around someone who needed to think positive?

Draco didn't notice his gaffe. "Pansy, you mean?"

"No, I meant . . . " Harry thought hard. "Um, that *Petrificus*, the one you told me about?"

"Oh, him." Draco leaned back in his chair, extending one long leg while keeping the other one bent. "Are you torturing yourself again? Well, don't. That . . . it wasn't like this for me. Not at all."

The sconces on the walls suddenly flared, casting a brighter light across the room.

"Severus," gasped Draco, leaping to his feet.

Their father was leaning against the open doorway, his robes hanging so limply from his frame that at first Harry thought the man must be injured, somehow. But then a single drop of water oozed from the hem to drip upon the floor, and he understood. The cloth was sodden.

"Where have you been?"

Thankfully, Snape didn't take Harry's question as an accusation. "Walking the castle," he said simply, his voice devoid of inflection. It matched his shuttered eyes. Harry couldn't tell what he was thinking or feeling. Or if he was thinking or feeling, really. "Walking the fields."

For a long moment, the three of them simply gazed at one another. Draco, Harry noticed, was hardly breathing. He certainly wasn't talking. Harry wondered if he was afraid to, if he was afraid that his tenuous hold over his impulses would crumple with the first word.

It was Severus who finally broke the silence.

"Draco," he said. "Leave me alone with your mother."

Draco glanced at the bed and then back at his father several times, his gaze flickering with uncertainty.

"Leave," said Severus again in a tired voice, pushing off from the wall. "She will come to no harm."

Draco still looked uncertain, but he finally nodded and strode from the room without a word or a backward glance.
Severus waited until they were completely alone to speak again. "Harry. I should have come to fetch you sooner. You need to sleep for six hours to dispel the effects of the Lillehammer."

That was when Harry realized he still couldn't feel his head. Somewhere along the way, he'd got used to it being entirely missing.

"Um, yeah I'm sure, but I'd rather stay here in case you need . . . something," Harry finished lamely. The truth was, he didn't think he could do anything to help the man. But sometimes just knowing that someone cared could be helpful, he supposed.

Snape took three steps into the room and stared down at him, his black eyes somehow critical. "Draco would not appreciate that. And you will be quite seriously ill tomorrow if you do not clear the Lillehammer from your magic. So, please, Harry. Or are you also convinced I might murder her in her sleep?"

"Nobody thinks that!"

"No?" Snape's lips twisted. "Perhaps not. I am, shall we say, not at my best at this juncture."

_Juncture_, really. In other circumstances, Harry might have smiled. But for now, it seemed that the only thing he could do was what his father had requested. "I'll go to bed, then."

"Not in your room," cautioned Snape. "You need to sleep deeply, and I imagine that will be difficult tonight with Draco so distressed. Go and sleep in my chamber, Harry. I dare say I'll have no use for my bed tonight."

Harry just stared.

Snape made a strange sound that seemed halfway between bitter amusement and heart-wrenching despair. "Speechless, are you?"

Yeah, he pretty much was. "You want me to sleep in your _bed_?"

Snape's glance at him was openly annoyed, that time. "I quite assure you, you have survived the experience before."

"When?"

"Shortly before the adoption."

"Huh," muttered Harry. "I'm just . . . surprised. I mean, I didn't think I'd ever been in your room. And anyway, I'm sure Draco will shut up and let me sleep if I tell him what you said about the Lillehammer."

Snape ran a hand haphazardly through his hair, sending strands flying in several directions. "Perhaps, perhaps."

"All right, so I'll be sure to explain--"

Snape shook his head. "I was also rather hoping that sleeping in my bed again would cue your memories."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh," Snape repeated, his voice slightly mocking. "Does the idea truly distress you so very much?"
Oh, God. Oh, no, no, no-- Harry suddenly realized he was walking on thin ice. Razor-thin. Crap, what if Snape thought Harry was worried about the bed thing because of what he'd learned about how Snape's own father had treated him? It wouldn't be the first time Snape had believed that Harry thought him tainted by those horrible experiences--

But what was Harry supposed to say, that he'd seen Snape and Morrighan's dots in that very bed, snuggled together? He couldn't admit that on a good day!

And this had been anything but.

"I'm not used to having a parent," he muttered. "Offering me your bed is really parental. I mean, nobody's ever done that for me before."

"I have."

Harry managed a small smile. "Yeah, I guess you have."

"Though it was more a matter of insisting. You were reluctant then, too."

Enough dithering. "I guess I should thank you instead of putting up a fuss. I'll just pop into my room to get some pyjamas--"

"Or I could Accio them," said Snape, leaning down a little and peering at him closely, his black gaze suddenly direct and piercing.

"I'd better tell Draco where I am, anyway. Or he'll think I'm with you in here all night, I bet."

Snape shuddered a little as he rose back up to his full height. "Merlin. You're quite right. I should have thought of that, myself."

"You've got more than enough on your mind," said Harry. "Can you-- can you remember that you can talk to me, Severus? About any of it, if you need to. I won't . . . um, judge, all right?"

"You may not try to, but you'll get a headache."

"Well, not if it's just about, you know, why you can't possibly, um, do what Sirius was suggesting."

Snape hissed a long breath out through his teeth. "Please, Harry. Go to bed."

Harry gave him one last, long glance, but then he left the room as asked.

---------------------------------------------------------------------

"That's a weird request. Tonight of all nights."

Harry didn't exactly disagree. He shrugged as he fished a pair of pyjamas out of a drawer, grabbing a clean pair of socks for good measure. "First he said that after the Lillehammer I needed to sleep really well, and you'd probably be minded to talk all night."
Draco hung his head as he sat cross-legged on his rumpled bed. "I don't think there's much left to say."

"But then he said I'd slept in his bed before and he was hoping another it would help me remember."

"That sounds like Severus. Plots within plots. Though granted, he usually doesn't admit to them so readily."

"Why'd he offer me his bed before, though?" asked Harry. "He said he insisted."

Draco pointed vaguely around, seeming to indicate the walls. "Mostly that. You've been spilling wild magic in your sleep and he thought it prudent to monitor you when he gave you a potion that might help stop it."

"Why didn't he just watch over me in here, though?"

"How should I know? Plots within plots. Maybe he was trying to get you to accept him as a father. Children in distress do go and sleep in their parent's bed sometimes, you know."

No, he didn't know. Well, not personally. "Yeah, when they're four," he scoffed, thinking of Dudley. "Or ten for my cousin, actually. Maybe even twelve . . ."

Harry managed to push that line of thought away. "Will you be all right? I mean, I don't think you should probably go back to your mother's room tonight. Not unless Snape asks you to. You might, you know, say something really unfortunate . . ."

"I might," said Draco, looking down at his hands as he twisted them through his bedspread. "This is really hard. I actually think it was easier to knowingly choke down poison than to force myself to leave Snape alone. Particularly since it won't matter anyway. I don't suppose . . . I don't suppose he said something to you about . . . any of it?"

Harry shook his head. "I kind of hinted that he could talk to me if he liked, and he told me to go to bed."

Draco snapped his head up. "Oh, really. And what were you going to tell him, Harry?"

"Nothing! I was just going to listen!"

"Of course you were. It's not like you'd be of a mind to possibly coerce him, not when you hate my mother!"

"Well, you're the one who told me she spent a whole year doing nothing to help you!"

"Well, you're the one who told me she spent a whole year doing nothing to help you!"

"She did what she could!"

Harry shook his head. "Let's not fight, Draco. I already made up my mind that if Severus decides to marry her, I won't be any kind of obstacle. I can't be, don't you see? I know you love her! So no matter what I think about her, I don't want to see you lose her."

"It's easy to plan to be noble when there's no chance you'll actually have to do it," said Draco sourly. "I'd thank you, but there's no fucking point."

Harry shut his drawer, managing not to slam it, and scooped up his wand. "I'll see you in the morning."
"Whatever."

Harry had no idea what to say to that, so he left.

Snape's bedroom door was standing wide open when Harry made his way down the corridor, an invitation if ever he'd seen one. Narcissa's door was closed by then, the barest hint of light peeking out through the narrow cracks between wood and stone. Absolutely no sound was emerging through those cracks, though. That didn't surprise Harry.

He closed the door to the corridor and changed into his pyjamas, then looked doubtfully at the bed. It was neatly made up, the bedspread a dark, rich blue in what looked like velvet.

Dithering, he decided he'd better wash his face and such. Sure enough, the only other door led into a bathroom. A pretty posh bathroom; Harry wondered if all the professors had something similar. Maybe just the Heads?

Soap was easily found. He wet his hands and smeared some suds on his face so he wouldn't have to dirty a washcloth. Washing a face he couldn't even feel was a new experience, but he got used to it after a minute. By then, though, he had decided that he was being unbearably stupid about everything. Severus would want him to use his things! He'd probably take it personally if Harry didn't.

Relaxing a bit, Harry helped himself to a towel to dry his face, though he thought better than to do the same with the only toothbrush he could see. He ended up scrubbing his teeth with a finger. He'd have used some toothpaste or dental powder or whatever Snape had, too, if he could figure out where it was. But nothing was labeled, and really, the little pots and jars could contain any number of strange potions. No way was Harry going to start guessing which ones might be for teeth.

Padding back into the bedroom, he stared once more at the posh double bed, sighing. He really didn't know why this was so hard. It shouldn't be.

Finally, Harry peeled back the covers and slid in, pounding a few pillows to get them into the right shape. A quick Nox plunged him into darkness, but he didn't feel like the room was quite black enough until he waved his wand again to pull the curtains closed.

Even then, it seemed like a long time before he relaxed enough to go to sleep.
Harry was starving when he woke up, but after he got dressed he still took the time to make Snape’s bed. He might as well not have bothered, though. He couldn’t manage to make it look not-slept-in, and he didn’t know the right housekeeping spell.

Draco was in his mother’s room again when Harry wandered out. “Where’s Snape?”

The other boy shrugged, the motion brittle, somehow. “He came to get me a couple of hours ago, and then he said that he had things to do.”

“He didn’t mention anything about . . .” No, obviously he hadn’t, Harry realized. “Um . . . how’s your mother doing?”

“A little worse today,” sighed Draco. “The potions are losing force.”

Harry nodded. They’d been warned about that. “Would you like anything in particular for breakfast? And what should I order for your mother?”

“I’m not hungry. But some porridge for her. With honey.”

“Draco, you have to eat--”

“I will, Harry. When I’m hungry. Right now I think food will just make me feel sick.” Draco huffed. “Sicker, I mean.”

Harry gave his brother a sympathetic look, and then went out and ordered breakfast through the Floo, asking for the porridge with honey along with double portions of toast, bacon, and eggs, just in case Draco changed his mind. Which didn’t look likely; the other boy actually scowled at him when Harry floated everything into Narcissa’s room.

“I told you--”

“Yours is under a warming charm” interrupted Harry. “In case you want it later.”

“Whatever.”

That seemed to be Draco’s favourite new word, thought Harry.

“Go and eat at the table,” Draco suddenly snapped. “I don’t need you to hover.”

Harry didn’t see what harm it was doing for him to keep Draco company, at least until he had to get to class, but there also wasn’t much point in antagonizing him. “All right,” he said, picking his plate up from his lap.

Eating breakfast alone was unbelievably boring. What made it worse was that he’d got up pretty early, so there was over an hour to kill until he had to leave for his first class of the day. Sighing, Harry finally ended up summoning his Transfigurations textbook to read.

It didn’t really help with the boredom problem.

He was halfway through the chapter on changing tiny objects into huge ones when the front door creaked open and Snape stepped through it. He looked positively knackered, his face deeply lined with exhaustion, though at least his robes weren’t soaked through this time.

“Good morning, sir,” said Harry. “Um . . . didn’t you get any sleep at all?”

Then, of course, his stupid face had to heat up, since he started remembering where he had slept.
“No,” said Snape shortly. “Did you? Six full hours?”

Harry quickly nodded, relieved when the man dropped the subject, stepping closer and glancing down at the table. “You’ve eaten.”

“Every morning.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “I should hope every evening as well. Yet I don’t recall seeing . . . did you have anything last night?”

Harry just shrugged.

The man’s voice went glacial. “I certainly did not mean to send you to bed without any supper.”

Oh. Standing up, Harry laid a hand on the man’s shoulder. “You didn’t, Severus. I know you’re under a lot of strain just now, but you know, I am old enough to know I ought to eat. If I skip a meal, it’s not your doing.”

Severus abruptly dropped into a chair. “Strain,” he repeated, rolling his eyes upward almost as if prayer could be some kind of answer. “That’s a rather mild way to term it.”

Harry suddenly had a bad feeling. What had Draco said to Snape a few hours ago when he’d been called back into Narcissa’s room? “Draco hasn’t been pressuring you, has he? Sirius told him not to.”

“Ah.” Snape rubbed the side of his nose with his index finger. “Well, that explains a great deal. Your brother has been remarkably guarded in his comments. All but silent, in fact. Though I’ve no idea why he would listen to anything that mangy cur has to say. Draco didn’t know him at all when he was alive, was my understanding.”

“Sirius told him that you wouldn’t be able to counter the Withering Witch if you felt like you’d been forced into marriage.”

“Ah,” said Snape again. “A miracle. Your godfather almost never had such good sense when he was alive.”

That was insulting, but it was better than “mangy cur,” so Harry just shrugged a little. “Draco said you had things to arrange?”

“You don’t do subtle, do you?”

That was a weird question. “Um . . . no?”

Snape sighed. “And you didn’t remember anything, did you, of the time before when you slept in my bed.”

“No. Sorry.”

Another long sigh. “It is becoming more and more clear to me that you weren’t quite yourself with us, last year.” Snape gave him a long, piercing look. “I think you would have been wracked with guilt that I blamed myself when you skipped a meal. But this new, more forthright incarnation of my son has no trouble telling me, quite appropriately, that a seventeen-year-old young man is responsible for himself in such matters.”

Harry couldn’t help but shudder, a little. “Neither one of you has said so, exactly, but I can’t help
thinking... it sounds like I was kind of pathetic last year.”

“Not pathetic,” Snape assured him, leaning forward a little. “In need of healing, I do believe.”

“I hope I thanked you. I could have been permanently blinded--”

“You thanked me. Too much, in fact. But restoring your vision was almost nothing in comparison to the healing I meant, Harry.” The man gave a shrug that looked almost eloquent, it said so much.

“Oh. Getting used to having a family?”

“Believing you were entitled to one, I think.” Snape glanced over the scattered dishes, then.

“Would you ask the elves for buttered rye toast and a pot of English breakfast? I need to change into fresh robes.”

By the time Snape returned, his meal was waiting. He drank deeply of the tea, but barely nibbled at his toast. He was on his third cup when the Floo whooshed to life again and a rolled up newspaper came sailing out.

“The Prophet,” murmured Severus. “I asked Albus to send a copy through to me. Let me see if--”

The headline was impossible to miss. It practically leapt off the page the moment the paper was unfurled.

Lucius Malfoy DEAD at You-Know-Who’s Wand!

Harry blinked. “Um, how’d the Prophet find out he died? But they got it wrong about how . . .”

Snape began tapping his fingertips on the table. “Albus and I leaked the story. We thought it best to seize control of the narrative before Voldemort could. Lupin will certainly not be able to resume his ruse now that he has been found out, and no-one else would be able to step into his shoes, as it were. Lupin was only able to do it because of his long stretch of theatre training.”

“But . . . why admit that Malfoy’s dead? Voldemort might not have known that part!”

Snape started tapping out a faster rhythm. “That was so that I could help Draco,” he said in a flat, almost dead voice that contrasted hugely with the frantic motion of his fingers. “Narcissa Malfoy is too well-known for us to proceed otherwise. The Ministry would certainly refuse us a marriage license if officials there believed her to still have a living husband.”

From down the hallway, they heard a loud crash.

“Um, I think Draco heard you--”

“No doubt.”

A moment later, Draco emerged at the entrance to the living room, his face a stark, startling white.

“S- S- Severus?”

“Yes,” said Snape, obviously answering a different question entirely.

Harry wouldn’t have believed it possible, but Draco’s face went whiter still as he stood there, motionless, not even breathing.

“Yes,” Snape said again, swallowing hard before going on, his voice rasping like sand poured over gravel. “I will not let your mother die, Draco. Not as long as it is within my power to prevent it.”
Draco’s knees buckled. He fell, lurching against the corridor wall before righting himself. And then he stared at Severus, just stared, his eyes wide and fevered, his Adam’s apple bobbing over and over as he stood there.

Harry rushed to his side. “It’s all right now, Draco,” he said, resting his hands on his brother’s shoulders so he could gently shake him out of his shock. “You can relax, finally. Your mother’s going to live!”

“It is not terribly flattering to realize what you must think of me,” said Severus in low tones.

That seemed to snap Draco out of his daze. “It’s what you must think of me that has me so-- so--.” Brushing off Harry’s hands, Draco started over. “I didn’t know, Severus. I-- I-- I know you told me a hundred times but--”

Draco suddenly burst into tears, great gasping sobs wracking him from head to toe as he wailed, “I never did believe that you could really, truly l- l- love me! Not as much as you love Harry!”

Snape was across the room almost at once, four long strides taking him to Draco, where he enfolded the young man in a tight embrace. But it didn’t help. It was like a set of floodgates deep inside Draco had been smashed, and he couldn’t stop the words that kept pouring out from his soul. A soul that was far more wounded than Harry had ever supposed.

“How could you love me just as much? How could anyone ever?” cried Draco, shaking as he stood in Snape’s arms. “He’s Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived! Defeator of Dementors! Slayer of Basilisks! Rescuer of damsels in distress! Tri-Wizard champion, for fuck’s sake!”

Snape pulled Draco even closer. “No, no, no. He’s not any of those things, Draco. Not to me. He’s just my Harry.”

Harry took a step towards the pair, then stopped short. Draco had been right before; he needed to pick his moments better. This one was for a father and his son. One son.

But still, what Severus had just said? Harry liked it. He liked it a lot.

“He’s my son,” Snape was continuing. “And so are you, Draco. You aren’t him, but I wouldn’t want you to be! I love you just the same! Of course I do, you idiot, idiot child!”

By the last few words, Snape was outright yelling.

Draco started to bawl.

Snape shifted his weight a little so he could wrap his outer robe around Draco as well, swaddling him. Only Draco’s head stuck out, and that was firmly lodged against the man’s shoulder by then.

And then Snape just let him cry it out, not trying to hush or stop him.

Catharsis, Harry thought, remembering something Marsha had said. Huh. He honestly couldn’t tell if it was a recent memory or one of his forgotten ones.

When Draco’s tears finally slowed, Snape dropped a brief kiss atop his head before loosening his hold. Harry quickly averted his eyes, all at once aware that he probably shouldn’t have watched all that.

“Thank you,” Draco said in a low, low voice, barely audible. “Thank you, Severus.”
Snape didn’t ask for what. Perhaps he didn’t need to. “You’re welcome.”

Oh, God. That made Draco start crying again, just a little. And then he got the hiccups. Snape wordlessly passed him a handkerchief; Draco wasted no time mopping his face with it, smearing his tears everywhere before managing to wipe them dry.

Harry smiled at the sight. He didn’t think he’d ever seen Draco be quite so graceless.

“What?” barked Draco, raising his chin in challenge. “So I’m jealous! I told you that much ages ago! Going to make something of it, eh?”

Harry just smiled again, even wider. “I love you, too.”

“Shut up.”

“And I like having you for a brother.”

“You’re a berk. An utter berk.”

“Well, so are you, sometimes,” admitted Harry. “But I still like having you around.”

“Merlin preserve me from sibling rivalry,” said Snape, shaking his head. “I think that will be enough for now, gentlemen.”

“We can resume later--”

Snape slanted Harry a glance. “That’s enough cheek as well.”

All at once, the man grew solemn, the amused glint in his eyes flickering out as he grimaced. “I must ask you both to say nothing to anyone, save Narcissa and the headmaster, about my upcoming nuptials.” He cleared his throat, his voice dropping into a lower register as he continued. “I have not yet had an opportunity to speak with Maura.”

Snape sank into a chair and ran a hand through his hair as his grimace grew more pronounced. “I thought it best to wait until Narcissa was coherent enough to understand matters. That took almost all night. Only then could I be certain that she . . .” He made a vague gesture.

Harry managed not to stare. Of course she would wish to! There weren’t many people who would knowingly choose death over marriage, even an unwanted marriage. And it wasn’t likely that Lucius Malfoy’s widow could object to Snape’s Death Eater past, was it--

And there it came, just like clockwork, a roaring headache that made Harry’s whole face twist as it wrapped itself around his brain, somewhere in the region behind his eyes.

Fuck this, he suddenly thought with vicious intent, as he willed a thick wall of fire to surge up in the corner of his mind. Drawing deep on his magic, he shoved the pain right through the wall. When it tried to creep back, he shoved at it again. And again.

Until it was gone. Or hidden from him, at least.

“Harry?”

He blinked again, unsure which of them had said his name like a question. “Um, yeah. Sorry. Lost in thought for a second, there.”

“When are you going to speak with Professor Morrighan, sir?” asked Draco, biting his lip.
“This evening after her last class, as time is of the essence. Speaking of which . . .” A quick Tempus showed that the school day would begin in just a few minutes. “Draco, you have been excused from lessons for the time being. I have likewise been released from my duties. Harry, however, should attend his lessons as usual. Please feel free to come home for luncheon, though I cannot guarantee that I will be here.”

Nodding his understanding, Harry headed to his room to gather his books and things.

When he re-emerged, wearing his robes, school bag slung over one shoulder, Draco was nowhere to be seen. Snape hadn’t moved from his chair; he was just sitting there, staring morosely into space. Harry didn’t know what to say that might comfort the man. Probably there wasn’t anything.

He was almost to the front door when Snape’s grating voice halted him.

“The headmaster will be teaching Potions this week. Would you be good enough to inquire of Miss Granger as to whether he has bothered to follow my lesson outlines?”

Odd request, since surely Snape could just ask the headmaster himself. “Um, sure, but how’s Hermione going to know if he is?”

“It will be apparent from the copious amounts of ice cream and gelato creations being made.”

“Oh--”

Snape sighed. “You don’t remember that, either.”

“I can’t even tell any longer!” exclaimed Harry, frustrated. “It seems sort of familiar, maybe, but I don’t know if that’s a memory of last year or if Draco mentioned it in passing! Or maybe it just sounds a lot like Dumbledore!”

Another long sigh. “Very well. But please do inquire of Miss Granger, all the same.”

“I will,” said Harry. And then he decided to try, even if it was useless. “It’s very good of you, Severus. What you’re doing. It can’t be easy.”

“It is, in fact, the only thing to do.” Snape fixed his gaze on the corridor to Narcissa’s room, his eyes bleak, black, and hopeless. “Go to class, Harry.”

Nodding his understanding, Harry let himself out and began trudging through Slytherin’s upward-sloping corridors.
Harry was almost late to his first class, sliding into a seat a scant ten seconds before Transfiguration began. McGonagall pursed her lips slightly as she glanced at him, but said nothing of it. But then, she must have seen the headline, and being in the Order, she already knew the truth about Lucius Malfoy. So she must be aware that something odd was afoot.

She lectured for an hour and then tossed something like a dozen round glass balls into the air, deftly transfiguring them into stout metal keys before they hit the ground. Each key was engraved with the name of two students who were to work together, trying to transform it into a chest of drawers. Harry was less than thrilled to find out that his key had paired him with Zabini.

"Draco's too torn up to attend classes?" drawled the other boy as he positioned the key in the middle of the table they were now sharing. "This morning's Prophet can't have been an easy read, even considering how long it's been since he and his father were on speaking terms."

"Funny," retorted Harry. "Draco was on speaking terms with his father just this morning. I should know, I was there."

"Yeah, Snape hasn't let either one of you out of his sight, has he, since Saturday when you were both swaggering about Hogsmeade swilling Ogden's straight from the bottle." Zabini aimed his wand at the key and incanted a low-level engorgement charm. "And then Draco's mum showed up here at the castle, hmm. Grey with stress, the paper said. I'm guessing it wasn't the drunken carousing that had her looking so ill. She knew, didn't she? She knew that her husband had been slain--" His looked up to meet Harry's gaze, his brown eyes gleaming. "Is she down in the dungeons consoling him or is it the other way around?"

"Correct your work and begin again, Mr. Zabini," said McGonagall crisply from the side. "That is a positive abomination."

"And so are you," murmured Harry as she strode away to speak to another pair. "Fishing for gossip instead of caring how Draco's actually doing?"

Zabini finished restoring the key to its original size before gesturing toward the snake on his crest. "Slytherin, Potter. I think you're familiar with the term?"

"Slytherin doesn't mean scum. Except in your case."

"And how is dear Draco doing?" asked Zabini, his voice gone sickly sweet. "You can tell me, Potter. I do so care."

"Gryffindor doesn't mean imbecile," Harry retorted, keeping his own tone level. "Except in your case!"
That was so stupid that it wasn't even worth replying to. For the rest of the lesson, Harry restricted himself to spells and not hexes, though it was tempting, the way Zabini kept chattering away, alternately pumping him for information and throwing out catty remarks about everything from their classmates to Harry's hair.

By the time the lesson had ended, their key vaguely resembled the assigned chest of drawers, but it had a distinct metallic tinge and was so lopsided it could barely stand straight.

"The drawers were to open smoothly instead of not at all," tsked McGonagall as her quill, hovering in midair, made a notation on the parchment floating alongside. "And I would think that drawer pulls would be helpful."

Harry made a face and was a little taken aback when Zabini chuckled. They weren't mates, and they weren't going to be.

"You may banish your projects unless they are of sufficient quality that you would like the house-elves to transfer them to your Houses," called McGonagall, back at the front by then. "You are dismissed."

Harry wasn't surprised to see Hermione frowning at the idea of giving the elves more work, even as she looked longingly toward a beautiful chest of drawers that featured delicate swirls carved into what looked like maple. It even had drawer pulls that gleamed like polished bronze. Dean patted her on the shoulder and said something that had Hermione reluctantly nodding.

He wasted no time banishing his own project and headed out to the corridor. Ron and Hermione were both waiting for him, their faces expectant.

"Busy weekend, eh?" asked Ron as they started the walk toward the Defence classroom. "I know you don't like to see your name in print. You might want to be a little less conspicuous when you spend time in the village--"

Harry lightly punched him on the shoulder. "Don't believe everything you read."

Hermione picked up on what he wasn't saying. "Yes, quite unreliable, the *Prophet*. Anything you can tell us?"

"Draco and I did get drunk and use bad judgement, but we didn't destroy half of Hogsmeade. We found out that Dumbledore's got a brother working at the Hog's Head. And yeah, Lucius Malfoy is dead."

She gave him an impatient look, since of course she had known that much for months.

Harry lifted his shoulders. "I can't really tell you any more than that."

They'd understand, her and Ron both, what he meant. But passers-by would think he couldn't say more because he didn't have any information other than what the *Prophet* had printed.

"How is Draco? He wasn't in class?"

Surprisingly, it was Ron who asked, but Hermione quickly nodded her interest in the answer as well.

"He's probably going to miss lessons all week. And Severus too," added Harry, figuring he might as well take this opportunity to throw any eavesdroppers off the scent. "You know, Draco's pretty broken up just now. He's got his mum here -- the paper got that right -- but Snape still wanted to be
there for him for a while."

There, that was pretty good. It would mislead others, but not so much Ron and Hermione, even if it didn't explain the real reason Draco was staying in the dungeons for the time being. But then again, his friends probably assumed that Draco was consoling his mother, who unlike himself, might have just now found out that Lucius Malfoy had died.

And for all Harry knew, Draco could be doing exactly that during Narcissa's more lucid moments. Had she truly loved her husband? Would she mourn him? Harry had no idea.

"Should I come down to visit him, do you think?" asked Hermione, frowning. "I'd like him to know we're here for him, but he might want time with just his mum for now."

Ron nodded, and looked like he was agreeing to all of that, not just the last bit.

"You as well?"

That got him a speaking look. "He's your brother, Harry!"

Well, Ron understood family too, Harry supposed. "I think he'd really appreciate it if you came down."

They'd find out how sick Narcissa was, but that was probably all right. It didn't really give away the secret of Snape getting married. And even that wouldn't be a secret for very much longer, Harry supposed, drawing in a deep breath as he braced himself to keep his promise. No whinging. Just stalwart support for Snape and Draco both, since this was hard for both of them, though in different ways.

"Tonight?" asked Hermione.

"Yeah, come down after you finish eating in the Great Hall. I'm going home for dinner."

She patted his arm. "Of course you are."

It was a lot more difficult to get through Defence than Harry had expected. When Maura Morrighan emerged from her office in her usual form-fitting leathers, the sight of her hit Harry like a body blow. Damn it, he'd been ready to be mature and understanding about her and Snape getting married! He'd wanted to be a good son for the man, no matter how much he hated the idea of sharing his father.

And now it was going to be Narcissa Malfoy he'd have to be understanding about! It was maddening.

The worst part was that he couldn't even tell her, or not yet, that he was sorry he'd been such a complete snotrag. He'd acted like a spoiled five-year-old, a real Dudley. And she'd actually been sympathetic and understanding! Definitely, she didn't deserve the terrible news she was going to
hear later on this evening.

He couldn't help but watch her as she circled the pairs of dueling students, correcting incantations, gently lifting wands higher when needed, challenging her best pupils to move on to the more advanced form of the blocks they were practicing. How was she going to react when Snape broke the news? She wasn't perfect; he knew that much from the stories of how she had targeted Draco earlier in the year. She'd had a reason, true, but she'd have another one now, wouldn't she, once she knew that Draco was why Snape had broken off their engagement.

"Harry," said Ron impatiently. "Where are you? You haven't blocked my last three spells. I don't think you even noticed them hitting you!"

"Perhaps his mind is on his brother," said Morrighan softly from behind him.

Huh. Harry had got so lost in thought that he'd lost track of her location in the classroom.

"How is Draco?" she went on. "I've been informed he'll be absent from lessons for a few days."

"Yeah," said Harry, voice rasping. "You saw the papers? His mum's here now, and . . . things are . . . difficult."

"I can imagine," she murmured. "But that's perhaps a circumstance we can use to good effect in your own training, Harry. You've been in enough dangerous situations to know how important focus can be, I think."

An image of the graveyard rose up in his mind. Pettigrew. Cedric. His parents, and then the way he'd very nearly died that night. "Right," he managed to reply.

"This is an opportunity for you to practice concentrating even when you're distracted with worry," she explained. "Keep your mind on the duel. Block out everything else."

It was a skill he was going to need, he knew. To defeat Voldemort finally, and as an Auror as well. Nodding, he shifted back into a defensive stance and prepared to block whatever Ron decided to throw at him.

"Better, better," said Morrighan a few moments later. "Keep that focus, Potter."

Harry tried. But in the end, he found that the only way to keep it up for long was to shove any distracting thoughts behind the wall of fire he was keeping up in his mind.

Lunch was a rather subdued meal. Snape had little to say, Draco kept leaving the table every five minutes to check on his mother, and Harry didn't feel like dragging either one of them into a conversation. He did find out that Narcissa seemed a little worse than she had that morning, but that wasn't saying much.

And one thing more. "I felt the baby move," Draco mentioned toward the end of the meal.
Harry kind of goggled. "How's that? You just happened to be resting your hands on top of her, er--"

"No, I was reading some poetry to her and she reached up and tugged one of my hands so it would
touch her er. And then I felt . . . it was amazing, Harry. A tremendous kick, right into my palm."
Draco grinned. "Like he was saying hallo to his big brother."

Harry had to admit, it was a nice change to see Draco smile. "He?"

"I have a feeling. He's going to be a champion Beater when he gets to Hogwarts."

"We'll come to all his games," promised Harry. "Oh . . . Hermione and Ron want to come see how
you're doing, Draco. I told them tonight after dinner would be fine."

Snape set down his fork with a thud. "You told them your brother had been distraught over the
possibility that his mother would die?"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "No, they saw he was absent and they'd read in the papers that his mother
showed up here. I'm sure they think he's helping her cope with the 'recent' news reported about
Lucius. Honestly, I didn't think it mattered if they showed up here and realized she was sick."

"I suppose it doesn't," murmured Snape, passing a hand in front of his eyes. "Merlin, I think I'm
getting old. This is the second time in as many days that you've had to explain the bloody obvious
to me."

"Oh indeed, you're ancient for a wizard. You've only got another good ten or twelve decades left,"
drawled Draco,

"Yeah, Severus, you know you aren't losing it. You're just exhausted. How long has it been since
you slept?"

"Friday night, I do believe."

"And now it's Monday!" Harry leapt up from his chair. "Come with me. You're for bed."

"I've often gone far longer without sleep--"

"Yeah, when you had to, spying or something. But there's no need for it now. Come on."

"There is every need," said Snape stiffly. "I am waiting for the Ministry to Floo me the marriage
license I applied for this morning--"

"Draco isn't going anywhere. He can listen for the Floo and wake you up if there's a problem."

Still Snape didn't make any move to stand.

"I will, Severus. I'll wake you up at once."

Harry blew out a breath when the man still looked doubtful. "Really, Severus. How many times
have you taken good care of me when I was sick, or exhausted, or even just troubled? I don't know,
because I can't remember, but I'm pretty sure it's in the hundreds. And now it's my turn to take care
of you. So let me, all right? Because . . . I think that's what sons do. Grown sons, at least."

Snape lurched to his feet, taking a second to gain his balance. "You are hardly grown."

"Now you sound old."
Harry’s grand plan hit a few snags along the way. First, Snape had to unward the entrance to his bedroom and then he had to make his bathroom door appear so he could "perform his ablutions." Harry decided not to ask.

The whole scenario, though, made him realize that Snape must have come in here the night before, while Harry was getting his pyjamas, to unward everything. It touched him to know that even in the midst of all his turmoil, Snape had been thinking of what Harry would need to be comfortable in his quarters.

It made him all the more determined to keep the vow he’d made to himself. No whinging. Not one word.

When Snape emerged from the bathroom, he was swaying on his feet. Harry frowned a little. The man hadn’t been wearing his robes during lunch, so he was standing there in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt, both in his usual black. “Um, will you sleep all right like that? I mean, at least take off your shoes.”

He got an annoyed glance for his troubles. “I quite assure you, I have been putting myself to bed for the better part of four decades.”

“I’ll just head back up, then. Before I’m late to class--”

Snape set his wand on his nightstand and yawned. Harry took that as his cue to get going. He was almost back in the corridor when the man spoke again.

“Thank you, Harry.”

Grinning, Harry gave him a little wave.

“I think he’s still asleep,” murmured Draco when Harry went home for dinner.

“Should we wake him to eat, do you think?”

Draco’s hair swayed as he shook his head. “That would just give him more time to think before he has to go speak with Morrighan.”

Harry quickly knelt down before the Floo and ordered whatever suits for himself, Draco, and Narcissa. Apparently she wasn’t ready for much food since all that came through for her was a bowl of broth. Lamb, Harry thought, from the fragrant aroma wafting upwards.

He held it out to Draco, who went off to help her drink it, but he came back in under a minute.

“She’s sound asleep, too. I put it under a warming charm.”

Draco sat down at the table to eat with him, but he kept his head cocked like he was trying to listen
for the slightest sound from his mother’s open door.

“What? Signal charm?”

The other boy shrugged. “I’ve had one on her more-or-less continuously since we went to speak with your godfather.”

“So try to relax, then,” urged Harry. “You’ll know if she needs you. And try not to worry, either. Everything’s sorted now. She’ll be fine.” Which reminded him. “Did the marriage license arrive?”

“Yes.” Draco drank a full glass of pumpkin juice before he went on. “I was a bit concerned that the Ministry might fuss about matters. After all, they’ve only the Prophet’s word that her husband has died. That seems to be enough for them, though.”

“Well, they’re usually incompetent. Maybe that’s just government for you. My uncle would always go on about how useless and stupid the Muggle one was, too.”

“We’ve looked at in in Muggle Studies in some detail,” said Draco. “I tried to get Miss Burbage to clear up if they’d copied us, having Ministries and such, or if we’d copied them. I don’t think she knows, though. Anyway, she was more interested in explaining the Labour Party’s proposed House of Lords reforms.”

“I’ve officially woken up in an alternate universe,” said Harry dryly. “You know more about Muggles than I do.”

“Oh, I do not!”

“Well, about current politics, we’ll say. I don’t know what anybody wants to reform, and I only have the sketchiest idea about the House of Lords in any case.” Harry finished off his ham-and-swiss sandwich and pushed his plate away. “Then again, I stopped going to Muggle school when I was ten. I remember making a model Houses of Parliament out of sugar cubes, but that’s about it.”

“That sounds quite the useless lesson. What were you supposed to learn?”

“Not sure. Mine was pretty bad, anyway. Dudley kept eating it.” Enough of that, thought Harry. “It’s kind of funny what you got to eat tonight, Draco. I guess you didn’t feel like anything fancy?”

Draco looked down at his boiled spinach accompanied by two eggs over easy. “I’m basically forcing myself to eat. That probably influences what the elves made for me.”

“Spinach and eggs are your favorites?” That didn’t seem likely.

“One’s highly nutritious and the other one’s easy to digest? I don’t have any idea, really.”

“But why don’t you have an appetite? You aren’t still worried that she’ll die, are you?” Harry leaned forward a little. “You heard Dad. He absolutely won’t let her. If she started to get dramatically worse right now, he’d marry her and cast the counter tonight.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Draco, gulping. “Really, I don’t. Severus is being . . . unbelievably generous.”

“He’s being your father,” corrected Harry. “A really good one, too.”

“Well, it’s still mind-bogglingly good of him. And I do most definitely trust him to do as he’s said, Harry. But don’t you see? I can’t believe it will be all right, not until it is. Too many things could
still go wrong!”

“Oh, come on. What could go wrong?”

Draco waved both arms about in random-looking arcs as he spoke. “Ha. Tonnes of things! Morrighan could snap when he tells her, and Avada him where he stands—”

“That’s really not very likely—”

“Severus could slip in the shower and hit his head really hard, and forget all of this, and refuse to believe me when I explain!”

“Draco—”

“It could happen, Harry,” insisted the other boy. “We saw it happen with you, except with a Bludger, and you refused to believe us when we tried to explain!”

Harry frowned. He remembered those times, and how he’d only been thinking of himself. There wasn’t much else he could have done in the circumstances. But he was sorry that he’d hurt Draco, and even sorrier that he’d never really realized as much before.

“Well, you managed to find a way to get through to me. It just took a while.”

“My mother doesn’t have a while!”

“And Severus is not going to slip in the shower! He doesn’t even have one. He’s got a grand big tub with at least ten taps.”

Draco scowled. “I forgot, you’re the favoured son who gets to see the inside of his private chambers.”

“And you’re the favoured son he’s sacrificing the love of his life for.”

Draco swallowed. “Well, there is that. But don’t you think . . . that is, Merlin. It is amazing proof of just how much he really does love me, but don’t you think he’s going to end up resenting me, just as much?”

“I think we’re all going to have a lot of adjusting to do—”

“Be honest!”

Harry stopped to think. “All right. Well, he’s human. So he’ll probably resent matters now and again. But I don’t think he’ll resent you or love you any less. He knows this wasn’t your doing.”

“Let’s hope so.” Draco swallowed again and laid both his hands on the table, one on top of the other. “It was good that you got him to take a nap. He needed one, of course. But also . . . things were terribly tense all morning. He didn’t want to talk about it, and I had a lot of questions but I couldn’t ask any of them, because they were so clearly going to hurt him, and he’s hurting enough. Too much.”

“Draco,” said Harry, covering the other boy’s shaking hands with one of his own. “It’s going to be all right.”

“Let’s hope so,” Draco repeated, before jumping up to go check on his mother.
Snape was still asleep an hour later when a chime in Harry’s head had him going over to check the door parchment.

Oh, God. It didn’t just read *Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger*. There was a third name neatly noted: *Luna Lovegood.*

He had very carefully not thought about her all day, even though that meant using his Occlumency fire, which was turning out to be handy for all sorts of things. But what else could he do? She was still every bit as much in danger if he let slip how important she was to him, and he could hardly stand the way *she* effortlessly managed to act like their break-up -- hell, their entire relationship -- hadn’t been significant in the least.

She was doing it again, now, practically bouncing into the living room like she had springs in her shoes, and cheerfully chirping, “Hi, Harry! Hi, Draco!”

Draco glanced up from the medical potions book he was perusing, and lifted one pale eyebrow.

“I thought it would just be you and Ron,” said Harry in an undertone to Hermione.

“Luna overheard us talking about coming down and invited herself along.”

“Wasn’t much we could do, mate,” added Ron, with a sardonic glance that suggested, *What did you want us to do, hex her?*

“How’s your mum?” asked Luna, twirling herself into a seat alongside Draco. “Oh, but I know how she is. So I guess I really meant, how are you?”

“What do you mean, you know how she is?”

Luna smiled softly, but somehow it lit up the whole room.

Scowling, Harry quickly shoved that impression through the fire.

“She’s deathly ill, isn’t she, can hardly speak? Oh, and quite far along, too. But Pomfrey’s been here, so I imagine you’re all doing everything that can be done--”

“Far along with what?” asked Ron, which caused Hermione to turn half-around and whack his shoulder.

“How do you know all that?” cried Draco, rising to his feet in one smooth motion, drawing his wand as he surged upwards.

“How do you know all that?” yelled Harry. “No hexing my girlfriend!”

“Hey!” crooned Luna as she placed a delicate fingertip on the top of Draco’s wand and gently eased it down to point at the floor. “And I know your mum’s poorly because the Prenglies told me, silly.”
Harry sat down with a thud. “The Prenglies are spying on us, telling you everything.”

“Oh, no. They only tell me what they think I need to know.”

“Why do you need to know that Draco’s mum is sick and pregnant?” asked Hermione.

“Narcissa Malfoy’s pregnant?” gasped Ron, looking like he was about to choke on his own tongue.

Draco glared, and opened his mouth to say something, but Luna’s words cut straight across it. “Well, because I love Harry, and he loves Draco, and Draco loves his mum. So if Draco’s mum is ill, he’ll be dreadfully upset about it, and Harry will be worried about that, so of course the Prenglies let me know.”

She said all that like it was the most logical sequence of events in wizarding history.

“Do they spy on the whole castle?” Hermione demanded to know.

“Do they tell you every word we say down here?” yelled Draco.

“I don’t know and no, and no,” answered Luna, beaming.

Crap. That smile was lovely in a different way than the previous one, so Harry had to shove it through the fire, too. He couldn’t do that with the “I love Harry,” speech she’d given, though. He had to cling to that or he’d go batty when she started acting like he was nothing to her, again.

“What do you know?” asked Ron, taking a seat alongside Harry. Hermione was left standing, her hands on her hips.

“I don’t think they spy,” explained Luna. “They’re just about, and they see things. I’ve no idea if they notice everything they see. They only tell me about things they think I’d care about. Like Draco being upset over his mum, since he loves her and Harry loves him and I love Harry.”


“They don’t seem to know English, actually.”

“Then how do they talk to you?” demanded Hermione.

“How do snakes talk to Harry?” Luna shrugged. “I can hear the Preglies clear as day, but nobody else ever seems to hear them at all. Though I suspect they simply aren’t listening.”

“So they can’t repeat our conversations?”

Another shrug. “I don’t think so. They only ever tell me what they see, not what anyone has said. Like the time Harry ended up in the pie-shaped room.”

“Pie-shaped room?” asked Hermione

Harry waved that away. “It’s not important just now.”

Draco narrowed his gaze in a glare. “Tell these Prenglies to keep out of here, anyway. It’s none of their business what we do in our own home!”

“I can tell them--”
“Using English?” Hermione pertly put in.

“Hey, Parseltongue seems like English to me, you know. Doesn’t mean it is!” objected Harry.

“I will tell them,” Luna went on in an airy tone. “But they aren’t house-elves, Draco. I’ve no reason to suppose they’ll do as I ask. And they might really want to watch over the three of you. You see, I love him and he loves his brother and father, so . . . well, you understand how it is.”

“This is all very disturbing,” muttered Draco.

“Oh, no,” crooned Luna. “Love is wonderful, Draco.”

She wasn’t looking at Harry as she said it, but that was all right.

“Yes, I think it is.” Draco cleared his throat and glanced over at Hermione. Then he slowly rose to his feet and extended both hands, palms facing the ceiling. “Would you do me a great honour, Hermione? I would like to formally present you to my mother.”

She blinked. “That sounds rather . . .”

“It’s an old pureblood custom,” said Ron, scowling slightly. “Though these days it’s mostly just rich, stuck-up tossers who actually do it. But if he formally presents you, it means he’s letting his parents . . . I mean, his mum, know that he’s serious.”

Hermione’s eyes went wide. “Oh,” she said faintly. “Er . . .”

“You can decline,” said Draco in a tight voice, shoving both his hands deep into his pockets.

“No, it’s just--” She started twirling a strand of hair around a finger. “I don’t know much about your customs, Draco. This one . . . it’s not anything magical, is it? Because I don’t want to end up engaged. Oh! I don’t mean, not to you. I just meant . . . not now.”

Draco’s posture relaxed a little. “My mother’s still sleeping at the moment, but I would like to present you at the earliest opportunity.”

“I’d be delighted.” Her deepening blush said that she meant it, too.

“I feel I should warn you, she might not be pleasant about it. My mother almost certainly still holds to certain outdated generalizations about . . . er, wizarding lineage.”

“I’m absolutely astonished,” said Hermione dryly. “Listen, Draco. I don’t care what she thinks. I’m just happy that you’ve seen past the nonsense you were raised to believe.”

There was no telling what Draco might have said in reply, since Severus entered the living room just then. He stood regarding the group of students, his gaze narrowed, his posture so taut he looked like he might snap in two. He was dressed all in black as usual, but his robes somehow looked more formal than his everyday wear. Harry couldn’t have said why, exactly. They certainly
weren’t dress robes.

“Good evening, Professor,” said Hermione in a tone that was somehow pleasant and diffident all at once. “I hope we aren’t disturbing you. When we heard that Mrs. Malfoy was here and in mourning, we thought it would be good to see how Draco’s holding up.”

“Laudable, Miss Granger.”

He sounded like he was only barely restraining himself from adding something cutting, like Shall I nominate you for the Order of Merlin?

Hermione seemed oblivious to the undertones. “I was wondering, sir, if you were going to miss Ethics as well as Potions, this week—”

“Ethics will be cancelled until I can resume my duties, I do believe.”

Well, at least that came across as a little less hostile.

“Dare I hope that the headmaster is teaching my N.E.W.T.-level pupils something other than recipes designed to rot one’s teeth and most likely one’s brain?”

Hermione smiled a little. “Today we each had instructions for a different potion, but not for brewing. We had to find all the mistakes and ink in the needed corrections.”

Snape blew out a breath. “That appears to be in order, then. Harry, may I see you for a moment in my office?”

“Sure.” Harry gave Luna an apologetic glance, and then shot one with a bit of a warning in it to Ron. But he’d done fairly well so far, reining in his resentment over Draco’s interest in Hermione. The two boys probably wouldn’t come to blows.

Probably.

Once Harry was alone with his father, the door firmly closed and warded, Snape wasted no time in coming to the point. “Your friends need to leave no later than five minutes after I myself do so. I am not likely to be in a frame of mind to tolerate them, once I . . .”

His voice drifted off to nothingness.

“It’ll be all right,” said Harry soothingly.

“It most certainly will not.”

Well, I meant that you’ll get through it. You know, for Draco.”

Snape abruptly dropped into a chair, his hands trembling. “Yes, for Draco. I have to find a way to keep that uppermost in mind. I know what I have to do. But I . . . I keep trying to find a way not to do it, Harry. I must somehow convince myself to stay true to my resolve.”

“Maybe a potion?”

“It’s too likely the Withering Witch would interpret that badly, perhaps reading me as Confounded. I doubt that would help matters proceed as they must.”

Harry slanted him a glance. “Maybe Potions can’t solve everything.”
“This is hardly the time for humour.”

“Well, I’m just trying to cheer you a bit,” retorted Harry, taking the seat opposite his father’s. “Maybe it’s impossible. But it’s not like I know what would be best to say in a situation like this. It’s a mess.”

“Indeed.”

“Have you . . . er, planned out what to say? How to break it to her?”

“Yes, but I am not disposed to go into that with you.”

“Fair enough.”

Snape gripped the armrests of his chair. “Speaking of you, however. It occurs to me that I should have spoken with you at greater length before resolving to wed a woman like Narcissa.”

“Oh, you should not have--”

“It was not long ago that you were appalled at the notion that I might take the slightest action that could lead to matrimony.”

“Yeah, and I told you to ignore my immature reaction and go right ahead!”

“Ah, but that was before the object of my--” Snape broke off, grimacing. “I cannot say affection. I simply cannot. That was before I was contemplating marriage to Narcissa Malfoy. Surely that makes a difference to you.”

“Do I look like a delicate blossom, or something?” Harry demanded to know. “Look, I don’t really know what went on down here last year. Draco’s told me loads of things, but that doesn’t mean I understand how it was. Did I act like a baby all the time after I’d been stabbed with needles? Because you seem to think I can’t handle even the slightest bit of stress, and--”

“Harry,” interrupted Snape. “You have surmounted more stress than almost any wizard alive. You must forgive me if, as your father, it is only natural for me to seek to spare you even more.”

Oh. Well, that didn’t sound so bad.

Harry gave a brisk nod. “We’re all in a rotten situation. Even Draco. But I think you’re right that there’s nothing else to do but what you decided, so I’m not going to fuss or whinge about it. There’s no point.”

Snape said nothing.

“And, you know . . . maybe Draco’s mum won’t be . . . um . . . I mean, I guess it’s at least possible she could turn into a decent person someday. Draco did.”

“Hope springeth eternal.” Sighing, Snape rose to his feet, grasping Harry by the forearms and pulling him up as well. “You are a most satisfactory son. I wish that I did not have to involve a woman like that in your life. In any of our lives.”

“But you do have to. I understand that, Severus.”

“You are very far from a delicate blossom. More like stout, stalwart oak, I think. It takes great courage to accept something like this so gracefully.”
“Gryffindor,” said Harry, pointing to himself before motioning toward the other man as well. He thought better than to actually call him a Gryffindor, though. “You’ve been quite . . . oakey, too, about this whole thing.”

“Oaken,” murmured Snape. “Though you didn’t see me last night when I was stomping up and down hills, cursing and screaming at the rain and generally railing against fate.”

“Well, you did see me when I’d been sticking myself with needles, and you still think I’m brave.”

“Touché.” Snape paused for a moment. “And . . . so how were your classes today?”

Harry thought that hardly mattered at a time like this. “Well, Zabini was a pain, but that’s nothing new.”

“And, and . . . your robes? You have sufficient of your dual-house-affiliation crests?”

Harry blew out a breath so hard that it made his fringe fly up. He didn’t want to rush or pressure the man, but that last question verged on the ridiculous.

“Yes, quite right,” Snape muttered, sighing. “I have said all I needed to you. That was sheer procrastination.”

“That nobody could possibly blame you for--”

“Nobody?”

The answer to that hung unspoken in the air, a single word that all but resonated between them. *Draco.*

“I will go now,” Snape announced. “Remember what I said about your friends. Five minutes, no more.”

“Five minutes,” repeated Harry.

He wondered if that was enough time to get Luna into his bedroom so they could have a bit of a snog in private. But . . . that was probably a bad idea. How could he go back to acting like she was nothing, and make people really believe it, if he felt her soft lips again, and stroked her shiny hair, and held her so close it felt like they were merging into a single person?

His heart suddenly twisted so fiercely that it sent an actual bolt of pain shooting through him. God, how had he managed? How could he stand to do it again, after hearing three times tonight that she loved him? This was awful--

Harry abruptly shoved all his loving-Luna feelings straight through his Occlumency fire, then breathed a sigh of relief. Oh, yes. Much better.

“Tell them we have a family meeting planned,” suggested Snape, who was peering at him, Harry suddenly noticed. “Or perhaps use homework as an excuse.”

He clearly thought Harry’s sigh had been over the need to get rid of his friends.

“I’ll think of something.”

“And I,” repeated Snape, “will go now.”

It still took him a full ten seconds to begin walking toward the door, though.
Harry did as he’d said and ushered his friends and Luna out within just a few minutes. Then, there was nothing for him to do but wait. Draco had a bit more to keep him occupied. He kept checking on his mother and a couple of times, he had to administer the potions and other things Pomfrey had recommended. Harry was a little shocked when he went in with him to keep him company; Narcissa Malfoy looked much worse than she had that morning.

The skin on both her face and hands was grey again, the surface of it looking almost papery, like the slightest touch might rip through several layers of it. She was panting slightly as she slept, though at times her breathing seemed to fall off completely.

Draco was grim with resolve. “This wedding can’t happen soon enough. I can barely rouse her at all, now!”

Harry gulped. “Is she going to be able to say her vows?”

“We might have to resort to Pepper-Up.”

“Will that be safe for someone so--” Close to death, Harry thought, but didn’t say.

“Madame Pomfrey says it won’t harm her, though it won’t last long, either. The magical tide pulling her under is just too strong.”

“Oh. Um, Pomfrey knows about the wedding, then? About us finding out about the countercurse?”

“Not yet.” Draco sighed. “Severus wouldn’t hear of it, not until he could speak with Morrighan. I couldn’t wait, though. So I asked Pomfrey what I should do if I wanted to hear her speak to me one last time.”

“It won’t come to that.”

Draco’s hair floated upwards as he blew out a breath. “It might, at that. Look at her, Harry! Fucking Aunt Bella, casting a curse like that against a pregnant witch. She should have known it might twist the magic into a new shape!”

“I can’t imagine she’d have cared.”

“Maybe not with anyone else, but when it’s her own sister?”

“Well, at least you’ve got a father who understands family.”

Draco swallowed, his throat bobbing. “And a brother. Thank you, Harry. I shouldn’t have mocked you when you said you wouldn’t stand in the way of . . . so, yes. Thank you.”

Remembering the simple way Snape had acknowledged Draco’s thanks, Harry just smiled a little as he said, “You’re welcome.”
The noise of the outer door thudding closed had Draco leaping from his chair.

Harry took one more look at Narcissa Malfoy, lying there so close to death, and then followed his brother from the room.

Snape was leaning against the front door, his face a terrible, almost waxy shade of white.

Draco had halted a scant yard from the man and was shifting back and forth on his feet as he stood there, clearly anxious. Snape didn’t see any of that, though. His eyes were clenched tightly shut, his features wrinkled and twisted with strain. Still, he must have sensed that Draco was nearby, since he hissed in a breath through his teeth and grated, “Don’t.”

Draco threw Harry a confused glance and mouthed, Don’t what?

Harry pointed to his ring finger. Don’t ask.

All that got him was a frustrated glare.

Snape pushed off from the door, finally opening his eyes as he strode toward the sofa, his footfall heavy and loud. He dropped unceremoniously onto the cushions, the sofa creaking beneath the jolt of weight. “How is your mother?”

“She’s doing very poorly.” Draco rushed over to a chair and pulled it as close as possible to the sofa before perching himself in it. “I don’t know that she’ll make it through the night, Severus. Her skin looks like mica, and she’s barely eaten anything today. While you were asleep I got Pomfrey to come down and spell some nutrition directly into her stomach but you know we can’t keep that up forever, and her eyes, Merlin, there’s not even a hint of blue in them now, not that she opens them much, and—”

“I suppose it was too much to hope that the Withering Witch would resolve on its own,” said Snape, tipping his head back to rest it atop the cushions. He would have been staring at the stone ceiling if not for the fact that he’d closed his eyes again.

Draco gaped. “Well, yes, yes it was. She needs to get married so you can cast the counter. You know that!”

“I know that,” acknowledged Snape, bleak despair threaded through every syllable. “We shall marry in the morning.”

“She might not be alive in the morning!” shrieked Draco, reaching out both his hands to grasp Snape’s knees so he could give them a violent shake. “Haven’t you been listening?”

Draco was suddenly flung back, so fiercely that his chair rocked onto its rear legs from the impact. Yet Snape hadn’t moved a muscle; even his head was still tipped back in that odd posture. “Draco,” he grated after a moment, “perhaps you need to pick your moments better. When you
trigger an outburst of accidental magic from a man long-accustomed to exercising extreme levels of self-control, you are atop a broom missing all its bristles. So *desist!*

Draco did, sort of. He crumpled in on himself, pulling his legs up onto the chair with him and hugging them tightly.

Harry didn’t want to make things worse, but it wouldn’t be right to stand silent in the face of everything going on. “Um . . . but Dad? She really does look awful.”

“Imagine how awful she will look if I attempt to counter the curse in my present frame of mind!” snapped Snape. “Or have the pair of you never noticed that one’s emotional state can influence the accuracy and efficacy of one’s casting?”

Harry had to admit, he did have a point. And if the man was so stressed that it was exploding out of him in bursts of accidental magic . . . yeah, he wasn’t in any kind of shape to cast complex magic tonight. If he got it the counter wrong, he might make Narcissa worse.

Snape muttered something foul and rose to his feet. “But needs must, Draco. I will have a look at her and if . . . I will have a look at her. No!” barked Snape when Draco started to get up as well. “Stay here.”

Draco sank back down, shivering. But at least this time his feet were on the floor.

Snape came back in under a minute, his mood even fouler than before. Not for the obvious reason, though. “She has at least two days left,” he snapped, taking up his position on the sofa again.

“How do you--”

“Because I was a Death Eater, Draco!” roared Snape. “Shall we discuss in detail the legions of witches and wizards I have watched be tortured to death? Or will you, for the love of Merlin, trust me to know whereof I speak?!?”

Draco reared back in his chair, his teeth chattering. “I trust you! I just . . . she’s my mum!”

“Yes,” said Snape more calmly. “I do know that. And I swear to you that she will live until the morrow. But Draco? If I marry her and cast the counter tonight, I might well kill her. I am not in proper control of my faculties.”

Draco gave a cautious nod, the tension holding him taut unwinding a little. “You . . . you certainly aren’t.”

Snape turned to Harry then. “Do you need the Lillehammer?”

“Uh, no . . .” Harry had shoved the headache behind his Occlumency fire the moment it had threatened to bloom. He thought about saying so, then decided Snape might object to him using it that way. And really, the man didn’t need anything else to worry about!

“Very well, then.” Snape drew his wand and pointed it at the hearth. “*Incendio!*”

A huge fire erupted in the fireplace, orange flames viciously surging upwards, flinging themselves out of the confines of the Floo to lick against the stone ceiling several feet above.

“So,” Harry ventured when the flames finally settled down to a mere roar, “Tell us about--”

“I am not talking about that!” shouted Snape. “It is none of your concern what transpired between
myself and Maura! Or did you not hear me clearly say ‘Don’t!’ earlier?”

“About the wedding arrangements?” asked Harry mildly when the yelling ended.

Snape rubbed the sides of his nose, grimacing. “My apologies. That was ill-done of me. I am, shall we say, not myself.”

“Yeah, we understand. It’s all right.” Harry shot Draco a glance.

“Yes,” said Draco, a little more stiffly than Harry’s soothing tones had been. “I know this isn’t easy, Severus.”

“No, but needs must,” Snape said again. “The headmaster will come here tomorrow at ten in the morning to officiate. As a former Supreme Mugwump, he is still empowered to conduct such ceremonies. He will bring Madame Pomfrey with him so that she can assess Narcissa’s state of health as soon as the counter has been cast.” He ran a hand haphazardly through his hair, shoving it away from his face. “We need a witness in any case and the two of you are disqualified as involved parties.”

Harry wrinkled his brow a little. “Well, Draco would be, I guess, since he’s her son, but me?”

Snape stared at him. “And you are my son.”

“I know, I just thought, well, you know. I’m adopted, not . . .” Harry raised his shoulders.

“If you think that makes you less than a real son to me—”

“No! I thought it might make a difference to the fucking incompetent Ministry!”

“But not to you?”

“No,” said Harry again. “I know I’m your son and I know it’s perfectly real. I can’t remember, but yeah . . . it’s definitely real.”

“Good.” Snape’s lips twisted. “A word I doubted I would have use for on this accursed evening.”

Draco cleared his throat. “I’m sorry. I wish it wasn’t necessary, but . . .”

“But it is.”

“Dinner?” suggested Harry. “You slept through it.”

“Food holds absolutely no appeal. Drink is another matter.”

Harry nodded. “Tea? But it’s on the late side for that. Hmm, cocoa?”

“I think he means something more like firewhisky,” said Draco, standing up and holding out a hand. “Or your usual Galliano?”

Snape handed his wand to Draco and tipped his head back to rest atop the cushions again. “Single malt will do.”

Draco tapped the tip of Snape’s wand to the door of the man’s warded liquor cabinet. “Papisesswa! Oh, er, Pissipesswa! Hmm, Piwisspisswa?”

Snape launched himself from the sofa in a blur of black, a low growling noise erupting from his
throat as he closed the distance between himself and Draco. Snatching his wand, he pointed it at
the liquor cabinet himself. “Reducto!”

As with the fire spell, the magic emerged violently strong, shattering the liquor cabinet into a
thousand pieces, wood and glass and spilled liquor strewn across half the living room. Snape made
a noise of complete disgust and flung his wand to the surface of the dining table before dropping
into the nearest chair and hanging his head in his hands.

Harry heard a quiet banishing spell, and then the whoosh of the Floo as Draco stuck his head in the
fireplace, presumably to get some single malt from the kitchens. For his part, he pulled another
dining chair to face the one Severus was in. Sitting down in it, he rested his hands on the man’s
shoulders.

“It’ll be all right, Severus,” he said, making his voice as soothing and encouraging as he could.
“You . . . you got me through a lot last year, right? Well, we’ll get through this too. I’ll help you.”

Raising his head, Snape gazed at him with bleak, bleary eyes. “I don’t see how.”

Harry didn’t either, really, but admitting that sounded like a terrible idea. Then a better one came to
him. “You can talk to me, all right? Whenever you need to. I mean, when you feel frustrated or
upset or whatever, I don’t think you’re going to want to tell Draco about it. But you can come to
me. For whatever. For anything.”

Whatever Snape might have said to that remained unspoken, since by then Draco was back,
holding out a bottle of Ogden’s. “Will this do?”

“Those damned elves were told not three days past never to give you spirits under any
circumstances!”

“I didn’t ask them.” Draco pressed his lips together. “I . . . well, I fire-called the headmaster, and
said you needed a stiff drink, something stronger than what you kept in your quarters.”

Snape drew his brows together over black eyes suddenly gone furious. “You told my employer, the
head of the Order, that I needed—” He surged to his feet and snatched the bottle from Draco’s
hand, raising it high as though to hurl it toward the floor.

But the bottle didn’t go flying. Instead, Snape slammed it down onto the table, glared at Draco for
a moment more, and then said in a vicious tone. “Fuck it. Join me for a drink, both of you.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open.

Draco had a little more decorum, but his own shock was obvious from the way his eyes went wide.
“Um, I thought my punishment for Saturday was I wasn’t allowed a drop, not as long as I’m still in
residence as a student here—”

Snape’s glare in his direction was almost feral. “Did I, or did I not, just say to fuck it?”

Harry couldn’t help himself. A weak, almost thready laugh somehow crawled up his windpipe and
emerged, sounding like a hiccough that never quite got started.

Snape wasn’t done. “Well, did I? Or are the pair of you deaf, now?”

“You did,” replied Draco faintly.

“Well, then. Three glasses!”
Draco fire-called again, the kitchens this time, to get the glasses since all of Snape’s had been smashed. And then he poured, his hand shaking slightly. Harry nodded in approval when he saw the portions. Two glasses held just a scant half-inch, while the third boasted a good deal more.

Snape took the glass Draco extended and snorting, clinked it against both of theirs. He didn’t make a toast, though. Neither did Harry or Draco.

Harry sipped his firewhisky, letting just the barest drop slide down his throat. Even so, it seared him so much that he ended up spluttering. Draco drank his with more aplomb, but also only consumed a tiny fraction of what he’d poured.

Snape bolted half of what Draco had given him, then grabbed the bottle and topped his glass up again. When he’d finished all of that, he narrowed his gaze at Harry. “This time use Medire.”

Draco frowned. “What are you measuring?”

“I think he means sobriety potion.”

“Should it be necessary,” Snape added. Though that seemed fairly assured since by then he was topping up his glass again. He proceeded to raise it in a gesture that somehow looked ironic. “To sobriety potion.”

Draco looked like he might make a toast but thought better of it, instead venturing forth with a timid question. “Was Professor Morrighan very angry?”

Harry winced. He could tell that Draco just wanted to hear that everything was all right; he didn’t want to be responsible for ruining Snape’s life. The problem, though, was that everything wasn’t all right.

“Accio dictionary!” When the book came sailing, Snape thrust it out at Draco. “Look up desist since you’ve apparently forgotten the meaning.”


“Look it up,” ordered Snape in a menacing tone, staring at Draco until he actually did it. “Now do you understand, or shall we proceed to lines? Perhaps I should mention that I know numbers in excess of ten thousand. Perhaps I should mention that I know numbers in excess of ten million! Perhaps--”

“Jesus Christ,” Harry interjected before things could get even more tense. “He’s got the picture, Severus. He’s not stupid.” Harry looked straight at Draco as he went on. “He’s not going to ask you anything else about that. Not ever.”

Draco’s nod verged on frantic. “I won’t,” he promised. “I’m so grateful, Severus, you can’t imagine. I’ll be grateful to you forever and ever--”

“I am not doing this for your gratitude, you stupid boy.”

“I know, but I’m grateful all the same.”

Snape rolled his eyes a little. “Try not to develop a thanking-people thing, Draco. People might suspect Polyjuice.”

Draco raised his chin, looking a bit offended by that, but he wisely said nothing.
“And now for you, Harry,” said Snape in a silky tone as he topped up his drink once more. “If you do insist on cursing, consider doing so in a more wizard-like style. This is your culture now, I do believe. You intend to stay in the wizarding world for your life and career?”

“Says the man that just told us to fuck it,” Harry pointed out. “And yes, you know I plan to stay.”

Snape waved a hand rather expansively. “Ah but as my son it is your province to do as I say, not as I do. Is that not the saying?”

“It’s a Muggle saying,” said Harry dryly. “You’re killing your own argument.”

“I would much prefer to kill myself than marry a vicious shrew like Narcissa Malfoy.”

Draco bit his bottom lip, but managed not to reply to that.

“That’s the drink talking,” said Harry, shaking his head. “Come on, Severus. You don’t want to kill yourself. You’d never hurt Draco and me that way.”

Snape frowned, peering first at Harry and then at Draco, who had recovered enough by then to look back at him, his features composed even if his eyes were glinting with something. Tears or anger, Harry couldn’t really tell. “Perhaps I should drink alone.”

“No, stay here with us,” urged Harry. “But no more talk of killing.”

Snape ignored that entirely. “Maura should have killed me,” he lamented. “I deserve no less. Breaking my solemn promise! My word! My bond! My oath!”

“I wouldn’t have expected Dad to be a maudlin drunk,” said Draco in an undertone.

Harry waved a hand to hush him, and while their father was distracted, eased the bottle off the table, hiding it under his chair.

“But then, I made another oath, didn’t I,” lamented Snape. “Long ago, long before I could have dreamt that a lovely woman like Maura would look at me twice. When my mother died, in fact. I vowed then and there that nobody I loved would ever suffer from lack of a needed potion.” Snape slowly sighed, his fingers undulating against the side of his glass.

He looked over at Draco, then. “And now, well, this is not a matter for brewing, but the principle remains the same. I know very well what it is to suffer the loss of a beloved mother. How can I inflict the same upon my own son?”

“You can’t,” replied Harry softly when it looked like Draco was afraid of saying the wrong thing. “Of course you can’t.”

“He let her die,” Snape muttered, staring down at the splash of liquid that remained in his tumbler. “My father. She died because he spent his money advancing his useless so-called art, instead of on the potions that would have saved her. I hated my father for many reasons, but most of all because he let my mother die.”

“I . . . I wouldn’t have hated you, Severus,” said Draco. “This situation . . . it’s not the same thing.”

“Perhaps not to you,” said Snape, lifting his glass and draining the remaining contents. “But it seems much the same to me. And I will not become a man such as my father was. I will not be a man who stands by and watches as his son’s mother perishes. No matter the cost.”
“I’m sorry,” Draco said again, his tone much more helpless that time.

“Do not be.” Snape looked about as if searching for the bottle. “I am most certainly not doing this to make you miserable.”

“Then let’s not be miserable,” said Draco in a falsely bright tone. “I’ve got the dictionary already. So how about a game of Wizard’s Scrabble?” He waved his wand, and a moment later the game came flying, neatly landing on the table, where the box proceeded to pop its lid off.

“I think not.”

“What if we let all your E’s be worth five points?” wheedled Draco as another flick of his wand had the wooden tiles flipping blank-side-up onto the table. One more charm and they were whirling around each other like frenzied dancers.

Snape glowered.

“Harry?” asked Draco, giving him a work-with-me look.

Harry wasn’t sure what his brother wanted him to do. Convince Snape to play? That would just annoy him. “Um, well I’ll play. Maybe Dad can watch us.”

“In point of fact, I should retire for the evening--”

“No, no, we need you here,” insisted Harry, thinking fast. “I mean, I need you here. The dictionary’s not enough. I wouldn’t put it past Draco to invent words and claim they’re wizarding slang.”

“Do you truly suspect your brother would do such a thing?”

“Well, maybe. I mean, we both know that Draco’s pretty competitive, not to mention Slytherin--”

“Enough squabbling. I think I shall retire.” Snape made a motion as if to stand.

Draco bit his lip. “Harry’s right . . . I did actually make up words last year. So, best you stay.”

Snape’s nostrils flared as he sank back down into his seat. “You do realise, I hope, that it is something beyond pathetic to cheat at a simple word game.”

“Yeah, you tosser!” put in Harry. Just as well, though. “Well, that settles it. Dad has to stay.”

“Idiot children,” said Snape, shaking his head. “You truly need an arbitrer?”

“Not sure what that is,” said Harry brightly. “Don’t you get it, though? We want your company.”

"I really am a bit tired," Snape begged off, but Harry was having none of it.

"You're not going to brood all evening alone in your room," he announced. “Not a chance.”

Snape angled his head and gave Harry a strangely intense look. “Your memory appears to be improving.”

“Huh?”

“We have had this exact conversation before.”
That was news to Harry.

“And I really did cheat like mad last year whenever we played alone,” added Draco.

“Huh,” said Harry again. “I don’t remember that. I was just guessing. But anyway, don’t go off alone, Severus. Stay out here and keep us company. All right?”

Snape cast a long, doubtful look down the corridor that led to his bedroom, then turned back toward the table and plucked out a rail to hold his tiles. “I do believe . . . if I am going to stay, I may as well play.”

“Poetry to my ears,” drolled Draco. “Literally.”

“It just means he’s so good with words that he’s going to wipe the floor with us.”

“After the number of drinks he’s had?”

“Arbitrer?” Harry reminded his brother.

“Quizzex,” countered Draco.

“Huh?”

“Never mind.”

By then, Snape had chosen all his tiles. He’d also summoned the firewhiskey without Harry noticing, and was working his way through yet another glass.

Harry shook his head, but didn’t do anything else to stop Snape from drinking the lot. If anybody deserved a break from his dire thoughts, it was their father.

It was just too bad that starting tomorrow, those dire thoughts were going to become a grim, permanent reality.

_Bonded for life_ . . .

Harry shuddered, and tried to pay attention to the Scrabble game.
“Mmmnnmph,” mumbled Harry, rolling on his side, away from the fly that kept buzzing near his shoulder.

“Harry,” said the fly, shaking his shoulder harder that time.

Blinking, Harry sat straight up in bed and ran his hands through his hair. It took him a second to shake off the dream. Though it hadn’t been a dream at all, had it? Severus was crouching by the side of his bed, one hand resting atop the covers, the lit tip of his wand providing just enough light for Harry to see him.

“What . . .” Grunting a little, Harry tried again. “What time is it?”

“A bit past four o’clock.”

“In the morning?”

Severus quirked him a small smile as he waved his wand to light the wall sconces before casting a wordless Nox. “Yes, in the morning. I am sorry to wake you so early, but in the circumstances I saw no alternative.”

“All right, but quiet or we’ll wake up--” Harry’s thoughts skidded to a halt when his gaze collided with the empty, perfectly made bed across the room. Right. Draco had announced after Scrabble that he’d transfigure a chair into “something serviceable” so he could sleep at his mother’s bedside in case she needed him.

In case she worsened and he needed to alert Snape to marry her that instant, was probably more accurate, Harry had thought at the time. But Severus hadn’t said anything about the plan, so Harry hadn’t either.

Harry swiveled his legs off the bed, shivering a bit as his bare feet connected with the stone floor. A minute later he’d fished his socks out from the tangle of his bedclothes and slipped them on. Then he spent a moment studying Severus. “Do you feel all right? You drank the whole bottle.”

“And you measured correctly this time.” Snape rose from his crouch in one fluid motion. “I’ll let you get dressed. And then, I need your help, Harry.”

It only took a second for the penny to drop. “The countercurse.”

“Hehence the early hour.”

Harry didn’t really understand that comment, but Snape was out the door by then, closing it behind him, so he scrambled to get dressed. It was a little hard; he was sleepy enough to feel a bit
uncoordinated.

Snape was waiting by the Floo, his hands twitching a little as he held them at his sides. When he saw Harry, he scowled slightly. “Did I not specifically tell you to bring a cloak?”

“No, and why would I need one?”

Snape’s eyebrows drew together. “I cannot seem to hold onto a single thought.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m pretty sure you’re keeping track of at least a hundred, Severus, so stop being so hard on yourself. Accio cloak! There, problem solved. Where are we going?”

“I do not want to practise here for hours. I do not want to be here at all until I must.”

Ten o’clock, right. “Why would you expect it to take hours to learn the counter? It’s not complicated.”

Snape looked lost for a moment. “No? Draco said that after Black held you behind to teach you, it took close to the entire night.”

Harry smiled a little sadly, remembering those hours. “I learned the spell, and then we just spent the rest of the time talking. I didn’t want to leave him.”

“Ah.” Snape glanced about the living room as if in search of some kind of answer. Evidently, he found it when his gaze settled on the flask Harry had poured from the night before. “I would still prefer to absent myself until . . .” Clearing his throat, he started over. “I do believe my stock of sobriety potion will be woefully inadequate to my needs in future. I may as well take this opportunity to gather the morning dew needed to brew it. One moment.”

He disappeared into his private lab, returning with a black canvas bag that clinked as he carried it. “Shall we?”

“Um, maybe I should go let Draco know—”

“I am not quite that scatterbrained,” interrupted Snape. “I was loathe to wake him unless needed, so I left him a note, in addition to laying my own signal charm on him and on his . . .” His voice thrummed with distaste as he dropped it into a lower register. “On my fiancée.”

“I think you’re keeping up with a thousand things,” murmured Harry. “Anyway, where to?

“Will the meadow alongside the forest be adequate for you to teach me the counter?”

“Sure. And it probably collects a lot of dew. Though . . .” Harry swallowed. “Look, I know it’s not really my place to tell you how to behave, but do you really think it’s such a good plan to get drunk so much?”

“Isn’t that the pot calling the cauldron black?”

“I don’t get drunk all the time! It was just that once!”

“And you have seen me in my cups, I do believe, a grand total of twice.”

“But you just said you’re going to need a lot more of your sobriety potion!”

“I very well may.”
“What sort of example is that going to set for Draco and me?”

Snape leaned down and spoke alongside Harry’s ear. “A good one, if it keeps me from hexing her or worse.”

Harry ground his teeth together. “You have better self-control than that. And anyway, is that the example you want to set?”

Sighing, Snape straightened to his full height and cast Harry a baleful glance. “When I adopted you, I never anticipated that I would find myself on the receiving end of any rebukes between us.”

“Perils of a grown son.”

“You can lay claim to being grown, perhaps, when your age no longer ends in ‘teen,’” scathed Snape. “Perils of a much more confident son, though? I will grant you that much. And I will mention that morning dew is useful in a range of potions. Will that satisfy?”

Harry just nodded. He wasn’t under any illusions that he could really stop the man from drinking, if that was how he decided to deal with his unwanted marriage. “So, the meadow. Can we Floo through to Hagrid’s?”

Snape gave a long sigh. “You want to see more of Hagrid. Of course. I should have realised as much. Last year you were quite keen not to lose contact with him and what have I done this year but insist you focus on Draco and me to the exclusion of—”

He finally shut up, but only because Harry grabbed his arm and gave it a sharp shake. “I only mentioned Hagrid because his hut is closest to the forest, Severus! And if I want to see more of him, I certainly know how to arrange it. Why are you trying so hard to blame yourself for things?”

He got a dour look for his troubles.

“Yeah, all right,” muttered Harry. “Well, it’s no wonder you’re in a mood, considering. Anyway, I’m not sure Hagrid’s awake yet and I imagine it’s pretty rude to just stroll through his house without letting him know we’re coming.”

“The Great Hall,” announced Snape, reaching up to the mantle for some Floo powder. “Follow me.”

He vanished in a flash of green fire before Harry could so much as reply.

“Will this do?” asked Snape, gesturing around at the tall grass visible in the waning moonlight.

Harry nodded and took up a stance alongside his father, holding his wand out as Sirius had shown him. Arm angled upward, but wand tip pointed down. “The idea is to move your wand tip in a small circle, three times around. Anti-clockwise. And then, one short, sharp flick downwards, like you’ve conjured an egg and now you’re cracking it.”
Snape practised the motion a few times, then raised an eyebrow. “And the incantation?”

“A capite ad calcem.”

“From head to heel,” translated Snape.

“Sirius said I was doing it right, but you’ll be able to tell for certain, since you-- uh-- qualify to truly cast it,” said Harry, his voice trailing off near the end.

“Here,” said Snape abruptly, turning to face him and thrusting out a vial filled with a brownish sludge.

Harry had shoved the headache through his Occlumency fire before it could really even trouble him, that time. He was getting pretty good at that. “I don’t need the Lillehammer.”

“Are you finally coming to terms with my Death Eater activities, then?”

“Something like that.” Harry shrugged, since right now definitely wasn’t the time to get into it. Severus had enough to be going on with. He didn’t need even more worries.

Snape, it seemed, wasn’t willing to let the matter lie so easily. “You weren’t at ease with it even last year,” he said, dark eyes narrowed and focused squarely on Harry. “We had words about it. And then it seemed you were resolved to ignore the matter. But once you had amnesia, any mention of my Death Eater days began to trigger these terrible headaches, which shows me how much you must have been repressing your true feelings toward my past.”

Harry toed the loose soil of the meadow, looking down at his shoes as he spoke. “So? I guess I had some growing up to do.”

“And you expect me to believe that you have grown up overnight?”

“Why, is there some kind of statute against it?”

Snape took one step closer to him and settled a gentle finger on Harry’s chin, pushing slightly until Harry gave in and looked up at him. “Belligerence, Harry?”

“Maybe I don’t like being called a liar!”

“Maybe I don’t appreciate you being one,” Snape retorted. “And certainly not on a subject of this importance! So it doesn’t bother you any longer that I was once a Death Eater in absolute truth? I didn’t join the Dark Lord’s army in order to spy upon him, you realise! Is that perfectly clear? I did it out of hatred, and before I came to my senses about the utter idiocy of blood purist ideology, I witnessed far more than my share of torture and murder!”

Harry clutched at his head as searing waves of pain surged through him. Gasping, he clenched his eyes shut to focus on pushing the waves back and away, through the fire. But as Snape kept on snarling out horrible, horrible details, those waves grew stronger and stronger, pounding into his mind, trying to grind his brain down into sand--

Snape grabbed his shoulders and shook him, completely breaking his concentration. “Shall I describe those murders, Harry? The screams of the women, the flayed bodies of the children?”

Harry abruptly wrenched his body to the side, tearing himself out of Snape’s grip before he collapsed to his hands and knees and began to vomit in the grass.
“You’ve been using your Occlumency to block the headaches,” said Snape flatly. “And how much else? Every stray emotion you found unpleasant, Harry?”

“Well, I had to do something,” gasped Harry, another rush of sick coating his tongue until he spat it out. “I couldn’t go about quaffing headache potion all the time, and anyway your fucking Lillehammer was making me mental, all those memories rushing in like that. So I solved it! So what?”

“It’s dangerous,” hissed Snape, suddenly down in the grass beside him, a damp handkerchief in his hand as he mopped at Harry’s mouth. “Your mind can only take so much strain before it snaps! I believe you’ve seen Longbottom’s parents in person, yes? And Lockhart, now every inch the imbecile his idiotic books suggested.”

Harry heaved in a breath and moved slowly to sit down in the grass. Even that much motion made his stomach lurch. He ended up swallowing hard to quell another bout of nausea. “That— that was Obliviate, and the Crucius, not— not Occlumency—”

“She mind is the mind!” roared Snape. “And I told you, I warned you—”

“Fine then, so give me ten billion lines to write!” screamed Harry.

The meadow went abruptly, hauntingly quiet, the only noise drifting through it the sound of Snape’s harsh breathing and Harry’s pants as he tried to settle his stomach.

“I refuse to believe you think that of me,” said Snape at last. By then, he was sitting cross-legged in the grass, leaning back on his palms as he regarded Harry.

“What? Draco had a lot to say about your love of long-winded lines.”

“No doubt. Nonetheless, you do not really believe that I am going to punish instead of help you in a case like this.”

Since he hadn’t really punished them for getting drunk and ending up on Hogsmeade . . . yeah, that seemed unlikely. “But you can’t help me,” Harry said, turning his face away. The pressure in his head started swelling again, but he made himself say the rest anyway. “You did kill and torture people. Children! You said it yourself—”

“I said I witnessed all that,” Snape corrected. “Which is hardly to my credit. And make no mistake, I was every bit a Death Eater. But other than . . . my father, I did not kill on the Dark Lord’s command. Now, drink this.”

Harry shuddered. “It’ll make me lose my mind again, the memories—”

“Those, you may Occlude,” Snape allowed. “But nothing else, Harry. Not your anger, not your fears, not your dread of my past. You must resist the impulse, lest it become so ingrained that you begin to do it without thinking.”

Harry took the Lillehammer and quaffed it, sighing in relief as the familiar feeling of his head vanishing washed through him. “I . . . yeah, it was getting easier and easier to use the fire to . . .”

But then his eyebrows drew together. “But wouldn’t every Occlumens be doing this? It was dead useful.”

“How many are tapping into their deepest magic to do it?” Snape shook his head as he banished his soiled handkerchief.
“I wasn’t using Parseltongue, though.”

“Nor were you when you blasted out the windows in the Hospital Wing last year. And Occlumency as a mind-magic requires no incantations, in any case. You are drawing from your dark powers when you Occlude fiercely enough to instantly shed a headache that would otherwise require such a powerful potion as the Lillehammer.”

“So that’s it, then?” Harry sighed. “For the rest of my life I’ll need the potion, every time I get reminded of your-- of your--”

Snape rose to his feet and offered him a hand up. “No. We will solve it, and we will begin this very night. You have an appointment with the good doctor this evening.”

“I don’t want--”

“I don’t care.”

Harry gaped. “But it’s your wedding night!”

“Such as it is,” muttered Snape. “But that makes no difference to this. I have already arranged with the headmaster for both you and Draco to accompany Narcissa and myself to Grimmauld Place for a few days.”

It was a good thing Harry couldn’t feel his head. He was pretty sure it must feel like it was about to blast right off his neck. “You’re taking Draco and me on your honeymoon? You’re going to honeymoon in Grimmauld Place?”

“It will be no such thing,” protested Snape. “The woman is more than eight months along with another man’s child!”

“But your vows, you have to mean them!”

“I will.” Snape waved a hand when Harry tried to reply. “This is yet another reason why I wanted to leave my quarters, Harry. It did not feel right discussing such matters with Draco and his mother down the hallway, even with the protection of my best privacy wards.”

“My headache problem?” Harry narrowed his gaze. “You planned to trigger one!”

“Yes, if you would not admit on your own how you had been dealing with them.” Snape waved a hand again. “But I meant something else. Grimmauld Place. Harry . . . surely it has occurred to you how very convenient it is for Voldemort to have Lucius Malfoy’s widow living in my quarters?”

“Well, yeah,” protested Harry. “I told Draco she could be planning . . . I don’t know! But he wouldn’t listen. He just kept saying that the blood wards let her in, which has to mean she’s pure as the driven snow.”

“She is decidedly not that. I will agree that it is intriguing the wards would admit her, but neither Albus nor myself are disposed to wholly trust her on that basis alone.” Snape met his eyes. “And so we are going to Grimmauld Place for a few days.”

It took Harry a moment. “The portrait. You want to see what she might say to the portrait--”

“Yes. Albus has already layered some additional protections on it, so that Narcissa will not have complete privacy no matter what spells she may cast. And then, we will see. If she is indeed here at the behest of Voldemort, she may not be able to resist mentioning it to Lucius.”
“If she doesn’t say anything suspicious, that doesn’t mean much. She could still be here as part of some plot.”

Snape inclined his head. “She could. I know very well how Draco regards the matter. Since his mother is a Black, she surely recognized the Withering Witch and realised the curse was moving far faster than usual. With her husband missing, it is only to be expected that she would come here, to be with her son before she died.”

“Oh,” countered Harry, “Voldemort ordered her to come here. That’s why he had Bellatrix use this particular curse on her, so you’d have to marry her, and he could plant her as a spy right in the middle of our family.”

“Either explanation is plausible. And truly, Narcissa is probably too cagey for us to catch her out with the portrait, but Albus and I thought it worth a try.”

“I . . . I sort of thought you were so upset about marrying her that you hadn’t thought of all the implications,” said Harry slowly.

Snape frowned. “I wonder if I have thought of all of them. But those, at least, are obvious. Except perhaps to Draco.”

“Maybe you could use Legilimency to see why she’s really here.”

“I tried,” said Snape bleakly. “I found nothing to condemn her, but that means very little. I couldn’t push too hard without breaking her mind. And for Draco’s sake? I dared not.”

“Try again after you cast the counter, then.”

“Oh, I will. But it will surprise me very much if she is not a skilled Occlumens by now. It would certainly be a skill I would develop to my utmost in her place. After all, she knew that by not informing at once on the imposter playing Lucius, she was betraying Voldemort.”

“Or she was protecting herself, since she expected to be blamed for living with an imposter for any time at all.”

Snape nodded as he sighed. “Again, her actions can be seen in two different lights.”

"Are you sure about Grimmauld Place, though? The portrait's there, sure, but . . ." Harry cleared his throat. "She'll have to be added to the Fidelius."

"True, but it's not as though Narcissa is unaware the house exists. And too, its approximate location has been well-known to Voldemort for over a year, given the way Lucius Malfoy kidnapped you. It won't make much difference if she can enter the dwelling." Snape's nostrils flared. "I quite assure you, she won't be allowed to enter during Order meetings, and if she tries to leave behind any eavesdropping spells . . . suffice it to say that her magic is no match for the headmaster's."

Harry closed his eyes. "Or yours, I'm sure. But Severus? I really, really wish you didn't need to cast this counter."

He heard a long sigh. "Indeed. Speaking of the counter . . . shall we?"

“I guess there's no choice.” Harry tried to shake off his gloom as he pointed at a rock a few feet away. “You’re supposed to aim the spell at the top of her head, and it’s supposed to come out kind of a deep yellow colour, oozing over her once it hits.”
“From head to heel. Quite literal, those Blacks of old.” Snape changed his stance and seemed to gather his energies before extending his arm at a slight upward angle, his wand tip pointed downward, moving it in a circular motion as he began to incant. “A capite ad calcem!”

Nothing happened. Absolutely nothing.

Hmmm. Harry walked in a circle around Snape, glancing him over critically, trying to remember exactly how he’d performed the spell for Sirius. “Take one step forward as you cast, I think,” he murmured. “And I should have mentioned, you’re supposed to think about how you want to heal her. Or, um, heal the rock in this case, I suppose.”

When Snape tried again, a transparent spell emerged from the end of his wand. It moved a lot more slowly than most magic Harry had seen. It landed, blob-like, on top of the rock and then slowly oozed down over it, coating it completely.

“I thought you said it would be yellow?”

“That’s only if the target is actually your wife. Any other kind of target can’t accept the magic, is the way Sirius explained it. But the clear goo means you did cast it correctly.”

“And so my last paltry hope of escape dies an inglorious death.”

“Sorry.” Harry cleared his throat. “If you didn’t really want to learn it, we could have told Draco you tried but couldn’t manage . . . no, I don’t suppose you’d really have been willing to go that route.”

“You understand. If I can possibly save her, I have to do it.”

“Even though she might be working for Voldemort.”

“As I said.” Snape favoured him with a small, grim smile. “You understand.”

“Well . . . we still don’t really know for certain that you can heal her,” Harry pointed out. “I mean, we can’t know that unless you marry the rock first.”

“Don’t tempt me. I would much prefer it.”

“Sorry. I didn’t meant to--”

Snape’s hair swayed as he shook his head. “It is no matter. I cannot expect you to avoid all reference to the obvious. And too, it is not lost on me that you have sorrows of your own, Harry. I should have addressed the matter earlier. You have only one shard left, you said?”

Harry turned to the side, nodding.

“I was rather hoping you had announced that merely as a diversion, to keep Black from fading away when we needed him. It is true, then?”

“Why do you think I stayed there for hours and hours, talking?”

“Because you often do precisely that?”

Harry stiffened. “I didn’t realise you were keeping such close track.”

“I did not want you to forget to live,” Snape said softly.
“Well, no danger of that now.” Harry couldn’t help it that his voice was a bit bitter. “I’ll use my last shard someday, but not until I have something really important to tell Sirius. Something I want my parents to know. He can ferry them all the information he likes, you know. They just... can’t come to see me. They can’t, not ever.”

“I know. And I know it hurts. To be entirely cut off from someone you love?”

Harry wondered if Severus was thinking of Maura, or how he’d lost his mother, when he said that. But he wasn’t going to ask. “Yeah, but I know I was lucky to even have this much time with him. So I’m not going to complain. But yeah, it hurts.”

They stood there in silence for a moment, until Snape ventured, “It hurts me that you would not only Occlude away your uncomfortable feelings, but also tell me you are fine when you most certainly are not.”

“Oh, I was supposed to load you down with even more cares and worries at a time like this? On this exact day, when you’re getting married in a few hours to a woman we both think is more likely than not a spy for Voldemort? I’m not allowed to assume that you have enough to be going on with?”

“Bringing her, or any woman,” Snape said, emphasizing the last three words, “into our family does not mean that I am going to neglect you, Harry.”

“Well, I didn’t expect--”

“You should.”

“Yeah, but I just didn’t think that--”

“You should.”

“But--”

“You are entitled to your father’s love and care!”

Harry bit his lip to stop from objecting again and tried to think that through. He knew it was true, but he also knew it sort of wasn’t. He couldn’t quite make sense of his feelings. “You were really busy.”

“I don’t care if Merlin himself has come to tea!” shouted Snape. “Or if Draco needs a potion brewed, or if God forbid, my new wife is hanging off my arm like a disease! You are to come to me when you are troubled, not endanger your sanity by trying to manage on your own. Merlin’s blood, I thought we had surmounted this with the needles!”

Harry flushed. “Um, well... I can’t exactly remember.”

Snape clenched his fists for a moment, then suddenly thrust out both his hands, grasping Harry’s shoulders with fingers curled so tightly they felt like talons. “What would you say to Mr. Weasley if he was becoming addicted to taking Unbreakable Vows, but refused to speak to his father about it because Arthur was ‘really busy?’”

“Um, that he was acting brainless--”

“What would you say to Miss Granger if her teeth were falling out and she wouldn’t discuss the matter with her father?”
Harry blinked. “You know what a dentist is?”

“Don’t change the subject!”

“Well, it’s just different for me!”

“Because you do not truly have a father?” growled Snape, his grip tightening.

“Not that!” shouted Harry. “It’s me, I’m different, it’s not the same for me, is all! Because I, I don’t know how, I’m just used to managing on my own!”

Snape relaxed his hands, but used his palms to pull Harry marginally closer. “You believe that Ron and Hermione are entitled to whatever they need from their parents. But somewhere deep in your psyche, you cannot conceive of the same for yourself.”

Harry looked up in shock. “You . . . you never call them Ron and Hermione.”

“That is who they are to you.”

“Oh, God,” moaned Harry, twisting a little under Snape’s barely-there grasp. He ended up sideways, leaning one shoulder against the man’s chest. “You . . . you sound like you understand me.”

“Some,” admitted Snape. “More this year than last, odd as that may sound.”

“Yeah, you said I wasn’t being myself.” Harry groaned a little. He really did hate being such a nutter. “Um, but I did come to you when I was using a n-- n-- needle?”

Damn. The idea of it brought up a huge slew of feelings he didn’t want to think about. Insecurity. Vulnerability. Need. Trust. Being loved . . . he couldn’t remember, but that didn’t make him any less sure. It took everything he had not to shove it all through the fire. Then it came to him that maybe he didn’t need the fire, or at least he didn’t need it burning so strongly, tempting him with its high walls to use it as a barricade.

Cautiously, very cautiously, he tamped it down until it was just embers. Huh. So far, so good. He’d only started using it in the first place to ward off those memory surges. They didn’t seem to be happening just now. He didn’t know why not. Then again, he didn’t know why they’d started, either.

“Yes,” Snape was saying. “Eventually. You let the matter fester, literally, for far too long. But when things grew serious enough, you came to me.”

Harry sighed and twisted around again, this time so that he’d be facing Snape.

Or, no. Facing his father. Maybe that was the problem. He knew it was true, but he didn’t really think of Snape that way very often. He probably should. Though it was still too hard to toss the word around out loud. Maybe he could only do that when he wasn’t trying to. “I’m sorry, Severus. I’ll stop. And . . . and, and if I feel like things are getting to be too much, I’ll come talk to you instead of shoving everything through the fire.”

“Everything?” It was sort of scary, how dark Snape could make a single word sound.

“Well, my annoyance with Zabini, and how bad I feel for . . . er, Morrighan, sorry . . . and some of how much I love Luna, and . . . yeah, pretty much everything I didn’t want to think about. Plus every time I started to get a headache. Sorry,” Harry said again.
“That is far, far too much. I should have noticed sooner, what you were doing.”

“Not your fault. You told me not to do it, remember?” Harry scowled. “Well, Draco knew what he was talking about. Plots inside plots is right. You brought me out here to collect dew after you learned the spell, except you really wanted privacy so you could yell at me a bunch, except you also wanted away from Draco so you could clue me in about using the portrait to test Narcissa. Anything else? I mean, I’ll be disappointed if you don’t have seventeen reasons for our morning stroll.”

“You are mistaken if you think I wanted to yell at you. Or indeed, that I enjoyed it. I would much prefer to have been mistaken about what you were doing.”

“You shouldn’t have been able to trick me like that,” Harry suddenly realised. “You told me when we were talking about the chameleon that you didn’t participate in . . . that. And I believe that, Severus. So why am I so . . . so disturbed, whenever I think ‘Snape’ and ‘Death Eater’ in the same sentence?”

“I don’t know. It was the same last year. You knew about my ruse to maintain clean hands. I do not think you doubted me. Yet you were uneasy with the topic. It simply didn’t take the form of violent headaches.” Snape gave him a speaking look. “Yet one more reason why you should consult the good doctor.”

“I told you I didn’t want—”

“And I told you I didn’t care.”

Harry smiled, just a little. “Except, you do. You’ve just said so, over and over.”

“Quite.”

“Maybe you should have some sessions too,” said Harry, no smile about him that time. “I mean, I said you can talk to me and that’s still true. But maybe Marsha would also be a good idea?”

Snape raised his chin a little. “Oh, neatly done. Slytherin, in fact. If I object in the slightest, you will take that as leave to continue your own obstinace.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“All to the good if your cunning comes naturally,” said Snape, his voice smooth that time. “I told you from the very first that it would require cunning to win this war.”

“The very first?” mocked Harry. “I seem to remember that your first lesson to me was that fame wasn’t everything.”

“When I first began to know you for you,” Snape corrected in a gruff tone. “And now we should probably resume our tasks. A few more rounds of practice; by then it should be the perfect time to gather dewdrops.”

“Just a couple of things more. I understand the plan about the portrait. But, um, I don’t really know why that means I should come along to Grimmauld Place.”

“It will make it easier to arrange some sessions with the good doctor, given that I will not be in residence at the castle.”

“Now it’s sessions, plural,” groaned Harry. “Fine. What else?”
“I would like to be near you in case you find your fire too tempting to resist.”

Yeah, that made sense. By now, though, Harry was starting to think he had a better sense of who this man, his father, really was. “And? Come on, don’t you always have ten reasons for every action?”

“Hardly ten,” scorned Snape. “But since you ask, it could be very instructive to watch Narcissa Malfoy react to you. She has no extensive theatre training, you understand, nor any experience of spying. She is not likely to be able to hide her true motives for long, especially when she is forced to be in close proximity to Voldemort’s very own nemesis.” Snape shrugged. “When we return to the castle, you will be in classes or Gryffindor much of the time.”

“So, plots inside plots again. Do you never stop?” Harry didn’t wait for an answer. “Are we . . . are we really not going to tell Draco what’s going on, why he and I are coming along on your honeymoon?”

“Stop calling it that.”

“But are we?”

Snape bent down a little to put their faces on the same level. “What do you think we should do?”

“I don’t like leaving him out. But, I’m not sure he can be rational on this subject. I mean, we all but know she killed her own second cousin’s uncle or some-such. For money. And Draco acts like that’s nothing. Or like it’s to her credit since she did it to help him!”

“And so?”

“Yeah, we can’t tell him,” said Harry, giving a clod of dirt a good kick. “If she turns out to be evil, he’s going to hate us for knowing her better than him, all along. And if she turns out to be here just because she was scared, not because of some scheme, he’s going to hate us for not trusting her and for lying about it. So either way he’s going to hate us.”

“And so?”

“So we still can’t tell him. The whole situation ronks.”

Snape straightened up and clasped his hands in front of him. “At least you don’t have to marry the woman.”

“No, I just get to have her for a step-mother.” The word actually tasted nasty in his mouth. “But you know, I feel a bit better now. At least I know you don’t really trust her either.”

“I do not. But I have to admit the possibility: perhaps she will prove us both wrong.”

“Perhaps pigs will grow wings and fly.”

“Not an apt reply in the wizarding world.”

That was true enough. Harry thought a second. “Perhaps brooms won’t fly? Perhaps photos will stop moving?”

“Better.” Snape took up his casting stance again, and waited until Harry was watching him closely. “A capite ad calcem!”
Snape was serious about not going back home until he had to. After they’d gathered a dozen vials worth of fresh morning dew, he and Harry breakfasted in the kitchens with just the elves for company. Dobby seemed in high spirits. He eagerly chatted with Harry, showing off his newest hats and boots as he strutted back and forth on the tabletop while the other elves bustled about preparing mountains of porridge and heaps of fried tomatoes.

Snape watched it all in silence, but Harry could hardly blame him for that. Ten o’clock, after all, was getting closer and closer all the time.

He did take Dobby aside for a “private word” while Harry was finishing his sausages. Whatever it was, it seemed to involve a lot of nodding. On Dobby’s part, that was, not Snape’s.

“What was that all about?”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Are you the one in need of a dictionary, now? I do believe I termed it a ‘private’ word.”

Fine, fine. For all Harry knew, Dumbledore had been daft enough to order some celebration food to follow the wedding, and Snape had just cancelled it.

After that, Snape walked Harry up to the Tower so he could fetch Sals to bring along on their impromptu holiday. “And speak with Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley,” he added. “There will be an announcement of the marriage tomorrow in the *Prophet*. I shudder to think what your friends will assume if you go missing just as they learn about your new family situation.”

Yeah, that probably wouldn’t go over too well.

Harry lowered his voice, though really, nobody was about and this hallway didn’t even have portraits. “Can I tell them, you know . . . why?”

Snape stared at him for a moment as they walked along. “Yes,” he said at last. “I learned last year that your friends are a great strength for you. But please, do ask them to keep their own counsel. I would rather the entire wizarding world not know how easily I can be controlled via a threat to one or both of my sons.”

Which meant, Harry supposed, that Snape would be equally willing to marry Lily Potter if some dire circumstance made it necessary. He shook off the strange thought in a hurry, finding it more than a little disturbing. In fact, it made him wonder how Draco could be so accepting of this marriage. But then, Harry didn’t know what it would be like to be afraid your mother would die. He couldn’t even imagine feeling that way.

"Don't forget to fetch your snake," added Snape as they approached the entrance to Gryffindor. "You usually brought Sals along whenever we decamped from the castle for holidays."

"All right," said Harry, wondering if Snape had sixteen reasons for that as well. Did he want Harry to practice casting in Parseltongue so he wouldn't be so dependent on those ribbon sweets? Though Harry had been telling himself for a while that he ought to get his dark powers back completely. It
seemed like he never had time to focus on it. But maybe a week without classes would help.

“Password?” demanded the Fat Lady in her usual imperious tone.

Harry was about to recite the bawdy limerick that Seamus had picked out last week, but Snape had stepped in front of him and was staring pointedly into the Fat Lady’s painted eyes.

She looked back fearlessly, at least until Snape spoke two words with what seemed like murderous intent.

“Pine oil,” he whispered, his voice all the more menacing for being quiet.

The door swung open soundlessly, the Fat Lady gaping like a fish out of water.

“I don’t know why she looks so surprised,” said Snape conversationally as he stepped through into Gryffindor. “I’m well-known for threatening uncooperative portraits with turpentine.”

Harry smothered a laugh. “That’s the secret? That’s how to get past any of them?”

“They have to believe you’ll brew it. And even then, some will prove uncooperative.”

Harry decided not to ask if Snape had ever followed through on the threat. “Um, all right, I’ll be a few minutes. Why don’t you--” Uh-oh. He didn’t want to suggest the man go home. He didn’t want to kick him out at all, in fact, but he couldn’t really imagine that Snape had any interest in hanging about in the Tower--

“Why don’t I avail myself of the comfortable seating in your garishly appointed common room?” asked Snape, looking about as darkly amused as Harry had ever seen. “Thank you, Harry. What an excellent idea.”

“You’re just going to sit here as students wander down to go to breakfast?”

“Gryffindors for breakfast, how very delightful.”

“Stop it,” laughed Harry. “Droll and evil is a terrible combination.”

“And there I thought my commentary on student essays was a brilliant synthesis of the two,” murmured Snape. “Go, Harry. I dare say your housemates will survive the shock of seeing me here. You know perfectly well I’ve been to Gryffindor before.”

“Don’t make them pee their pants,” gasped Harry, and fled.

Harry went to his own room first. Sals was asleep in her little box, but she twined readily enough around Harry’s fingers when he whispered softly to her. A moment later, he was tucking her into his pocket and rousing Ron, who was sleeping with a pillow covering his head. Then he sent Ron to get Hermione, since he wasn’t sure if his status as a Slytherin prefect would let him climb the
He met them in a secluded alcove with a window seat where students sometimes liked to read, but more often to snog. Before they’d even arrived, he’d cast his best privacy wards, even fishing a ribbon sweet out of a pocket so he could layer some Parseltongue magic on top of the regular spells. With Sals winding between his fingers as he cast, though, he started to wonder how he could get away from needing the sweets. “So... I have some news.”

Hermione covered her mouth and spoke through her fingers. “Draco’s mum? Oh, dear. He’ll be so upset--”

“Draco’s mum, but not the way you think.” Really, Harry didn’t have the slightest idea how to tell them. “Don’t panic, all right? But, um, she’s going to die for sure unless she gets this special healing magic, and um, Snape’s the only one who can cast it, long story. But the healing spell is marriage-linked so, yeah, that’s the important part. He’s going to marry her.”

“He’s going to marry her,” Hermione repeated slowly. “Your father is going to marry Draco’s mother?”

“Ewww.”

“Well, he’s not going to let Draco watch her die if there’s a way to avoid it!”

“But marrying her?” Hermione pursed her lips. “Whose brainstorm was this? Let me guess... Narcissa’s? Because it can’t have been his! Isn’t he in love with Maura Morrighan?”

“It was Sirius who realised Snape could heal her, actually,” said Harry coolly. “It’s got to do with the intricacies of some old spell his family used a lot. Snape wanted me to explain things to you so you wouldn’t worry when you see the wedding announcement tomorrow. Because I won’t be here to ask. We’re all going away on a holiday, Draco included.”

“You’re going along on Snape’s honeymoon,” said Hermione. Harry thought he’d better not get into how it wasn’t really a honeymoon. That was really Snape’s private business. So he had to make something up. “Yeah. You know, so we can all, you know, bond.”

“So you can bond.”

“Would you stop that?” hissed Harry. “Repeating me like that?”

“I’ll stop when you say something less vapid,” snapped Hermione. “The last I heard, you didn’t want a step-mother at all. You certainly don’t want her.”

“So I’ll just let Draco know you’d rather she die?” Harry’s fringe flew out as he blew out a breath. “I don’t like any of this, but I can’t exactly object. I mean, Luna was right. I love him and he loves her, so I’m just stuck. So is Snape.”

Hermione scowled. “I suppose you are, at that. Poor Draco.”

“He’s afraid that Severus will resent him,” murmured Harry. “But you know, Sirius said that Draco might like the idea, and on some level I think he does. I mean, this way he gets to have both his mum and the man he really thinks of as his father. When just last year he was repudiated by his family and didn’t really have anyone.”
“He had you,” said Ron. “It took you a while, but then? Yeah. You even told me how grand it was that you got to be a brother.”

“And now I get to be a stepson,” said Harry, shivering a little. “I already know what it’s like to be the one who doesn’t fit in, in a family, the one who doesn’t really belong.”

“Oh, mate.” Ron slung an arm around Harry’s shoulders and gave him a fierce squeeze from the side. “It’s not the same. You were never wanted there. Now you’ve got a father who actually chose you, so of course you belong!”

“All three of them are Slytherins!”

Hermione and Ron exchanged a glance, then chuckled.

Harry glanced down toward his chest, but of course his cloak didn’t have a crest the way his school robes did. “Yeah, all right. Point taken.” Some part of him, though, had to ask the rest. “You . . . you really believe I’m sort of Slytherin? I usually just think of that as sort of a formality.”

“You told me last year about the Sorting Hat saying you’d be great in Slytherin.” Ron smiled. “I didn’t take it so well. But we got past that, and you know what, Harry? You are great in Slytherin. And Gryffindor too.”

“You lot are really good friends.”

“Yeah, and Snape’s a really good dad, and Draco, I guess he’s not such a bad brother. And this new thing, with his mum . . .” Ron made a face. “That’s just having a family. Things twist and turn and you have to just adapt.”

Hermione was nodding, though she didn’t look very happy. Then again, neither did Ron. It was more like they were both resigned, now. But supportive. About all Harry could ask for.

“I won’t be in classes today either,” he hastened to tell them. “The wedding’s this morning. Oh, and um, Severus said I could tell you why he’s marrying her, but he’d really rather not have it spread around. All right?”

Ron snorted. “Like we want to get on his bad side. No, thank you. Been there, done that.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, but then realised that was a story best left to another time. “I’ll see you in a week or so, I think.”

“I’ll take notes in class for you!” called Hermione as he cancelled his privacy wards and headed back down to where Snape was waiting.

When Harry reached the far edge of the common room, Snape was leaning forward in his chair, his voice slow and silky as he spoke to a first-year girl. "And so," he was saying, "that is why I highly recommend that you improve your Potions scores, Miss Dankworth. Post-haste, mind you."
The little girl was shaking in her boots, practically in tears. "B- b- but, b- b- but, I'm trying my best, Professor. I am, I am--"

"Alas, for I fear that makes no difference to my pressing need for ingredients--"

"Oh, stop it, sir," said Dean, brushing against Harry as he reached the bottom of a curved staircase. He went straight to the Dankworth girl and gave her shoulder what looked like a comforting rub. "He's not really going to chop off your toes to use in Gouty Goat Goulash, Dagmar."

She leaned into Dean, hiding her face from the Potions Master, before whispering, "H- h- how do you know?"

Dean looked over Dagmar's head to glare at Snape. "Well, in the first place, there's no such potion as Gouty Goat Goulash."

"Which Miss Dankworth would know, if she ever bothered to crack open her Potions book--"

"And in the second," added Dean, raising his voice a little, "Professor Snape here is Harry's dad. You met Harry, remember? Well, ever since the professor adopted him, he doesn't really hate us Gryffindors, but old habits die hard, and he just can't resist teasing, now can he?"

"Mr. Thomas!" snapped Snape.

Dean just smiled.

"No points from Gryffindor, either," said Harry before Snape could announce some.

Snape turned his head toward Harry's voice, scowling slightly. "That is my prerogative, I do believe. It is most certainly not yours."

"True, but you still aren't going to do it." Harry's confidence wavered a little when Snape kept staring at him, his black eyes narrowed. "Are you?"

The man sniffed slightly. "Well, you did help me gather several vials of dewdrops. I suppose I owe you a boon."

Dean moved away from Dagmar, who proceeded to run full-speed up the nearest staircase. "Ha, dewdrops! Looks like your punishment for going drinking in the village is you have to learn to brew a sobering solution, Harry."

"Yes, a sound notion indeed," drawled Snape as he rose from his chair in one smooth motion and whirled around to face his son. "And how convenient that I may find myself with abundant free time to instruct you in the next few days."

Dean snorted, probably at the look on Harry's face. Then he went still. "Free time, sir?"

"Was I mumbling?" asked Snape, looking down his long nose in a way that suggested he towered over the student he was speaking with. The effect was more-or-less ruined, though, by the fact that Dean was pretty tall these days. "Should you need more information, I suggest you read tomorrow's morning paper."

With that, he turned to Harry. "We have other business to attend to. Come along."

Dean smirked a little. "Be good!" he called out to Harry as they left.
"What needs doing?" asked Harry as soon as the portrait swung closed, leaving him in the corridor with his father.

"Nothing of note. I simply didn't care to trade barbs with stray Gryffindors any longer."

"Well, if you wanted to rush out, we could have flooed back to your quarters."

"I would rather walk back. Slowly."

Yeah, that made sense. "Speaking of barbs . . . it's pretty mean to threaten a first-year's toes, you know."

Snape scoffed as he walked along. "I told her I needed them for goulash, of all things. How was I to know she would take the matter so seriously?"

Harry couldn't help but sigh. "I don't think you understand how scary you are to an eleven-year old, Severus."

"And she never does read her Potions book," added Snape, nostrils flaring.

"So she deserves to be terrorized?"

Snape paused half-way down a staircase. "Merlin, you're full of rebukes these days."

"Sorry," said Harry, though really, only part of him was. "I know it's probably not a good day for it."

"It's not a good day at all, but my own comment wasn't meant as a critique," said Snape, leaning against a wall so he could study Harry carefully. "It goes back to what I said about confidence. This year, you're much more able to tell me what you really think. You aren't nearly as willing to subsume your true opinions in hopes of securing my approval."

"Yeah, well that sounds like a better way to be." Harry shook his head. "I don't like the picture you keep painting, Severus. I was really so desperate for a family? I just ignored all your bad behavior?"

"I don't think it was that, not precisely," murmured Snape as he pushed off from the wall and resumed their downward trek. "I wouldn't say you overlooked things. There were times when we had words. But still, you weren't nearly as forthright with your thoughts. You were more apt to use persuasion than outright insult."

"I didn't insult you!"

"You called me 'mean.'"

"Well, you were mean."

"Hence the insult."
Harry raised an eyebrow. "Did it really bother you that much? You can't take a little honest criticism?"

Snape's robes flared a little as he turned to glance at him while they walked. "You are missing my point entirely. I am saying that I approve of these changes, Harry. You are less hesitant with me now, and more openly Gryffindor. But that means you are being yourself, so I approve of that as well."

"Really," said Harry doubtfully. "Dean was right? You don't hate Gryffindor like you used to?"

"If you could remember, you would know that." Snape sighed. "I told you that I could not love you and still hate your house, not when it is such a large part of who you are."

Harry chewed his lip. "That's . . . I guess I didn't expect that. I mean, you still do say wretched things about Gryffindors. Eating them for breakfast comes to mind."

"Mr. Thomas was right about a great deal. Old habits do die hard. But I think you understand me, Harry. I favour sardonic humour. For good reason."

It took Harry a second to follow the man's last comment. "Oh. You mean . . . um . . ." He didn't want to say more, not out in public like this. Not that anybody was about.

Snape flicked his wand. "Muffliato. Now even the portraits will merely hear mumbles. And yes, I mean the reason you keep needing the Lillehammer. Among other things, including my childhood. The good doctor would no doubt term my caustic wit a coping mechanism."

"We all have those, I'm sure," murmured Harry. "Mine would be, er, I don't know. Learning to sneak food out of the kitchen every chance I got. And run fast to get away from Dudley."

"Anything else?" asked Snape, his voice quiet.

Yeah, of course there were other things. Harry would have to be daft not to know that much. He didn't want to talk about them, so he just shook his head and kept walking down the sloping corridors leading to the dungeons.

Snape didn't press for more, though he probably wanted to. Anything to keep his mind off what awaited him in his quarters.

A few minutes later, they reached them.

Snape pulled in a long, bracing breath, and then gestured for Harry to tap out the sequence that would make the door appear. Then, a look a grim determination creasing his features, he reached for the door handle and stepped across the threshold.

"Severus," said Draco in a breathless voice the moment the man entered the living room.
"Yes."

Again, Harry had the feeling that his father was answering something else completely. Then he noticed that Draco was wearing dress robes, of all things, his shoes gleaming brightly like they'd just been polished. There was even a small blue flower pinned next to his prefect's badge. None of it seemed appropriate, in the circumstances.

"Why are you dressed up?" hissed Harry as he stepped forward. "This isn't something to celebrate and you know it!"

"No," said Snape slowly, but not to agree with Harry, as it turned out. "Your brother is quite correct. I need to see to my own attire. Are your dress robes here, Harry? If not, I feel certain that Draco can transfigure something for you."

Harry stared as Snape strode down the hallway to his bedroom, then whirled to face Draco. "I don't get it. He's not happy. Why would he care what anybody wears?"

Draco crooked a finger to beckon Harry to their bedroom. "It's not about happiness. It's to show respect for the magic."

Wizarding culture, again, surmised Harry. Or maybe pureblood culture. Though even Muggles respected marriage enough to usually dress up for the ceremony.

"I know you don't have your dress robes here. I checked," Draco was saying. "So I thought, maybe this?"

He held out a robe tailored to look much like his own.

"That's a pretty impressive transfiguration--"

Draco flushed. "It's not. I can try to make something if you don't want to wear my spare dress robes, but I never have quite mastered the fine art of tailoring . . ."

"Don't be ridiculous," chided Harry as he carefully scooped Sals out of his pocket and set her down on his bed.

"Isss the big furry creature here?"

Harry glanced at Draco, who was staring down at Sals with revulsion twisting his mouth. "Is your ferret anywhere around?"

"Loki's in Slytherin."

Harry assured his snake that she wasn't in danger of being eaten, and watched her coil around and close her eyes. Then he took the garment Draco was extending and slipped it on. "Hmm. These robes are a little long on me, but I suppose they'll do."

"Excellent." Draco summoned a bit of lint and deftly transformed it into a flower to match his own. "There. Will that do?"

He sounded anxious, and Harry doubted the cause was really the quality of the flower. "It'll work out all right, Draco. It will."

"Merlin, I hope so." When Draco met his eyes, his own silver ones looked haunted. "I don't want to lose my mother, Harry. But I don't want to lose my father or brother, either."
Harry settled a hand on the other boy's shoulder. "You won't, I promise. Isn't that clear by now? Nobody's making you choose. We'll find a way to make it work."

"But..." Draco bit his lip so hard that a droplet of blood welled forth from the tiny cut. "How can it, really? I'd hate anyone who made me marry against my inclinations! Sooner or later he's not going to be able to stand the sight of me!"

"He's too good a father for that," said Harry. "You know he is. You told me so, yourself."

That made Draco smile, even if the expression was a bit wry. "Very funny."

Harry flicked his wand to check the time. "It's nearly ten. Do you need more time to, er--"

"Compose myself?" Draco drew in a long, slow breath. "No, I'm ready. Though could you heal my lip?"

Harry nodded and cast the charm. When they went back out into the living room, Dumbledore and Pomfrey had arrived. Both were also dressed in formal robes, Harry noticed. Snape emerged a moment later, his own dress robes a blue so deep and dark that they almost appeared black. Whenever he moved and the light played across them, though, the blue hue glimmered into life.

"Shall we?" he asked, gesturing toward Narcissa's sick room.

"I thought out here," said Draco. "I'll give her the Pepper-Up and help her walk. If she's not strong enough, then..."

"Of course, Draco," said Snape, nodding slightly.

Harry thought it took forever for Narcissa to emerge, even though he knew that probably only two minutes had elapsed. Maybe it was the way nobody was talking. Dumbledore was staring at Snape, and Pomfrey kept looking from Harry to Snape to Dumbledore, and Harry was trying not to look at anybody at all.

Finally, a faint hum of music began floating on the air. Draco's idea, obviously. But Snape didn't look annoyed, so maybe this was one more way to show respect for the magic.

Draco stepped into view, his mother at his side. She wasn't wearing her sick clothes any longer, but at least Draco hadn't dressed her all in white. Narcissa's gown was a shimmery gold edged with a pale blue flounce that matched the color of Harry and Draco's flowers.

It was hard to notice much more about her clothes, though, because the woman herself was such a sight. She was leaning heavily against Draco, lurching as she walked, her skin even more papery and grey than it had been the day before. And she was skeletal, so skeletal. She really did look at the edge of death, and it was almost inconceivable that she was on her feet at all. Or breathing, for that matter. She was practically a corpse. A walking, breathing corpse.

Clearly, it was only the Pepper-Up that was animating her.

Harry swallowed hard. He didn't want Snape to marry her, that was true enough. But seeing her like this... It was positively hideous, what the curse was doing to Narcissa Malfoy, and he was suddenly ashamed of himself, ashamed of the way he'd thought she was evil enough to deserve this. Nobody deserved to rot away while they were still alive.

Dumbledore must have been alarmed at the sight of her as well, since he wasted no time in starting the ceremony. The instant Draco had lain his mother's hand atop Snape's waiting one and stepped...
to one side, he began.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are gathered here today to recognise the union of two souls," he solemnly intoned, his wand held parallel to the floor in front of Snape and Narcissa's joined hands. "If there be any here who have just cause to offer against this union, let them speak now or forever hold their peace . . . . Then in the presence of these witnesses, I do ask, who gives this woman into the estate of honourable matrimony?"

"I do," said Draco quietly, his voice shaking a little.

"And who gives this man?"

_Crap_, thought Harry. Somebody should have warned him. But there was nothing for it but to say, "Er, I guess I do."

Dumbledore favoured him with a beatific smile. Snape just stared straight ahead, his lips set in a grim line.

"Do you, Severus Augustus, take Narcissa Aquila, to be your wedded wife? Do you promise to honour and cherish her, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, all the days of her life?"

"I do," said Snape, in a low voice thrumming with intent.

The word "love" wasn't in the vows, Harry noticed. He wondered if that was typical for wizarding weddings, or if Snape had arranged it with Dumbledore so that he could truly mean his promise.

"And do you, Narcissa Aquila, take Severus Augustus to be your wedded husband? Do you promise to honour and cherish him, in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, all the days of his life?"

Narcissa opened her mouth to reply, moving her tongue and lips as though she were trying, but no sound emerged. Harry saw Snape squeeze her hand slightly as Draco took a half-step forward. "I . . . I d- do," she managed to croak out, every word a painful wheeze.

"Then by the power vested in me by magic itself, I do declare you bonded for life," finished Dumbledore, waving his wand aloft to shower the couple with starbursts that whirled around them. To Harry's horror, Snape gathered the corpse-like Narcissa into his arms, clasping her close and bending his head to kiss the bride, even though the headmaster hadn't said to. But maybe it was needed for the bonding magic to take hold.

The starbursts spun down and down, disappearing into the stones of the floor, as Snape stood up straight again and stepped back from Narcissa, who swayed on her feet until Draco rushed forward to steady her. "Here, mother," he said gently. "Sit, sit."

She sank into the chair he summoned close, collapsing, as limp as a rag doll, her head lolling precariously to one side.

Severus took three steps backward, assuming the casting position he'd practiced in the meadow before twirling his wand three times before executing a sharp, vertical snap. _A capite ad calcem!_"

A yellow blob of goo oozed out the end of his wand, stretching itself out toward Narcissa until it hovered over her head and abruptly fell downward to coat her hair and then her shoulders. Like a giant egg yolk, it dripped like a curtain down across her robes, turning her a bright shade of sunshine wherever it touched. And then, it soaked through her clothing at the same instant that it vanished from her hair and skin.
Narcissa sat up straight and blinked, turning her head left and right as she looked about as if she wasn't quite sure where she was or what had happened. Even before Pomfrey began casting diagnostic spells, though, Harry could tell that the countercurse had done its job. The woman's colour was much better, waves of pink and cream washing into her skin as Harry watched. Her hair, which had been hanging in brittle hanks before, grew thick and lustrous before their eyes, a shining golden cascade of gently curling strands. When she tried to stand, though, she staggered slightly.

"Mother?" asked Draco, his voice squeaking, while Dumbledore questioned in more sombre tones, "Poppy?"

The mediwitch continued casting for a moment, her eyebrows furrowing. "There's absolutely no trace of dark magic about her any longer. Nor any remnant of the curse. Not even a tendril."

"Oh, good." Draco took one of his mother's hands in both of his own, a gesture Harry had seen him do dozens of times in the past few days. "Do you understand, mother? You're healed. Aunt Bella cursed you, but you're healed, now."

She was still gazing about rather dazedly. Her eyes were a brilliant sky blue, now, the whites the shade of purest snow, but they were unfocused. Confused.

"Mother?" asked Draco again, this time in tones of panic.

"Draco," said Severus calmly from his position a few feet away. "Give her a moment. She's been through a terrible ordeal."

"Indeed she has," murmured Pomfrey, walking in a circle around Narcissa as she cast something toward her feet and legs. "The curse is gone, but it will be some time before your mother's full strength returns. Her core is severely depleted." She glanced over at Harry. "It takes time to recover completely when one's magic has been damaged."

Harry started to bristle, but then it occurred to him that she might be talking that way at the headmaster's request. Yeah, if the woman was spying for Voldemort, it wouldn't hurt to talk up Harry's magical injuries, he supposed. Of course, knowing Pomfrey, she might just be acting her usual fussy self.

"Draco?" asked Narcissa suddenly, her hair sweeping in a graceful circle as she quickly turned her head to stare at him. "Oh, Dragon! My treasure!"

To Harry's surprise, her eyes filled with tears that overflowed and slowly trailed down her cheeks. By then, her complexion had completely recovered and could only be described as peaches-and-cream with a touch of pink along her cheekbones. With the golden dress completing the picture, she looked like something out of a storybook. An angel, maybe.

Harry almost scowled. He didn't want Narcissa Malfoy to be every bit as beautiful as Draco had always claimed. But God damn it, she was. She really was.

She closed her eyes, almost clenching them as her lips twisted in a grimace. "Bellatrix," Harry heard her moan, the words just a thin thread of sound. "The Withering Witch. My own sister..."

"But it's over, mother," said Draco anxiously. "Did you hear Madame Pomfrey? The curse is gone."

That had her eyes snapping open. She looked around again, but with focus and intent this time, scanning the room until her gaze rested on the man standing farthest from her. For a long moment
she simply stared at him, her expression blank of any emotion at all, though her cheeks were still wet with tears. And then the blue of her eyes seemed to soften as Harry watched, shifting toward a more pastel shade as the faintest hint of a smile curved the corners of her mouth.

"Yes," she said. "I understand. Everything. Thank you, Severus. Thank you."

Damn, even her fucking voice was beautiful.

Snape merely inclined his head in response, his dark hair swaying slightly as he moved.

Draco waited a moment, but when it seemed that Snape wasn't going to reply out loud, he cleared his throat a bit and began gesturing to the others in the room. "You know the headmaster, and you remember Madam Pomfrey from your own school days, I think. And this is my brother, Harry Potter."

Narcissa smiled a tiny bit more than before, her eyes softening further as she glanced indulgently at Draco. "I am aware, my Dragon." She turned toward Harry then, extending one slender hand as her gaze met his. Harry almost stepped back, but not because he was afraid of shaking her hand. It was just that the force of her beauty was hitting him head-on as she focused all her attention on him. Truly, she was something close to dazzling. And that, despite the fact that she was leaning on Draco more now than a moment earlier; she was clearly still weak and frail. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr Potter."

Harry shook her hand, one part of his mind wondering if he was supposed to kiss the top of it, instead. But that wasn't on.

"You're married to our father, now," chided Draco. "I'm sure we can all be on first-name terms."

"No, that's all right," said Harry in a rush. "I'd rather call your mother Mrs. Mal--"

Oh, God. He couldn't call her that any longer, could he?

She didn't look offended. Gently amused, perhaps. "Narcissa will do better, I think," she murmured.

"Speaking of names," said Dumbledore, drawing a folded parchment out of a robe pocket and peering at it through his spectacles. "This would appear to be in order. Though I'm afraid the bonding magic has recorded your name on the certificate as Narcissa Malfoy Snape, my dear. I do hope that doesn't give you any pause."

She shook her head slightly, though her lips were pursed. "Severus?"

He shrugged, and spoke his first words to her since the ceremony. "You've been tied into the manor wards for more than a decade, after all."

Narcissa shuddered. Harry wasn't sure why, but when she spoke it was clear she was remembering her last days there. "Did the werewolf recover?"

"Yes, thanks to your information," said Draco with a pointed glance at Harry.

"And . . . and . . ." It sounded like the words were choking her as she went on. "And your father, Draco? He-- He must be dead, I think. Else the bonding magic could not possibly have granted Severus the power to . . . to . . ."

"Severus is my father," said Draco gently. "But Lucius is dead, yes."
Her eyes welled over with tears again. Harry's first thought was that it was a terrible way for a woman to behave on her wedding day, weeping over her previous husband. But then a new thought occurred to him. This marriage wasn't of her choice, either. She'd been forced into it, too. Even more than Snape had, really.

"I thought he must be," said Narcissa sadly, turning her face away from all of them as she grieved. "I've thought as much for a long time."

Silence reigned for a long moment after that. Maybe because not a single person there could tell her they were sorry Lucius Malfoy was dead and gone.

Her legs started to buckle, so Draco helped her over to a chair. "There, there, mother. I know this is all very hard, but things will be all right. You'll see. The worst is over and--"

Snape made a choking noise.

Sighing, Draco started over. "The curse is over. And soon enough you'll have your baby, right? It's all going to be wonderful."

Snape managed not to react to that last word out loud, but he did abruptly drop down into a dining room chair, his back ramrod stiff. Harry had the feeling he actually wanted to hang his head in his hands, but his sense of decorum was keeping him upright.

"Madam Pomfrey?" asked Draco, his voice worried again. "The baby is all right, I hope?"

"Yes, yes. A healthy, thriving wee one, no doubt about it," she assured him. "Your mother's magic expended itself to the limit, keeping the curse away from her baby."

"There, you see? Wonderful," Draco repeated.

"Congratulations, Severus," said Madame Pomfrey in a formal tone. "Best wishes, Mrs. Snape. If you should have any concerns about your health or that of the child, I am no farther than a Floo call away."

"Thank you. For everything you've done," breathed Narcissa, sinking deeper into the plush chair Draco had settled her in.

Pomfrey nodded and left through the door instead of flooing.

Dumbledore rubbed his hands together briskly. "Yes, yes. Congratulations and best wishes from me as well--"

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot," said Draco suddenly, reaching into a pocket to pull forth a small velvet pouch that clinked as he moved it. He extended it to the headmaster. "For your services as officiant. Thank you."

"Oh, Draco. That's hardly necessary--"

Draco raised his chin a scant inch. "I insist."

"No, no, my boy, it was my pleasure--"

"It wasn't mine," snarled Snape, baring his teeth. "Take the funds and let us be finished with this farce of a morning!"

Narcissa, Harry noticed, drew back sharply against the back of her chair.
"Yes, yes, of course," murmured Dumbledore, finally taking the proffered pouch. "And now to other matters. Narcissa? Please look at me." He waited until he had her full attention. "Your son, Draco Alain Gervais Malfoy Snape, owns a property located at Number Twelve Grimmauld Place, London, England."

"The British Isles, Europe, the world," muttered Snape.

"I do understand, Severus, that you're under a bit of strain at present," said Dumbledore, merely shaking his head.

"Meddlesome old man--"

Harry thought that was completely unfair, in the circumstances. It wasn't like Dumbledore had forced the issue of the marriage. Though maybe that was the whole problem. Snape was trying not to take his temper out on Draco, maybe. Or Narcissa, though she was hardly to blame. Except for coming to Hogwarts, Harry supposed. Had she only come here for solace from Draco, or had she known that Severus could reverse the Withering Witch? Voldemort could have told her about Snape's coming of age.

Well, maybe Harry would be able to get some answers from her soon. Though he wasn't sure quite how to ask the questions. He didn't want to fight with Draco, after all. And he didn't want to let Narcissa know that they were wise to her, assuming she'd been planted here by Voldemort.

"Number Twelve," said Narcissa slowly. "My, oh my. I remember the old Black House, of course I do. Why, I haven't thought of it in years. I think I actually forgot the address. How ever did you come to own it, Draco? The last title holder was my cousin Sirius, and I didn't think you'd ever so much as met him."

Harry glared at Draco. He'd better not mention the mirror, he'd just better not. Narcissa would want to talk to her cousin in that case, and he wasn't going to use his last shard for that, he just wasn't. No matter how beautiful the woman was!

"Sirius was Harry's godfather," Draco explained, nodding slightly to show that he'd understood Harry's silent message. "He left Grimmauld Place to Harry, who gave it to me."

"Oh." Narcissa glanced uncertainly toward Harry. "That was . . . well . . ." She dropped her voice into a lower register and leaned toward Draco. "Really, darling. Malfoys don't ever take charity. You know this."

"No, they just disinherit their children," said Draco, his own tones hard. "And I'm not a Malfoy any longer. If that's not acceptable to you, then we aren't going to get along. I love you, Mother, but I'm not the same boy you remember. And a good thing, too. If I were, I wouldn't be Severus' son and he'd have had no reason to marry you."

"My word," murmured Narcissa. "You're rather fierce these days, Dragon."

"In defense of my family? Of course I am. And they are my family, mother. You have to understand that."

She raised her own chin a little, just the way Draco so often did. "I understand the institution of marriage Draco. They are my own family now as well."

"Good, because he's my brother and if it pleased him to give me a house, then it wasn't charity. It was brotherliness!"
"Did it?" asked Narcissa suddenly, her gaze zeroing in on Harry.

"Huh?"

Her eyes gleamed a little. "Did it please you to give Draco the house?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact." He was sure of that much, even if he couldn't remember it.

"Then, thank you, Mr Potter. Or rather, Harry." She smiled. "I do hope Draco thanked you as well."

Harry didn't care if he had or not, but it wasn't worth discussing. "Of course he did."

"Two fine young men indeed," said Dumbledore, beaming all around as if the room hadn't been filled with six kinds of tension in the last five minutes. "Well then, I shall take my leave. Do enjoy your holiday, all of you. Toodle-oo!"

With that, he flooed away.

"Holiday?" asked Narcissa.

"All of us?" added Draco.

Severus groaned and pushed slowly to his feet. "Yes, Draco. I think we could all do with a break from the castle. Pack whatever you'll need for a few days. You as well, Harry." Walking across the room, he paused at Narcissa's chair and then crouched down so he could look her in the eye. "You came here with almost nothing, but I cannot believe it a wise notion for you to go near any Malfoy properties, Narcissa."

Her face drained of much of its colour. "No, no indeed," she whispered, voice trembling. "Lucius keyed the Dark Lord into the principal wards, and even some of the minor ones. It is how he . . . how he caught me in France."

"So do you feel strong enough to transfigure whatever you may need? Or shall I assist you?"

Harry thought that was a bit much, since of course Draco could do the same.

"A simpler dress for travel would be better," she murmured. "If you would be so kind, Severus. I'd rather not stress my magic until I've had a proper rest."

"Very well, then." Snape rose to his feet and swept his wand in an arc that transformed Narcissa's golden gown into a serviceable plain grey dress topped with a black cloak. The dress clearly showed her swollen belly in a way her wedding gown hadn't, but the cloak looked to be voluminous enough to hide her advanced state of pregnancy.

She raised a thin, arched eyebrow, clearly bemused at her new husband's fashion sense, but all she said was, "Thank you, Severus."

Snape gave her a sharp nod, then turned his attention to his sons. "Well? Pack."

Draco was staring, eyes narrowed, at Harry’s bed when Harry entered. "Your snake’s gone missing."

Harry focused on his brother’s prefect pin. "Ssssals…. Ssssals…."

The little snake wound her way up a bedpost, slithered onto the hand Harry held out, and promptly
proceeded to disappear inside his sleeve.

Draco made a face, before his features lost almost all expression. “You knew, didn’t you? About going to my house?”

“Just since this morning.” Harry shrugged.

“He could have told me. It is my house--”

“Draco,” interrupted Harry. “You don’t have a lot to complain about. Why do you want to complain at all?”

The other boy went still and seemed to really think about that. “I suppose . . . maybe I’m afraid to trust it. What if she gets sick again? What if the curse comes back? What if . . . well, you know what I’m worried about when it comes to Dad.”

“It’ll be all right.”

Draco gave a curt nod and focused on filling a soft bag with the things he wanted to bring along. Harry used his school bag, which meant not bringing most of his books. But that was all right. He wanted to focus on getting better at Parseltongue magic, anyway. And if he really needed one of his school books, he could borrow it from Draco, who looked to be bringing the lot.

In no time at all, they were back in the living room, waiting expectantly at the Floo. Narcissa, Harry noticed, was actually asleep in her chair. After a couple of minutes Severus joined them. He’d changed out of his wedding attire and was back to his usual clothing.

“Aren’t you bringing anything, sir?” asked Harry, since there was no sign of a bag or suitcase with him.

“Yes, in my cloak pocket.”

Harry flushed. Right, a shrinking spell. Well, Draco hadn’t thought of one either. So that was something.

Snape went over to Narcissa and gently shook her shoulder to wake her. Then, to Harry’s surprise, he extended a hand to help her out of her chair, keeping it on her as he assisted her over to the Floo. But then he let go of her.

“We need to transfigure your snake, Harry,” he said, drawing forth his wand.

“Oh, all right.” Harry called Sals again and asked her to twine around his wrist. Huh. He didn’t need a snake image since he could feel her touching his arm. He focussed on that until she came into view.

When the snake turned into a silver, serpentine bracelet, it all seemed terribly familiar. But maybe he was just remembering Christmas, not other trips through the Floo with Sals.

“Shall we?” asked Severus. “Draco, I suggest you go first and verify that your wards will admit your mother. Then firecall us to let us know it is safe for her to come through.”

Draco nodded and stepped across the hearth, then hesitated. “Is is safe for her to Floo at all, though? With her magic weak at present?”

“I will take her through myself,” Severus assured him. “All right? Now, go.”
It seemed like a tense five minutes to Harry until Draco’s face appeared in the flames to tell them that he’d added his mother to wards afresh, just in case the older spells that would allow her entry had faltered.

“Very well,” said Snape, taking Narcissa’s forearm. She stepped rather gingerly into the ashes, looking like she was so exhausted that she could hardly stay upright. And yet she still was beautiful, so it wasn’t like the curse was back. She was just weak, as Pomfrey had said. “Don’t strain your own magic,” Snape quietly told her as he held a pinch of powder in his upraised hand. “Allow yourself to lean on mine.”

She nodded and leaned against him.

Harry managed not to show on his face how much he didn’t like seeing them close like that.

And then they were gone in a whoosh of green flame, and Harry was left alone.

Part of him actually wanted to stay behind so he could avoid seeing her, avoid thinking about her. But a much bigger part of him wanted to keep an eye on her, and be there for Snape in case he wanted to talk.

Sighing, Harry got his powder ready and took his own place in the Floo. “Number Twelve Grimmauld Place!”

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Fifty-Four: "A Family Like None Other"

~

Comments very welcome,

Aspen in the Sunlight

---
A Family Like None Other

“So very many changes,” Narcissa was saying in a thin voice as Harry stumbled out of the Floo and dropped his school bag on the floor.

"What do you mean?" asked Draco.

"The mounted elf heads, I should imagine," murmured Severus.

"Severed elf heads?"

"Yes, Dragon. A Black family tradition to reward long years of service. Thankfully not one the Malfoys had. Ah, hallo there, Mr. Potter," she added as Harry stepped out into the main corridor where the others were standing.

"I thought we all agreed on first names," complained Draco as Harry extended his wrist to Snape, who tapped his wand to it to transform Sals back into a living snake. Harry set her down carefully on the carpet and watched her slither off along the floorboards.

"A habit," Narcissa was saying, fluttering a hand as she sank into a straight-backed chair upholstered in crimson velvet. "And too, I've no idea if Mr. Potter is amenable to your suggestion."

Harry's nostrils flared, though he couldn't be sure if she was putting him on the spot intentionally. Then again, he really didn't care what she called him. "Yeah, Harry's fine. And so is Mr. Potter if you forget. It's not worth a fuss, Draco."

The other boy lifted his chin a little. "I think it is. You don't remember, but Severus was insistent that we use one another's first names. He even took points over it."

Snape laid a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Narcissa looks a bit peaked, which is little wonder after what she has been through. Why don't you head to the kitchen and arrange some tea for her?"

Harry glanced up, eyes narrowed at the odd suggestion. The slightly intense look he got back in exchange told him that his instincts were dead on -- this was another case of Snape having more than one reason to do something. What that reason could be, Harry had no idea. Did Snape need to speak to Draco and Narcissa out of Harry's hearing? But then, he could have done that before Harry had arrived.

"All right," he said mildly, though some part of him, deep inside, was reminded of the Dursleys. He'd probably fetched tea for them a thousand times. He wouldn't have minded, except for two things: he'd hardly ever got to drink any, and of course Harry had been the only one ever ordered to fetch and carry like that.

Snape squeezed his shoulder slightly. Trying once more to communicate something, Harry thought. He just didn't know what.

He found out a moment later from the sight that greeted him in the kitchen.

"Dobby!" gasped Harry, grinning as the little elf whirled around on the stool he'd been standing on.

"Harry Potter!" Dobby bounced up and down. "Dobby is happy to see you!"

"So that's what Severus was saying to you this morning in the kitchens! He asked you to come here
while we're on holiday?"

"Yes, so Dobby can be cooking and cleaning for Harry Potter and Harry Potter's family!" Dobby beamed, showing off a full mouth of slightly pointed teeth. "Master Snape is even saying that he will pay Dobby an extra stipend, and Master Dumbledore is saying that will be fine, that Dobby is a free elf and can be accepting it! But Master Harry? Dobby is having one question."


Could he help it if his voice veered toward dismay at the end?

"Yes, yes, Dobby is knowing that from Master Snape." Dobby's greenish lips turned down in a slight frown. "Mistress Narcissa wasn't being cruel to Dobby and the other elves, but she wasn't being helping us either, and she was spoiling young Master. Oooh, spoiling him something awful! No wonder he is poisoning Dobby later. And apologizing because he is being Harry Potter's brother, and Harry Potter is good, but poisoning first." Dobby plopped down to sit on the stool, his little shoulders shuddering.

Harry could hardly follow parts of that. "Draco poisoned you? When was this, when he was little?"

"Last year," sighed Dobby. "Dobby was not supposed to be speaking of it, even to Harry Potter. But Dobby is a free elf and Harry Potter is not remembering, and horrible young Master, he is not telling Harry Potter, Dobby is being very, very sure!"

Harry frowned. "Draco did tell me about some poison he'd brewed. But he didn't mention you in the story. I thought he was trying to make some of the other Slytherins sick."

"And Dobby was food testing, because all the food was being food tested, because Harry Potter's father's birthday chocolate cauldron was poisoned, and young Master left fairy cakes out and only Dobby was being cleaning in his common room, and--"

"Wait," said Harry, clearing a throat that suddenly felt so tight he could hardly breath. Snape had been poisoned last year too? Someone had tried to kill him?

He wasn't sure why that should come as such a shock. Snape's own actions would have made it practically inevitable. Both Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy would have wanted him dead for saving Harry on Samhain, not to mention adopting Harry and offering him continued protection and help and counsel. An action that hadn't been secret at all -- Harry had read seen stories about it in the Prophet, for Merlin's sake. It only stood to reason that Voldemort and his minions -- all of them, not just Malfoy -- would be out for Snape's blood.

It was a shock to hear about it, though. Or maybe the shock was because of something else. The thought of Snape dead . . . it was like a huge chasm had opened up beneath Harry's feet and any second he was going to start falling. Like his absence would leave a gap in Harry's life, a gap that could never be filled.

Damn it, he didn't want Snape to die!

Harry closed his eyes on that thought, feeling like there was something just out of his reach, like if he could just stretch his arm out, or maybe his mind, and grasp it, then the world would somehow be complete. He tried to concentrate, stretching out his consciousness, focusing in on what seemed like the key element in play. He didn't want Snape to die, he didn't want Snape to die--

"Harry Potter is being ill?"
Dobby's plaintive voice snapped him back into the present and shattered whatever he'd been grasping towards. Harry flushed, feeling a bit stupid. Of course he didn't want Snape to die. He'd never wanted that, not even back when he was still blaming him for Sirius dying.

"I'm fine," he told Dobby. "Just thinking over what you said. Listen, Dobby . . . I can't blame you for not liking Draco much. Maybe you should stop calling him 'young Master.' He isn't that at all, not any longer."

"Dobby is a free elf!"

"Yes, exactly. It's hard to switch what you call people, I know. But try, maybe. I think calling him that reminds you of bad times."

"Harry Potter is a wise wizard," said Dobby, smoothing his ears back with both hands as he stared at Harry with eyes opened wide. "Dobby will be calling Harry Potter's brother Draco Malfoy instead of young Master."

"Maybe just Draco. Or Draco Snape? The other . . . well, it reminds him of bad times."

Dobby tilted his head back a little, lifting his nose higher. "Dobby is a free elf, though."

Harry gave it up, then. Dobby and Draco would have to work things out on their own. Or not. "Anyway, Severus wanted me to ask if you could make some tea for Mrs. Mal-- damn it. For Narcissa."

A snap of the elf's fingers and some biscuits glimmered into existence on delicate china plates. "The tea for Mistress Narcissa is almost ready. Dobby can be bringing it through in two minutes."

"I can carry it--"

"Harry Potter is preferring for Dobby to be staying in the kitchen?"

"I didn't mean that!" exclaimed Harry. "I just thought you might not want to see Draco!"

The elf curled a lip. "Dobby is not caring if he sees horrible-boy-Malfoy."

Harry's resolve to leave the matter alone withered a little, hearing that. "Dobby, I'm not sure if you know what Snape did last year to punish Draco for poisoning you."

"Dobby is not being sure that Harry Potter is knowing," retorted Dobby. "As Harry Potter is not remembering things."

That was pretty snarky, thought Harry, almost grinning. But the subject was too serious for that. "I've remembered some things. Snape made him take the poison himself. In a fairy cake, no less."

Dobby blanched, his skin taking on a sickly yellowish hue instead of its usual vibrant green. Then he started shaking his head, back and forth. "That poison is being bad, but much worse for wizards. Dobby sicked up and was right as rain, but a wizard?"

"Ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

"Dobby is believing that Harry Potter is believing," the elf instantly assured him. "But Dobby is thinking that Harry Potter is hearing this from horrible-boy-Malfoy, so . . ."

"Then ask Snape. Or don't," added Harry. "You can do as you like. Thanks for coming to help us, Dobby. It'll be good to have more time with you."

"Dobby is a free elf!"
The elf clapped his hands twice, making various items he'd collected jump into place on the tea tray. Jumping off his stool, he floated the tray off the table and before him as he marched out of the kitchen, straight to the room that used to have the Black family tapestry.

Elves must have a sixth sense, Harry decided, since that's exactly where the others were. Draco and Narcissa were sitting across a small table that featured a chessboard, but it looked like they hadn't started playing. Snape was standing, gazing out a window at the grey London day beyond.

A snap from Dobby's fingers had the tea service floating over to Narcissa, but it was Draco who lifted the teapot and began to pour.

Dobby, meanwhile, wasted no time. Marching straight up to Snape, he asked his question. "Was Harry Potter's father making horrible-boy-Malfoy eat a fairy cake laced with Venetimorica last year?"

Snape slowly turned around, and just as slowly, nodded.

Dobby blanched again, but less violently than before.

"Severus, really," murmured Narcissa. "Was that necessary?"

"Yes, it was," snapped Snape, his black eyes suddenly blazing. "And I'll thank you to remember that it was I who took on the responsibility of parenting your son after you callously sided with your worthless husband and abandoned him!"

Her pale skin went white with stress as she abruptly shrank back against the back of her upholstered chair.

"It's all right, Mother," said Draco as he reached a hand across the chest table and laced his fingers with hers. "Strange as it sounds, I actually deserved to have to eat poison. And Severus and Harry, they took really good care of me while I recovered."

"My stars, Draco," whispered Narcissa. "It sounds as though I've missed rather a lot."

"Well, we have all the time in the world to catch up, now," replied Draco, still in that soothing tone, though he was pulling his hand back to reach for the floating tea tray again. "Milk and two sugars, as usual then?"

Narcissa rested a hand across her swollen belly "More milk than I used to take, I think."

Draco nodded and passed her a cup, then jerked a little as he saw that Dobby had moved to stand right in front of him.

"Dobby will be forgiving horrible-boy-Malfoy, now," the elf said, the four hats perched on his head bobbing as he sealed the statement with a series of solemn nods. "But Dobby will not be calling young Master that any longer. Dobby will be saying Draco Snape."

"Thank you, Dobby," said Draco in a shaky voice. "I did mean my apology, you know. I really am sorry for what I did to you. Er... would you care for some tea?"

Dobby gaped, then began nodding again, that time with such enthusiasm that a fuzzy purple top hat flew off his head and landed near Narcissa's feet. "Yes and thank you, Draco Snape. Dobby is taking his tea with twelve sugars!"

Draco spooned them in, counting them out loud, then poured in the tea.
"And Dobby is liking biscuits, too! Heaps of biscuits!"

Draco glanced around, then shrugged and piled six onto the saucer, stacking them so they'd actually fit.

"Heaps and heaps!" shouted Dobby.

Draco bit his lip to hide a smile as he piled another half-dozen atop the other ones to create a teetering tower.

Dobby nodded in approval and snatched the cup and saucer Draco was extending, but instead of hopping onto a chair to enjoy his tea, he snapped his fingers and vanished.

"Dobby seems quite spirited these days," remarked Narcissa.

"I guess elves get that way when nobody's making them iron their ears or slam their fingers in doors," said Harry. "Though Dobby did say you weren't ever particularly cruel to him, so thanks for that, I suppose," he added in a surly tone.

"That was uncalled for--" objected Draco.

"What, you wanted me to say she had been mean to him?"

"What the hell's wrong with you?" exclaimed Draco.

"I think," said Snape in a low tone as he came toward them, "that your brother needs to sleep. He took a potion this morning that will only wear off after he has a proper rest."

"Right, talk about me like I'm not here!"

"I assume you'd like to use Black's old bedroom during our holiday?" asked Snape, directing the question at Harry, who nodded.

"Very good, then. I shall take the room directly across the hall. Draco, I believe it would be best if your mother used a bedroom on the ground floor."

"Stairs certainly hold no appeal for me at present," said Narcissa, smiling up at Snape. The expression looked strained, though. Harry wasn't sure what to make of it. "Thank you, Severus."

He didn't reply to that, but went right on. "You should sleep on the ground floor as well, Draco, in case your mother needs anything in the night. She's no longer cursed but she is in a delicate condition, to say the least."

"There's only one bedroom on the ground floor--"

"And there I thought you were a wizard."

Draco scowled. "Fine, fine. Though I feel obliged to point out that it might be considered appropriate for a woman's husband to help her during the night should she need anything."

"If you expect this marriage to follow traditional norms you are going to be very, very disappointed."

"Fine," Draco said again, the syllable short and tense.

It wasn't lost on Harry that the sleeping arrangements were going to put Snape as far as humanly
possible from Narcissa, since Sirius' bedroom was on the top floor. Well, that was all right. Maybe he didn't have to worry about the woman's haunting beauty making Snape forget exactly what she probably was.

"Do you want your tea before you go up, Harry?" asked Snape. "It might make it more difficult to drift off, but . . ." He made a vague gesture with both hands.

Harry knew what it meant. Had he been so transparent before when he'd been sent to fetch the tea? He didn't like the idea that his hurt feelings had been so obvious. Maybe they hadn't been, though. Maybe Snape just knew him that well.

A strange sort of shiver passed through his shoulders at the thought.

"No, sir," he said quietly. "I think I'd rather just get some sleep."

Snape's nostrils flared slightly. "Most likely prudent. But here, take a few biscuits up with you. We'll see you in a few hours." He pressed a plate of treats into Harry's hands.

It was a bit odd, being sent off for a nap like he was a toddler, but it was also comforting, in some way he really couldn't identify. As was Snape's making sure Harry took food with him.

And anyway, he was looking forward to being able to feel his head again, so sleep it was.

He must have slept more than six hours; the single window in Sirius' old room was showing a pitch black sky when Harry shifted beneath the sheets and blinked his eyes slowly open. Yawning, he sat up and stretched, only then noticing that Snape was sitting in a straight-backed chair across the room. He was wearing his usual black robes again. Those, combined with his stark black hair, made his white face appear almost eerie, visible only by the light of a distant streetlamp.

Once, the sight would have sent him into shivers. Snape, watching him sleep? Now, it just seemed kind of comforting. Fatherly, maybe, he mused.

Snape waved his wand, casting wordlessly. Probably a muffling charm, considering the guest in the house. Though she wasn't properly a guest at all, was she?

"How is your head?"

"Back again," quipped Harry as he threw back the sheets and swiveled his legs off the bed. Huh. He'd only taken off his shoes when he'd crawled into bed for his nap, but now he was missing a sock as well. Just the one. Harry fished in the bed to find it so he could slip it on. "Um, have you done this a lot? Watch me while I'm sleeping?"

"From time to time." Snape leveled a long stare at him, almost as if he was waiting for an objection.

But Harry didn't have one. "All right." He gave the man a tremulous smile. "I mean, I'm pretty sure
you usually have a reason. Or knowing you, maybe six."

Snape flared his nostrils. "Just the one, this evening. Anything to excuse myself from my wife's presence." Then he seemed to relent a little bit. "Though she's being far from unpleasant. It's almost as though she's afraid to offer me the slightest offense. Not quite the Narcissa I remember."

"Well, she does owe you her life," murmured Harry. "And she's just been through something pretty harrowing. I'd think anybody would be feeling . . . er, tentative about what might come next."

Which reminded Harry. "Speaking of what comes next, do I really have an appointment with Marsha tonight?"

"Indeed you do. In point of fact, I was going to wake you up in another quarter-hour."

Harry slipped on his shoes.

"We'll be going out for pizza, first," added Snape, his mouth quirking a little at the way Harry gaped.

"Pizza, really?"

"That's the cover story to explain our absence from the house, this evening. For the record, you absolutely love pizza and can't get any at Hogwarts. Whenever you are in London you simply insist I take you out for some."

"Makes me sound like a spoiled prat--"

"I don't think it prudent to reveal allow Narcissa information about your therapy, just in case she is here as Voldemort's plant."

Harry thought that through. "But last year, you decided it was a good idea to convince him I was weak. I wasn't even allowed to walk alone in the corridors!"

"I don't mind him believing you to have a non-existent weakness, certainly. To reveal to him your true vulnerabilities, however? And in any case, I am not thinking solely of the fact that you need to speak with someone about your turbulent emotions. I am also thinking of the good doctor, herself."

It took Harry a second to catch on, but then he blanched. "Voldemort might target her to get to me. I should have thought of that, myself! It's obvious enough. But I didn't spare her a single thought, not even when I realised that I'd better break it off with Luna to keep her out of the line of fire!"

"Another issue you might consider discussing with the good doctor," murmured Snape. "Are you ready?"

Harry glanced about and saw that his school bag had made it upstairs. Dobby, most likely. He snatched a fleece jacket out and slung it on, then raised an eyebrow towards Snape. "Yeah, I am. You aren't, though."

Standing, Snape waved his wand to transfigure his clothing into a reasonable facsimile of a typical Muggle outfit: trousers, button-up shirt with long sleeves, and a blazer that looked slightly old-fashioned somehow.

"The all-black look might attract attention," Harry pointed out. "You kind of look like an undertaker."

*Or a Death Eater in Muggle disguise,* his subconscious chimed in, less than helpfully. Sighing,
Harry Occluded the headache away before it could really take hold. Then he drew in a deep breath and lifted his face up. "All right, so it just hit again and I used the Occlumency."

Snape didn't need to ask what "it" was. "I said that you could certainly use your dark powers to deal with the headaches."

"Yeah, but after what you said in the meadow I'm trying to . . . er, be more open about things." No, that wasn't quite what he was trying to do. "Be more open with my . . . um, father," he corrected, quickly adding, "Since I have one. I didn't mean to act like you weren't. I'm just . . . not used to it, that's all." If he was mumbling by the end, well, he thought that couldn't be helped.

"I understand, Harry," said Severus resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing slightly. "I didn't mean to pressure you."

"No, it was probably good that you yelled." Harry shrugged a little, then fearing that Snape might take that as a rejection, he reached up and put his own hand on top of the man's long fingers. "It was kind of fatherly. I mean, not usually, but since I was doing something that could land me in St. Mungo's, some yelling was probably called for."

"I shouldn't lose my temper like that."

"Yeah, you should be perfect a hundred percent of the time," drawled Harry. "I don't want a robot for a father, Severus."

"What is a robot?"

That would take a while to explain. "I'll tell you over pizza. By the way, why else are we going, besides for a cover story?"

"You slept through dinner and need to eat."

"Dobby can snap me up something in an instant--"

"And I thought it might cue some memories. You and I have dined on pizza before."

"Ha! I knew you had a bunch of reasons, not just the one! But I already remembered that, all on my own. I mentioned it to you."

"I do recall that. But I thought that re-enacting the meal might bring forth more context for you."

"We're going to Privet Drive? That’s where we ate pizza together before."

"I thought a restaurant." Snape stepped back and studied him. "Would you like to see your cousin, Harry?"

"Sort of," muttered Harry. "I mean, the things I’ve heard, it does sound like he’s changed. But I don’t remember that. I remember getting sat on and beat up. Anyway, though, I did go ahead and write him a letter like you suggested, and he never wrote back. So what’s that supposed to mean?"

"That he couldn’t find an owl, I should imagine," said Snape mildly. "He’s gone into hiding, and I not getting along terribly well with the Order member charged to safeguard him. He sneaked away in September to see you off at King’s Cross, and I might have been too harsh when I rebuked his keeper for such lax vigilance. It wouldn’t surprise me if this is payback."

"Oh," said Harry blankly, feeling suddenly overwhelmed with new information. It was a sensation
he hadn’t had in a while. “I don’t know why I thought he’d be at Number Four. I mean, I did understand that it had been destroyed. And then I went ahead like a perfect idiot and addressed the letter there!”

“You aren’t an idiot,” Snape corrected. Which was kind of funny, considering. “Perhaps some part of you was aware that the house had been rebuilt. We visited your cousin there during the summer.”

“Hedwig didn’t come back with the letter—”

“I’m certain the letter arrived intact. I suppose, however, that Dudley’s guard might not have let him have it. I’ll have a word with him.”

“Who is it?”

“For the time being, you’re better off not knowing.”

“Maybe so,” muttered Harry. “But if Dudley never even got my letter, then I want him moved to someone else. Someone we can trust to be decent to him. All right?”

“All right,” said Snape. “I’ll look into it.”

“Why would he be placed with somebody that vindictive in the first place?” asked Harry. “That’s not right—”

“If you think the Headmaster divulges to me all his reasoning, you have vastly overestimated my influence on him.”

“What happened to the Headmaster and I have few secrets?” sniped Harry.

Snape stared at him, just stared, but not in censure, it turned out. “Draco could not possibly have told you that I said that,” he finally said, the words emerging slowly. “Is that like the notion of us eating pizza in your aunt’s hideous kitchen? You first remembered it some months ago?”

Harry bit his lip. “No. I . . . it just came to me now. I don’t even exactly remember you saying it, or not the context. I just . . . I know you said it.” He smiled, though the Dudley conversation still had him feeling strained. “Well, that’s good. But now it’s not even true?”

“I said mainly that in reference to the prophecy.” Snape sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “At the time, I still thought of you as arrogant, and I had been assigned to accompany you to your aunt’s deathbed, in circumstances that meant the blood wards might fall at any instant. I wanted you to have every reason to do as you were told. So . . . I may have exaggerated.”

“May have?” Harry snorted. “Well, at least now, I know that sometimes you talk for effect.” Needing a change of subject, he gave his father a critical glance. "Switch your shirt to blue or green. And lighten up the black. Dark grey would be better."

Snape saw to it, then preceded him down several flights of stairs to reach the ground floor, where Draco was reading in the library. "We may be some time. Where is your mother?"

Draco flicked his wand and narrowed his eyes at the results of his spell. "She went to bed. It looks as though she's nearly asleep."

Snape nodded, the gesture somehow distant. "Madame Pomfrey is only a firecall away if anything dire occurs. Contact her first and myself afterwards."
Harry blinked. "Won't that mean obliterating dozens of Muggles who see his Patronus?"

"Dad gave me a sickle with a Protean charm on it."

"I have one for you, as well," said Snape, passing it over to Harry, who slipped it into a pocket. "Though I don't expect us to become separated. Still, one never knows. Send a silver message as a last resort."

"Sorry you can't join us for pizza," added Harry to Draco. "All three of us should go out some time."

"All four of us, I think you mean," said Draco, baring his teeth a little. "But I'm not sure my mother would enjoy an outing much, anyway. She needs to be resting to get her strength back, not traipsing about and dodging cars."

"All four," agreed Harry, trying not to sound as glum as he felt. "But not tonight, right. See you later!"

With that, Severus grasped hold of him and Apparated them both away.

"I could have managed by myself," muttered Harry as Snape led them inside a hole-in-the-wall pizzeria.

Snape's hand twitched inside his pocket, casting another muffling charm, Harry felt sure. "I'll remember that, when we're going somewhere you can consciously remember. I'm not disposed to engage in magical experiments."

Well, that made sense. "Are we paying with Muggle money or are you planning to . . ." He gave the man's pocket a significant glance.

Snape shook his head, passed him a fifty-pound note, and went to find them a table, leaving it to Harry to order.

Harry never did get around to explaining robots to his father, but that was mostly because there was too much else to discuss. While he'd slept that day, Snape and Draco had spent some time talking with Narcissa, and Snape had tried some gentle Legilimency as they spoke. It seemed like either she was entirely innocent of any plotting, or she could Occlude well enough to seem that way. The trouble was, there was no way to tell which was true, not without a much more violent invasion of her mind.

And that just wasn't on, considering how Draco would feel about his mother being attacked.

Still, Snape had gleaned some useful information that helped to fill in some of the gaps in the story they'd known until now. Narcissa hadn't known she was living with Remus Lupin specifically, but she'd figured out quickly that her "husband" was an imposter, and in the simplest of ways, too.
Lucius, of course, had already known that his wife was pregnant. When her "husband" had seemed to have no idea, she'd immediately become suspicious of him.

"Of course we had anticipated that Lupin's knowledge might be lacking in some regards, even with all the coaching Draco provided. We had invented a story about a blow to the head in an attempt to explain away any discrepancies," Snape revealed in between cutting neat pieces off his slice of pepperoni. "But Narcissa was ill-disposed to believe he could have forgotten something as vital as a second child, especially after they'd disowned their only heir. So she started watching him very closely. It wasn't long until she felt her suspicions had been confirmed. Lupin burned his hands on the silverware."

"Silverware," repeated Harry. "Oh. Oh, no. The Malfoys would be stuck up enough to eat with solid silver forks and such!"

Snape nodded. "Lupin tried to cover his gaffe by screaming at the house-elves that he was lord of the manor and entitled to dine using gold implements. Which he did from then on, apparently. But that little bit of theatre convinced Narcissa that not only was she living with an imposter, but that her 'husband' was in fact a werewolf."

Harry sighed. "Poor Remus. To be undone by something so simple. I'm sure he did his best. Can I see him soon, do you think?"

"Lupin did well," said Snape gruffly. "But the plan itself was a bit daft from the outset. Impersonating someone full time, not just to his wife but also to Voldemort himself? We are lucky he lasted as long as he did."

"And?"

Snape made a slight sighing noise. "And you may see him as soon as circumstances permit."

"All right. So, what else did you find out from Draco's mum?"

"She understood that Lupin's coded language at their last meeting was an attempt to warn her that Voldemort wanted to see her, yet in a way that would betray no-one should he view her memory of the incident. The warning itself told her that the imposter was working against Voldemort. Until then, she'd thought it could be another Death Eater impersonating Lucius on the Dark Lord’s command, or possibly on his own initiative as part of some nefarious plot."

“No wonder she stayed out of England for so long,” murmured Harry. “For all she knew, the imposter could have been living in Malfoy Manor to spy on her.”

“Precisely. And if the imposter was there to spy on Voldemort, her best strategy was also to absent herself so it would be difficult to blame her for not reporting the impersonation. So... she took Lupin’s warning to heart and fled even deeper into Europe. Unfortunately, she did not know that Lucius had keyed Voldemort into the wards on many of the minor Malfoy properties on the Continent. She fled to one in Switzerland, but he was able to sense her there and send Death Eaters to apprehend her."

"Yeah, she mentioned something about that."

"She also said that her terrible condition upon arriving at my quarters was in part because she’d had a glamour cast on her, directly after the Withering Witch. It made it appear that she wasn't with child. The glamour interacted with the curse, somehow, drastically accelerating it, though her advanced state of pregnancy may have contributed as well."
“Magical experimentation.” Harry shivered, understanding Snape’s caution earlier a little better.

“Always fraught with peril,” Snape agreed. “At any rate, the glamour became unstable as Narcissa’s condition deteriorated. It snapped apart after she had made it into a secret passageway in the castle. The way she tells it, it shattered in a rather violent way that only made her all the more ill.”

"Why a glamour at all, though?" asked Harry, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Bellatrix taunted her about it, saying that only a worthy man could spare her from the Withering Witch, and on the off-chance Narcissa could find one in time, she might as well not look pregnant."

"Find one," echoed Harry. "Not you in particular? So Voldemort didn't send her, then?"

"If Narcissa's account can be trusted, she was set free to wander until she died. Though any idiot could have predicted she would go nowhere except to Draco, even if she was never specifically ordered to. I think it likely that Bellatrix and Voldemort hoped Narcissa's beauty might help to sway me, but not so much in her swollen state. They didn't realise, of course, what a dreadful toll the curse would take on her, since it usually takes weeks and months to advance."

"But the timeline . . ." mused Harry as he munched his way through a piece of garlic bread dripping with butter. "She was held captive for weeks. And it sounds like she was released right after they cursed her. So what was going on before that?"

"Occlumency training, perhaps," said Snape grimly. "Bellatrix has been tasked with teaching it from time to time. Or for all we know, Narcissa was trained by Voldemort himself."

"Could be."

"Or not," added Snape. "We really have no idea. Voldemort's plots at time can be . . . abstruse."

"Well, enough about that for now," said Harry. "How are you, Severus?"

"I take it you refer to my married status." Snape frowned and stared down at the table. "I will manage."

Harry didn't know what to say, except maybe . . . "She's cured now, though, right? So maybe you can just get divorced."

"You have a Muggle perspective of marriage. Divorce is more difficult for wizards. You saw -- we've been bound by magic."

"Oh. But there's no law you have to live with her, is there?"

"No, but I promised to honour her, and I meant it. The marriage bond would not have taken, otherwise. And too, there is Draco to consider."

"You mean he expects you to at least give this marriage a chance."

"I doubt he has a clear notion of what he truly expects. He's simply a young man in great distress at the moment. And he is my son."

"Yeah, I know you did it for him. But I wish you hadn't needed to."

Snape suddenly glanced up, his black gaze piercing. "I wish the same. You cannot know how much. What I had to do to Maura . . . I could not possibly feel worse."
Harry felt like that was an opening. Snape certainly hadn't offered one before. "She, um, took it really badly, then? Did she hex you, curse you, scream and yell?"

The man's lank hair swayed as he shook his head. "That would have been easier. Maura . . . she was compassion personified. Nothing but kindness, in word and action both. Of course I had to save Draco's mother, she told me. Of course there was no alternative for a father who loved his son. But . . . she cried and cried as I held her for the final time."

"I'm sorry," said Harry, reaching across the table to take the man's hands. "That sounds awful."

Snape said nothing, but his eyes were bleak.

"Um, you want a pint of something? They probably have Guinness here, or, I don't know. I still have some money left."

"Not while we are out in the open. But thank you, Harry. Perhaps a nightcap when we return for the night. And now, I do believe we should make our way to the good doctor's office."

"She gave me a pretty late appointment," said Harry, his chair loudly scraping against the floor as he shoved it back. Snape rose to his feet without making a sound, he noticed. He wondered if magic was involved.

"She's been very accommodating."

Harry tried to smile. "Maybe you should pay her more."

"So you are comfortable now, with me paying her at all?"

At that, Harry's smile grew wider. "Yeah, I think I am. Though I could help you out, you know, if it's really expensive."

"I accepted quite some time ago that I was destined to be the poorest member of the family."

By then, they were outside the pizzeria and heading down a deserted alleyway. A moment later Snape was side-along Apparating him once again. Though when they melted back into existence into a small room containing several plush chairs and one wooden one, he did say, "Now you'll have the location in your conscious memory, for next time."

"Next time." Harry groaned. "But fine. Yes, all right."

"And so I've been allowing Harry to use his mental control to block the headaches," finished Snape as he sat in a rocking chair upholstered in bright orange fabric. It really didn't suit him.

"But for a long while you had him use this potion instead, you said."

"It worked fine at first, but then it started driving me spare," Harry put in. "Though when I took it..."
again yesterday that didn’t happen.”

Marsha swung her head to glance from Harry to Severus and back. “Why would you take the potion yesterday, when you’d already learnt how to block the headaches with your own magic?”

Harry thought better than to get into details. “I ended up with a really bad one. It got away from my control. But I don’t want to have to rely on Draught of Little Hammer, I mean Lillehammer, and um, Severus is worried about the mental blocking technique I was using. ’Cause I started using it for all sorts of other things, anything I didn’t want to think about, basically, and um . . . apparently using it so much can send you to the loony bin for life.”

“Severus is worried,” she repeated, angling one eyebrow upwards.

“I’m worried too, obviously.” Harry glared at her. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“But what are you here for? I’m not a headache specialist, and I wouldn’t want to prescribe you medication in any case. There’s no telling how it could interact with any potion you might take, or other magic for that matter.”

“Severus explained what we’re here for,” said Harry, not quite shouting. “Are you a therapist or not?”

“Severus explained,” she repeated, that time very gently.

That time Harry didn’t need the eyebrow. “All right. I want you to help me. I get a . . . a squicky feeling when I think about him being a real D—D—Death Eater, all those years ago. I can’t remember, but Severus is sure I wasn’t so comfortable with it last year, either. But after I got amnesia, thinking of him that way started giving me the worst headaches ever.”

“Do you have one now?”

“No, but I’m using my magic to wall off the headache.”

“I think you can leave us alone now, Professor Snape,” said Marsha, waving a hand toward the door that led to her waiting room. “Though as this appointment is outside my usual schedule, I can’t say how long we may be talking.”

Snape gave a quick nod and stood, but he handed Harry a vial of potion before leaving, the door snicking quickly shut behind him.

“Just in case,” said Harry. “Unless you think I shouldn’t for some reason.”

“You’re willing to take my advice, this time?”

Harry stared. Of all the things he thought she might say, he hadn’t expected a rebuke for the way he’d ignored her advice before. But maybe she meant the question sincerely, not as some kind of payback. “As long as you know that I might sick up on your carpet without it, if I can’t manage with my own magic alone. That’s what happened yesterday.”

She sighed. “I don’t actually have objections to the potion, should you truly need it. I just want to understand your attitude towards your own therapy, Harry. We haven’t met much at all this year, and you’ve ignored most of what I’ve suggested. Then tonight your father is here, explaining what is happening and what you need, while you said almost nothing for ten minutes.”

“You thought he’d forced me to come?”
“He did force you right after your Quidditch accident. You wanted no part of a ‘head shrinker,’ as I recall. And then after Christmas, it was my understanding that he’d pressured you again. You struck some sort of deal with him that meant you’d talk with me once more?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like that tonight,” said Harry stubbornly. “I want to get this solved.”

“Good.” She had been leaning forward, but sat back in her chair at that. “It’s a standard precept that patients in many kinds of psychological distress can’t truly be helped unless they are the ones seeking better mental health. No matter how concerned their relatives may be.”

Harry nodded, her earlier actions making more sense. “All right, so how do I start? ‘Cause I think I need to learn how to, you know, ignore his Death Eater past. I know I really should. It’s not like he’s that kind of person, now.”

“You tried to ignore it last year, as far as I can tell. And it worked so well that the moment you and your father had a major conflict, your mind decided to make an issue of it.”

“Major conflict,” scoffed Harry. “I’m not going to forget again that he’s my father!”

“So you’re satisfied with that state of affairs, now?”

“Yes,” said Harry firmly. “He makes it very obvious that he cares about me and that he’s doing the best he can. Which is pretty damned good. I like him. And I understand him a lot better, now. He’s . . . complicated.”

Marsha nodded. “And how is your memory recovering progressing?”

“I remembered a new thing just this evening. Something Severus told me once.” Harry almost added So, there, but decided it would make him sound like he was a six-year-old. And a snotrag.

But then he realised what she’d meant. “Oh, you think when I remember everything completely, I’ll be able to stand the fact that he was a Death Eater?”

“I doubt it. Last year amnesia wasn’t an issue,” she reminded him as she crossed her knees at the ankle. “Yet you ignored your own discomfort regarding his past. I suspect because you were wary of that kind of conflict with your father. You probably feared rejection. Perhaps without even being aware of it.”

“I must have been aware some,” mused Harry. “I know I used to worry a lot about being unadopted.”

“Very, very common. Perfectly normal, in fact.”

“But not now,” Harry added. “He wouldn’t do it even when I was being an absolute arse. He wouldn’t ever reject me, no matter what. I know that, now. So shouldn’t that mean I’m more comfortable with him? Damn it, if I was going to get headaches over him being one of Voldemort’s evil minions, shouldn’t I have got them last year?”

“Not at all. Last year you weren’t comfortable enough to risk getting them.”

“Well, that’s just a bucketload of comfort, isn’t it?” asked Harry, and then jerked in his chair because it seemed like he’d said something like that before. To Snape. Or thought it, maybe. Another memory? He couldn’t be sure.

“Do you need to take that potion?” she asked, very gently.
Glancing down, Harry realised he was still holding it, his grip so tight it was good the vial was made of unbreakable glass. “No,” he said, setting it aside on an end table. “I just need you to tell me what to do. I . . . I don’t understand.” His voice caught as he went on. “I mean, I think you probably can’t help with this unless I’m completely honest, so I guess I should admit . . . I don’t just like Severus, these days. I think I probably l- l- love him, but I can’t imagine ever telling him something like that. Even though I think he’d like to hear it. He’s told me a hundred times in words alone since I woke up with amnesia, and more like a million if you count actions. So it just doesn’t make any sense that I can’t ignore his Death Eater past as well as I used to!”

“It makes perfect sense. What you were really ignoring last year, Harry, wasn’t so much his past as your own feelings about that past. Your mind is more at ease this year, and it’s not letting you get away with that.”

“But why headaches?” exclaimed Harry, slouching down a bit on the couch. She didn’t seem to mind, so he went ahead and propped his feet up on the coffee table. Draco would probably sneer, but Harry decided he didn’t care.

“They’re well-known to be brought about by stress, among other things,” she observed, uncrossing her ankles and crossing them again in the other direction.

“Yeah, like Bludger hits.”

“Yes, like Bludger hits,” Marsha echoed, watching him closely. “I’ve read your case notes. You had a terrible headache in the wake of that blow, for quite some time. Entirely to be expected, of course. But it’s interesting, isn’t it, that in your times of discomfort now with who your father is, your mind chooses to go back to ground zero, so to speak.”

Was it interesting? Harry narrowed his eyes and tried to think it through. “Since I saw you last time, Snape let me in on a horrible secret. Apparently I overheard it just before the Quidditch match, and it was probably what distracted me during the game. And then months later, he told me again, ’cause he thought I might need to hear it again for my memory to heal.”

She didn’t ask what the secret was. “And?”

“And . . . and . . . well, the secret had to do with something he’d had to do because he was a Death Eater. Except by that time he’d already turned away from that, and he’d become a spy for Dumbledore, but he still had to do this thing. Otherwise Voldemort wouldn’t trust him and he’d be useless as a spy, and the Light needed its spy. So he had to do it, he really did. But . . . well, it ended up . . . my parents died,” he finished.

Somewhere in all that, he’d started staring at his own trainers, but a thudding noise had his face jerking up. She’d dropped the glass of water she’d been holding. She looked aghast, her face pallid, her eyes wide with horror.

“Oh, God, no,” Harry rushed to tell her, sitting up straight again and leaning over his knees to peer at her. “He didn’t kill them. He passed on some information and he didn’t really have a choice, since if he hadn’t passed it along, this other bloke who’d also heard it was going to. So . . . it’s kind of his fault that they died, but it’s also kind of not. Not really.”

“You’re . . . “ she coughed slightly. “You’re very forgiving.”

“Maybe,” Harry allowed. “It doesn’t seem that way to me. But anyway, the headaches . . . you think I’m kind of going back to the moment of the Bludger hit, something like that, whenever I think about Snape being a Death Eater? Since it was him once being a Death Eater that led him
“That’s possible.” She still looked really disturbed, Harry saw. He didn’t know what he could do about that -- he wasn’t about to tell her the entire story of the chameleon, and it might not make a difference even if he did. But he could probably help her be a little more comfortable.

Standing, he drew his wand and cast a few quick drying charms, delimiting them to include both the carpet and the front of her skirt. It flew up a little and bared her knees, which he hadn’t meant to do. To cover his embarrassment, he levitated her glass off the floor and neatly landed it on the table nearest her.

“All right, now?”

“I should be asking that of you.”

Harry shrugged, knowing what she was really asking. “Ever since I started at Hogwarts, my life’s been really complicated. I mean, my godfather was wanted for mass-murder, and I had to time-travel to keep him from being Kissed. So I guess I’m just used to it.”

That just made her look aghast again.

“Keep him from being executed, I should have said,” Harry clarified.

“I know what a Dementor’s Kiss is.”

Squib, right.

“Oh . . . he was innocent,” Harry added, since that was probably the part that had upset her.

“Of course,” she said dryly. “Well, I feel we’re drifting a bit far from the point.”

Harry sat down again, but thought better than to slouch so much, this time. “Headaches, right.”

“When did they start?”

“Well, I was getting them all the time for a while after the Bludger hit.” He struggled to put together an accurate timeline. “And then would get some when I was really straining hard to remember, or when things seemed especially stressful--”

“No, these headaches, the ones that would hit you just as you started to contemplate your father’s past. When did they start?”

“Not sure, exactly.” Harry shrugged. “Severus was the one who pointed out the correlation. He asked me if I was aware that I kept getting headaches whenever he mentioned being a Death Eater. And I hadn’t been. Aware of it, that was. But then, right then, I tried not to think of him that way, and all I could do, of course, was think of it more and more. And the headache spiked something awful. That was the first time he gave me the Lillehammer potion.”

“And this was how long after he’d admitted to his . . . role, in your parent’s deaths?”

“Oh, it was before.” Harry swallowed. “Just before, actually. I mean, it was why he told me. He said I had a war inside me and it had to stop. And he thought coming clean would make it stop. But it . . . it didn’t.”

“He told you,” she said, every word sounding careful, “that he’d been in some manner responsible for your parents dying, because he thought that you needed to know that in order to stop the
“Yes. And regain my memory. He was sure I’d remember everything.”

“Well, I can see why you would have such complete faith in his love for you, then. That’s . . . a rather stunning act of self-sacrifice.”

“And him a Slytherin, too,” joked Harry, then immediately felt bad about it. He knew Slytherin didn’t mean evil, for heaven’s sake. Then it hit him that maybe some of the Gryffindor insults he’d heard around home were in the same kind of vein. More teasing than mean-spirited. Huh.

“Back to you, though,” she said briskly. “The headaches started before your father revealed this information. Can you narrow down when at all?”

“I wasn’t aware what had been causing them. Severus figured it out.” Harry thought back, struggling to recall exactly what his father had said. “Um, he said he’d noticed it happening several times in-- in--”

His throat closed over each time he tried to say “Devon,” until he figured out it was the *Fidelius* doing its job. “Several times when we went away for the Christmas hols,” he substituted. “I think that might have been when he first noticed the headaches.”

“I see.” She picked up a pen, but not to take notes. Instead, she started tapping the end of it against her lips. “Did anything else significant to you happen around the same time?”

“You might say that,” said Harry, grinning a little. “I fell in love.”

His grin didn’t last long, becoming a grimace instead. “But then I had to give her up. It actually took me longer than it should have to figure that out. Can I blame the amnesia? Anyway, it’s on hold until the war’s over. Has to be.”

“That must have been very difficult to do, giving her up.” Marsha smoothed her skirt where it was draped over her knees once more. “But I was wondering if anything had shifted in your relationship with your father, right around the time of the Christmas holidays. After we spoke, perhaps?”

Harry felt his face flaming when it came to him. “Yeah, there was one really big thing.” He thought he’d better not mention mirrors into the afterlife so he could talk to his dead godfather, the one accused of mass-murder. “It was . . . well, Severus solved something that had been depressing me for a long time, and he didn’t have to, I’d never have known, and by solving it he was letting me talk to someone that hated his guts and really might try to turn me against him, and well, he solved it anyway. I think it was the first time I realised how a father should love a son, and I could see that it was like that for him. So, I . . . er, hugged him.” Harry lifted his chin a little. “Why shouldn’t I? I mean, he is my father!”

“There’s no reason you shouldn’t,” Marsha assured him. “And your headache problem started after this revelation?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah.”

“You knew he was your father before that, but only in more of an intellectual sense?”

“It was sort of like that. More sometimes than others. But afterwards . . . after that hug, everything seemed different.”

“And after that, your mind tried to take you back to the Bludger hit whenever you thought of your
“Why, though?” Harry cried out, frustrated. This was useless; they were just going around in circles. “I mean, he did tell me again what I’d learned that I think started all this. So learning it again should have stopped it! Especially since I don’t blame him for my parents dying! I don’t, I really really don’t! He was trapped—”

“Because he’d been a Death Eater. If not for that, he would have never turned spy and been caught in that trap.”

“Yes. So?”

She leaned forward, her fingertips tapping together, the pen lying in her lap by then. “So I think I have something that might help you, Harry. Something that might allow you to reflect and gain a different perspective on all of this.”

“Good,” breathed Harry. “Good. What is it?”

“That will have to wait until tomorrow, I’m afraid—”

“What?” Harry leapt up and started pacing. “No, no, it doesn’t. Severus won’t care how long I’m in here, and if you’re worried because my time’s run over, well, how much does he pay you for a session? ‘Cause I’ll pay you double, triple, ten times, whatever it takes—”

“No, Harry, that’s not—”

“But I have gold, loads and loads of it,” he babbled, panic spearing through him at the thought he might have to wait to get this solved. He loved Snape, he knew he did now, and he didn’t want to keep enduring this feeling that it was always going to be overshadowed by things neither of them could change. “It’s like a mountain, really. The first time I saw it I actually wanted to dive into it, the pile was that huge. You can have as much as it takes—”

She shot to her feet. “Stop. Offering. Me. Money,” she gritted out, every word emphatic.

Harry froze in mid-step, only then taking in the outraged expression twisting her lips and wrinkling her forehead. Oh, God. He’d really offended her, and now she wouldn’t want to work with him at all, and how many fucking squib psychiatrists were there, anyway? He was doomed--

“Your father pays me a perfectly adequate wage, one we both negotiated in good faith,” she added in a frosty tone. “It’s insulting for you to suggest that I would alter your treatment one micron to the left or right because of personal financial considerations!”

Harry didn’t know what a micron was, exactly, but he got the point. “I’m sorry,” he said, so quietly that it sounded meek. He hated that, but probably deserved it. “Can I . . . can I still come back tomorrow? I mean, I’d understand if you never wanted to see me again, but I . . . if you won’t let me come back, I don’t know how I’m ever going to—” Oh, God. He was actually crying. Not weeping, not great gasping wails, but he could tell his eyes were wet. Damn it.

“Oh, just sit down, you foolish child,” she said crossly.

Harry did, so quickly that he almost stumbled on the way back to the couch. It was probably stupid of him, but “foolish child” was close to “idiot child,” and Snape meant that in the nicest of ways, didn’t he, so maybe there was hope after all--
Instead of sinking down into her chair again, she took a place next to him on the couch, and patted his knee three times before withdrawing her hand. “Of course you may come back tomorrow, and as many times as you feel you need, Harry. I only meant that I had something at my home that I think could help you. I need to bring it to the office.”

Oh. Well, now Harry felt like a right idiot, didn’t he? He tried to cover the feeling by distracting himself. “What is it?”

“Something I’d like you to watch. I have it on videotape.”

Crap. Now Harry was a lot less hopeful. He was going to have to watch some boring documentary about emotions or something? How was that going to help? He started to stand up. “Well, thank you for your time, and I am sorry I said those things. Um, same time tomorrow, then?”

“Please sit down, Harry. Our session tonight isn’t over, yet.”

“No?”

“No, because I think there’s a great deal more going on with you than just the matter of your headaches.” She swiveled to face him more fully. “Your father mentioned when he contacted me that he was getting married? To Draco’s mother, in fact?”

Harry sighed. “Well, you’re behind the times. They got married this morning.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“You did ask,” murmured Harry. And then he told her.

Snape was in the waiting room when Harry went back out, his head tilted to rest against the wall as he sat in the wooden chair. His eyes were closed, but he wasn’t asleep. He opened them the instant Harry touched his shoulder.

“Same time tomorrow.”

Marsha appeared in the doorway with her coat on, clutching a handbag.

“Shall I see you safely home?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t live far. And it’s your wedding night, I’ve heard.”

“I see you covered a range of topics,” murmured Snape to Harry.

“Seemed like a good idea.”

“No doubt.” Snape glanced around, then shrugged. “You won’t mind if we Apparate directly from your foyer? I think it best no-one realise Harry Potter has reason to be in this vicinity. Now more
than ever.”

Because now, Harry thought, they no longer had Remus on the inside of Voldemort’s inner circle.

“That’s fine, and whenever I know you’re coming, I’ll make sure the waiting room is empty, just like I did this evening. Until tomorrow, then. Good night, Harry.”

She let herself out, locking the door on her way.

“You go first and I’ll follow,” said Snape. “Apparate directly to Number 12.”

As if Harry had plans to go anywhere else! Then again, maybe this was the same as him telling Harry and Draco to “be good.” Something fatherly.

“Sure,” said Harry easily, just before vanishing.

Draco was nowhere to be seen as Harry wound his way through the ground floor and began to trudge up the staircase. A quick Tempus charm showed him that it was nearing midnight; he’d been talking with Marsha for more than three hours. Well, he’d had a lot to say.

When he reached Sirius’ room and threw open the door, the sight that greeted him made him stop in his tracks. And stop breathing. Literally.

There, propped up against his pillows was a tan-coloured plushie Teddy bear wearing a Gryffindor scarf.

Harry couldn’t help himself. Darting over to the bed, he snatched it up and hugged it close and tight, wrapping both arms around it and pressing his face deeply into its soft, soft fur.

A moment later, a small noise had him looking up, and he saw Snape silhouetted in the doorway. Harry knew, then. He knew without an instant’s doubt. He’d thought for half a second that maybe Draco had nipped out and bought this, and transfigured the scarf to sport Harry’s house colours, but of course he wouldn’t have wanted to leave his mother.

But it hadn’t been Draco at all. Harry could tell, just from the look on his father’s face, even though his features were largely shrouded in darkness.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. “It’s very good of you to remember. Thank you, Severus.”

“I do hope it heals some of that empty place inside you.”

Harry flushed a little, and gestured for Snape to cross the threshold. “It’s just that Dudley always had so many,” he murmured, suddenly realising that he was still clutching the Teddy bear to him. Even knowing he must look silly, he didn’t want to let it go. “And he wouldn’t share.”

“Sometimes the hurts we endure in childhood can be very lasting.”
Harry nodded, though he knew that the “hurts” Snape was probably remembering were far worse than his anguish over not having a plushie of his very own.

“Don’t,” said Snape suddenly. “You had no-one to love you, and no-one to love. That’s just as damaging as . . . other kinds of damage.”

“Abuse is abuse, I remember,” murmured Harry, finally managing to stop hugging the Teddy bear. “Well, I don’t care if it makes me look like I’m three years old. I like having my own plushie. So thank you again. And the Gryffindor scarf? Nice touch. Very nice.”

“You’re most welcome.”

“That’s why you gave me the coin? You knew you were going shopping?”

Snape nodded as though that were so perfectly obvious Harry didn’t need to ask.

“Always planning ahead, aren’t you? Speaking of which . . .” Fishing in his pocket, Harry pulled out the vial of Lillehammer and held it out.

“No, you keep that on your person so you will have it if needed.” Snape’s gaze raked him, head to toe. “Your session went well?”

Harry cast Muffliato and closed the door for good measure, then sank onto his bed, propping himself up on pillows with his bear close beside him. He waved for Snape to have a seat, then realised there wasn’t a chair. Snape rolled his eyes a little and swiftly transfigured one from a hand-mirror sitting on a bureau.

“You don’t mind that I talked about your marriage?” Harry asked when they were both settled.

“Not at all. I trust you were discreet.”

He meant with details they wouldn’t want Voldemort to know, in case Marsha Goode were to be captured and tortured. Harry shivered. “Crap. I probably shouldn’t have told her about Luna. Though at least I didn’t use her name.”

“A wide range of topics, indeed. Did the good doctor have advice for you on that front?”

Harry sighed and put his hands behind his head, fingers laced together as he toed off his shoes and kicked them off the bed. “I thought she was going to tell me how wrong I was to give her up. But she said that wanting to protect people was part of my basic psychology and it was healthy for me to stay true to myself. She said I might want to try something so I can feel like I’m connecting with her, but without putting her in danger. Write letters to tell Luna what I’d want her to know, but then burn them instead of send them.”

“And scatter the ashes,” added Harry. “Though Marsha didn’t mention that part.”

“You proved to me early on that you understood Reconstitutio,” murmured Snape.

“You could try it too,” Harry tentatively suggested. “Letters to Maura?”

He’d been half afraid that the man would bark at him and tell him to mind his own business, but Snape merely shrugged. “I think my circumstances with regard to . . . romance, are quite distinct from yours.”

“Not so much,” said Harry softly. “We’re both making the hard decision. Because there’s really no
good alternative. Marsha pointed out the similarities.”

“I should apologise to you.” Snape looked him in the eyes. “I do not think I fully understood how much you were suffering over giving up Miss Lovegood. Now, having done something similar myself . . .” His gaze shifted away. “It is agony.”

“We’re a pair.” Harry gave him a tremulous smile. “We can be there for each other, though. Commiserate, Marsha called it. Because we both know. Draco doesn’t, not really.”

“He agonized over Rhiannon Miller, certainly--”

“But he got over it.”

“And you are saying that we never will? That’s scant consolation. Though in my case at least . . . I fear you are accurate.” Snape sighed and tipped his head against the wall, much as he’d done in the waiting room earlier.

Harry bristled a little, and started petting his Teddy bear to calm the feeling. “In your case? Are you saying I don’t really love Luna?”

“How can I judge the depth of your feelings?” Snape lifted his shoulders. “Only you can do that.”

“Fair enough.”

They sat in silence for a time, until Snape finally broke it. “Well, at least one thing finally makes sense.”

Harry rolled onto his side, keeping the Teddy bear propped in front of him. “Hmm?”

“You’re exhausted, I should let you sleep--”

“Yeah, but tell me first. Hmm?”

“Why the Dark Lord had me kill my father,” the man muttered. “That always puzzled me. He had already been Kissed, there was no need for anything further. Hostilian would never have any power over me again. But the Dark Lord insisted, so I complied. It seemed meaningless either way, in the circumstances. But he was entranced by the Black Family Ritual, of course. He wanted to see it in full. Perhaps in preparation to use it with Regulus at his own coming-of-age.”

“Voldemort,” whispered Harry, eyes drifting shut as he shifted on the bed and clung to Teddy. A headache tried to bloom inside him, but he was too exhausted to shove it through the fire. It didn’t matter, though. As a wave of tiredness careened him toward sleep, the headache washed out of him by itself. “Call him . . . call him Voldemort.”

“Voldemort,” repeated Snape, the noise of cloth swirling almost drowning the name. Harry felt a weight draping itself over him, the sensation of warm and comfort swallowing him as soft cloth was tucked around his shoulders and underneath his chin. Shifting again, he cuddled Teddy closer.

“Good night, Harry.” The man ruffled a hand through his hair and squeezed his shoulder once. Then there was the sound of the door quietly swinging closed, plunging the room into complete darkness. Harry snuggled Teddy up against his chest, and drifted off to sleep.
Coming soon in *A Family Like None Other*:

Chapter Fifty-Five: "Another Tapestry"

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Comments very welcome,

Aspen in the Sunlight

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In the Cellar

Harry’s sound sleep was shattered by the noise of his door crashing against the wall, and Draco’s voice screaming.

“What the fuck, Severus? What the actual fuck?”

Blinking, Harry managed to untangle himself enough to sit up. Huh. He was fully dressed and lying on top of a made bed, but somebody had draped a pair of poofy down comforters over him. No, not somebody, he realised as his brain woke up a little more. Snape.

Who’d given him a Teddy bear and sat with him talking, and then tucked him in as he was falling asleep.

It was only then that he realised he was still holding onto Teddy, one hand clutching a fuzzy paw beneath the blankets.

“Oh,” Draco was saying. “Sorry, Harry. I thought our arsewipe of a father had taken this room. You can go back to sleep.”

“Not if you’re going to yell like that, I can’t. What’s wrong?”

The door across the hallway creaked open.

Draco whirled on a heel. “What the actual fuck?” he yelled again. “What’s wrong with you? Wasn’t last time enough? I can’t believe you’d pull the same crap stunt again!”

Snape glanced to one side, looking down the short corridor that led to the staircase, then nodded as if satisfied. “Well, at least your impulse control is improving. I see you cast a sound barrier so your mother won’t hear us.”

“You’ll be lucky if I don’t cast a gut-punch hex in your fucking direction!” screamed Draco. “How could you! How dare you!”

Snape stepped into Harry’s room and shut the door, then cast several spells and charms on it.

“Lovely,” sneered Draco. “Now you don’t even trust my intuitive grasp of magic. But then, I’m not the one with dark powers, am I?”

“No, you aren’t,” said Snape calmly. “Why don’t you take a deep breath and explain yourself?”

“Oh, fuck off, Dad. You’re not stupid. You know exactly why I’m disgusted with you.”

“You looked in the armoire in your mother’s room, I take it.”

“How could you!”

Harry climbed out of bed, leaving Teddy concealed beneath the covers, and found his shoes lined up neatly by the door, the laces tucked inside. Something about that seemed oddly familiar. Except there were supposed to be socks, weren’t there? Folded on top? Shrugging, he shook off the odd sense of déjà vu as he put on the shoes and turned back to his father and brother.

“Anybody want to fill me in?”
“It’s the portrait, that thrice-damned *fucking* portrait,” hissed Draco. “Dad here thought he’d get his jollies by tucking it away in the armoire in my mother’s room. And don’t you dare say that it was there by happenstance. Nothing is happenstance with you! I bet you plan out which teaching robes to wear five years in advance!”

“Well, I do only have the three sets,” murmured Snape.

“Don’t you fucking joke about this, Severus!”

“Fine,” said Snape, his eyes narrowing. “You are quite correct. The portrait was placed in your mother’s room deliberately.”

“My mother’s room,” scoffed Draco. “The one you manipulated her into, you mean. Ground floor so she won’t have to climb the stairs, ha. And there I thought you were just trying to place her as far as possible from you. As if she’s in any shape to visit you in the night making overtures—”

“I do want my bedroom to be as far from hers as possible within the confines of this house.”

“And there I thought you actually intended to honour and cherish her!”

“I can do that perfectly well without sleeping with her!” retorted Snape. “Or are you becoming confused about the reason I entered into this misbegotten liaison?”

“Apparently it was so that you could trick her into speaking to Lucius’ portrait!”

“Nobody is going to trick her,” Snape’s tone by then was verging on a snarl. “It will be her choice to engage with Lucius. I’m simply providing her with the opportunity.”

“You might have a little faith in her,” said Draco, his tone suddenly subdued. “Or in me.”

With that, he dropped into the chair Snape had transfigured the night before, and hung his head in his hands.

Snape dropped down to one knee before him, positioning himself so his face was only inches from Draco’s. “What do you mean?”

Draco looked up, his eyes a bleak, stark grey. “I couldn’t move it. I wanted to get it out of her room, but I can’t so much as touch it. At least you had the decency to turn it to face the back of the armoire. He . . . he didn’t see me.”

“If you recall, it was warded specifically against you because you had decided to stay behind after an Order meeting to taunt Lucius.”

“Oh,” said Draco blankly. “I thought you’d done it yesterday while we were busy with the chess game. To stop me from getting it out of her room.”

“Which you would have done, you said,” Snape gently pointed out. “Draco, please listen to me. I know you want to trust your mother, even despite the evidence of the past two years that her loyalties may be very conflicted indeed. It’s only natural that you would decide to place your trust in her.”

Draco turned his face away. “But? I know there’s a but.”

“*But*, Harry and I have no similar compulsion to trust her. You can’t expect us to feel the same way.”
Draco flicked Harry a glance, his lips twisted like he’d just bit into a sour. “I should have known you’d be in on this.” Then he returned his gaze to Snape’s. “And as for feelings, you’re her husband, now. You might try giving her the benefit of the doubt.”

“I’m not disposed to do that when Harry’s life could be at stake. We still don’t know, not truly, if she’s here at Voldemort’s behest. For all we know, he had her cursed as a means to get me to accept her into this family.”

Draco snorted. “And you think she’s going to just confess all this to her previous husband? She was in Slytherin, you do realise. Why don’t you just dose her tea with Veritaserum and be done with these suspicions?”

“We think she might know Occlumency,” said Harry quietly. “So that wouldn’t be such a reliable way to get the truth.”

Snape looked a bit like he was praying for patience. “Even more to the point, Draco, I doubt you want your pregnant mother consuming a potion made with adder’s tongue.”

Draco blanched. “Right. Of course.”

Snape rose to his feet in a single motion. Only then did Harry realise he wasn’t wearing his usual outer robes. Well, he’d been woken up in a hurry. It looked like he’d simply thrown on a shirt and trousers. Even his feet were bare.

“I still don’t understand,” said Draco after a moment, his tone subdued. “Why would the portrait be where I was so likely to find it?”

“You’re accustomed to going through your mother’s armoire?”

“No, but you must have guessed I’d be in her room, helping her, transfiguring more clothes for her since she has almost nothing, now. You must have known I’d be putting those things away.”

Snape sighed. “Contrary to your flattering assumptions, I am not omniscient, Draco. The headmaster and I merely sought to place the portrait in the most private space possible, so Narcissa would believe herself alone should she decide to share anything with it.”

“She doesn’t even know it’s there,” said Draco in a low voice. “If you’re so intent on testing her, why not hang it on the wall?”

“Too obvious by half. As you said, she was sorted Slytherin.”

“I don’t like this.”

“I never expected that you would.”

Draco twisted his lips. “You don’t think she’s going to wonder why there’s a portrait of Lucius Malfoy here?”

“She’ll wonder. I imagine she’ll come up with several possible reasons.” Snape shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter. If she decides the portrait is some kind of trap, she won’t speak with it. But we lose nothing by trying.”

“I still think you’re an arse, doing this to your own wife.”

“At least that’s a step up from being an arsewipe.”
Draco flushed. “I forget about that hearing of yours, sometimes. But fine, this is the way it is. You’re determined to find out if she’s here to work against us. Damn it, hasn’t it occurred to you that all she wanted was not to die? There’s every chance that she didn’t know you could counter the Withering Witch, but she thought you might be able to brew her something to help, and you’d do it, wouldn’t you, because of me!”

Snape was shaking his head. “She’s from the family that developed the curse. I doubt she believed a potion could help.”

“She was desperate, though,” said Draco earnestly. “Wouldn’t you be? And Severus, you know you have a reputation for being able to brew the impossible.”

When Snape merely lifted his shoulders, Draco scowled. “But fine, as I said. What do you want me to do?”

“You need do nothing, Draco,” said Snape softly. “Just let events play out. Truly, this is now your mother’s broom to ride.”

Draco gave a jerky nod, then made a sudden gesture. “Harry? It looks like your bed is about to strangle something.”

Glancing behind him, Harry saw that the fluffy blankets were trying to fold themselves around his bear. “Teddy!” he exclaimed, quickly snatching him out and patting him all over to make sure he hadn’t been damaged. He was lovingly smoothing down the little Gryffindor scarf when he remembered he wasn’t alone. “Uh . . . Severus got me a Teddy bear,” he mumbled, hoping he wasn’t blushing enough for it to be noticeable.

If it was, Draco had enough decorum to make no comment. “Good show, Severus,” he merely remarked. “And as it’s only just past five in the morning, I think I’ll go back to sleep. Perhaps next time I want to speak with you about something important, I won’t cast quite so early an alarm spell. Good night, good morning . . . whatever.”

Snape yawned and went back to his own room, presumably to get more sleep.

And Harry? He stayed up to play with Teddy.

At some point, Harry did end up going back to bed. He was woken up by Snape shaking his shoulder.

“You’re on holiday so it’s up to you when you care to wander down to breakfast, but I thought you should know that Draco and I are planning to work down in the cellar. He hopes to transform it into a rudimentary potions laboratory.”

It took Harry a moment to process all that. Sitting up, he ran his fingers through his hair. “All right. Um, so you all already ate without me, you mean?”
Snape grimaced. “Not quite. Draco only slept another hour before he went to get some food for the two of them from Dobby. I was loathe to disturb your rest so I ate alone.”

“You could have woken me. I had a ridiculous amount of sleep, yesterday.”

“To recover from the Lillehammer.” Snape seemed to be eying him carefully. “That hardly counts.”

Harry shrugged, since it wasn’t worth arguing about. “Do you and Draco want help down there?”

The man’s gaze seemed to get all the more intense at that, though his tone of voice remained casual. “You’re quite welcome to join us.”

Harry heard what hadn’t been said. “I think you want some time alone with Draco after this morning.”

“It could be beneficial.”

Harry nodded. “All right. I have a project of my own, anyway.”

“And that would be?”

Harry quickly cast a warding spell, and spoke in a low tone even so. Though it was pretty doubtful that Narcissa could have climbed all those flights of stairs to eavesdrop. Or even leave a spell lying around.

“Does she have her wand?” Harry suddenly asked. “I can’t remember seeing one.”

“She had a wand concealed on her person when she arrived. Draco took charge of it. But yes, she has it back now. She doesn’t seem able to do much with it at the moment. Her magic has yet to recover from the ravages of the curse.”

“She could be putting on a show.” Harry fixed his gaze on the far wall. “Like I was doing. To fool the enemy.”

“She could.”

“Do you want me to try to find out, while you and Draco are busy?”

“I’m not disposed to treat you as if you were a spy in my employ,” said Snape in a shortish tone. Which wasn’t a no, Harry noticed. “What is this project of yours?”

“Oh. Practicing casting. You know, without those sweets? If I can manage with them, I should be able to learn to make things flow on my own.”

“You’re quite careful with your word choice.”

“Seems prudent, considering.”

“Be just as careful with your choices of spells,” Snape cautioned. “I think Narcissa will notice if you cast a Basilisk.”

Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

Snape, it seemed, could read him like a book. “It’s a fine idea, Harry. I trust you to use good judgement.”
Harry grinned, a warm feeling spreading through him. Hearing that was maybe even better than getting Teddy. Maybe.

“Good luck with Draco. I know he’s got to be on edge with everything going on, but that was some way to wake us up.”

“Good luck with your project.”

“And thanks again for Teddy.” Harry propped him up on a dresser where he wouldn’t get in the way when the bed made itself. This time he’d actually slept in it, so it was likely to be a more involved manœuvre. “Oh, ick, I feel really grotty. You let me sleep all night in my clothes?”

“Why, yes. Weren’t you telling me just recently that you knew to eat on your own and such?”

“I guess that’s a fair point.” Waving his wand, Harry cast a few cleaning and refreshing spells at himself, but he’d never really excelled at those. He made a face at the slightly dirty feeling that still remained. “Eh, I think I’d better change.”

Snape took that as his cue to leave, closing the door behind him.

Dobby was delighted to see him, of course, and insisted on whipping up a feast that included both bacon and bangers, as well as poached eggs and crepes so thin they just about dissolved on Harry’s tongue.

“Is it any trouble to do our laundry while we’re here?” Harry asked, thinking about the pile of dirty clothes he’d shoved against a wall.

Dobby bounced with glee. “Dobby is being honoured to be cleaning Harry Potter’s shirts and trousers and socks and underpants!”

“That’s great, thanks,” said Harry faintly. He wasn’t sure that honoured was quite the word.

“More breakfast, Harry Potter? Dobby can be making you fried tomatoes! More tea? With sugar?”

“No, no thanks. But you have some—“

Dobby grinned in a way that would probably look maniacal on any other elf, and flipped a little hand. The sugar bowl responded by floating up off the table and pouring a waterfall of its contents into Dobby’s teacup, filling it at least half full before Dobby topped it off with tea.

Harry almost gagged, but quickly wiped the expression off his face before Dobby could see it.

A few moments later he was wandering out of the kitchen. As he passed the Black family library on the way back to the stairs, he spotted Narcissa in there, sitting on the chair nearest the fire, her legs covered by a thick blanket, a somewhat thinner shawl draped around her shoulders. And even so, she was shivering.
Harry nearly walked past, but he couldn’t quite force his feet down the hall. She looked too forlorn. And besides, how was he going to find things out if he never talked to her?

“Hallo, Mrs--” Harry cleared his throat as he strolled into the library, starting over. “Hallo, Narcissa.”

“Mr Potter,” she said quietly, glancing away from him.

“Harry, we decided.”

She gave a tiny shake of her head. “Draco was pressuring you into that. I would never dream of holding you to it.”

“No, it’s all right,” said Harry, dropping into the chair facing her. “Really. He’s not here now, right? I’m saying it of my own free will. Call me Harry.”

Her gaze wandered to meet his. “Very well, then, Harry.”

After that, they sat in silence for a bit, neither one of them coming up with much small talk. Strangely enough, it wasn’t a tense silence. Harry thought it seemed kind of calming.

Another shiver passed through her, this one making her tremble for several seconds. But it gave Harry a good idea for a conversation starter.

“So, Draco kept your wand safe while you were ill, I heard. Do you need me to fetch it for you?”

“No. Thank you, Harry.” She pulled her hand out from beneath the thick blanket on her lap, and Harry saw that she was actually holding her wand.

But she was cold, so . . . Harry suddenly understood, though he wasn’t sure why she hadn’t asked Dobby to build up the fire for her or cast a warming charm on her blanket. Maybe she was embarrassed that her magic was weak right now. He thought he could understand that, even though he really didn’t remember being without his magic for most of the previous year.

“It’s a little chilly in here, I think,” he announced, pulling his own wand out and directing a charm that would make the fire spark more brightly. “Would you like me to spell your blanket as well? And maybe your shawl?”

“That would be most appreciated.” Her voice was quiet. Almost timid, Harry thought. He wondered then what she might have heard about him. Complaints from Draco for years? Stories about him dueling Voldemort and somehow managing not to die?

Well, nothing for it, Harry decided. If he was going to find out anything useful from her, he’d have to get to know her a little. Fortunately, he’d just realized a good way to begin.

“So I’ve been meaning to thank you,” he said, leaning forward in his chair. “The werewolf who was pretending to be your husband, he’s a friend of mine. And when you found out he was an imposter, you could have done a lot worse than leave the country and put up anti-werewolf wards to protect yourself. So, thank you. And also for letting us know what you’d done so we could see about healing him. I think he’s all right now thanks to you.”

Her lips twisted a little. “I believe the proper response would be ‘my pleasure,’ but I can’t really say that. It was distinctly not a pleasure wondering who was living in the Manor with me, wondering what he might take it into his head to do.”
“Remus wouldn’t have hurt you—“ Harry managed not to gasp out loud, but it was a near thing. He did have to swallow hard, though. Damn it, why hadn’t he thought this out better? She’d only said “the werewolf” before, so there was every chance she hadn’t known who the imposter had been!

Then again, it might not matter now. It wasn’t like Remus could pretend to be Lucius Malfoy again. Not now that all of wizarding Britain knew he was dead.

Narcissa had a strange look on her face. A really strange look. Harry didn’t know how to interpret it.

Then she said, “Remus Lupin, I assume. One of Draco’s teachers a few years ago?”

That wasn’t why she’d looked almost like she’d disagreed with Harry a moment earlier. Harry was sure of it.

“Er, right.”

“You need not worry,” she said, glancing away from him to study the flames licking upwards in the fireplace. “I will tell no-one of this secret. Though I should caution you that the Dark Lord assuredly knows all, already. After his Death Eaters had snatched me from the villa in Schaffhausen, the Dark Lord took some pains to read from my mind every last detail of the previous months.”

She shuddered in her chair. “It took weeks before he was satisfied that he knew everything the false Lucius had ever said or done in my presence. Including, of course, the appearance he took on when he crossed my werewolf wards in Saint-Vivian.”

Well, that would explain why she’d been held captive for so long before she’d been cursed and let go, Harry supposed. Then again, she might be lying. How was he supposed to know?

Maybe he could at least find out if she would tell him the same story she’d told Snape, or if she’d slip up on some details. And then he’d know she couldn’t keep her lies straight.

“Remus wasn’t a very good imposter, was he?” asked Harry, trying for a rueful tone. “It seems like you left England pretty quickly after he’d moved into Malfoy Manor.”

She made a slight gasping noise. “He tried. He couldn’t possibly have known—“

“About?”

Instead of saying what he was expecting: “The silverware,” she started gasping again. Actually, it sounded a bit like she couldn’t breathe properly.

“Are you all right?” asked Harry, getting concerned despite himself. Yes, he’d been trying to pump her for information. But he hadn’t been trying to upset her or make her ill.

Something was going on, something she hadn’t mentioned to Snape. Harry was sure of it, and on the heels of that thought he forgot all about feeling bad that he was upsetting her. Damn it, they had a right to know what she was hiding!

He made his voice as hard as he could, trying to project an air of wizard-with-dark-powers. “It wasn’t just the silverware or the fact that Remus didn’t know you were pregnant, was it? Well? What else aren’t you telling us?”
Narcissa started hyperventilating in earnest. And then she burst into tears, grabbing at her shawl to wrap it more tightly about herself. That only lasted for a second, though, because after that she was yanking it up so she could bury her face in it as she wept.

*Fuck*, thought Harry.

And then things got worse, because Draco was sprinting into the room, falling to his knees beside her chair, taking both her hands in his. “What is it, Mother? What’s the matter?”

She shook her head frantically, bowing it while keeping the shawl covering her face.

Draco growled and whirled on his knees to half-face Harry as he continued to hold his mother’s hands. “Well, Potter? What did you say to her? What did you do to her!”

“Nothing!” protested Harry. “We were just talking—“

“H- H- He’s not to blame,” Narcissa choked out as she managed to raise her face. Long tear tracks stained her face, but she didn’t dab at them with the shawl. Draco seemed to understand why; he almost immediately conjured a handkerchief for her to use. “H- H- He’s not the one who—“

“Who what?” asked Harry. Then it suddenly came to him and he felt awful. Worse than awful. But how could he have known? He’d never have believed it, not in a million years, not of Remus, and because he really couldn’t believe it at heart, he spoke without thinking. “Did *Remus* hurt you?”

Draco jumped to his feet, fists tightly clenched. “I’ll kill him, I’ll *kill* him--“

“No!” shouted both Harry and Narcissa at the same time, though for different reasons, it turned out.

“The werewolf didn’t hurt me,” gasped Narcissa, looking even more stricken than before, somehow. Though that didn’t make much sense. “Calm yourself, Dragon. Please.”

Draco narrowed his eyes. “Well, if I find out differently--“

“Draco,” said Snape from the hallway. Harry had no idea how long he’d been standing there. “Your mother’s right. You need to calm down.”

Draco drew in a deep breath, making a clear effort to do as he’d been told, even dropping into a chair after a minute. “Well, fine. I’m calm. So let’s discuss what he did do, then.”

Narcissa turned her face toward the fire, the leaping flames making the edges of her hair almost translucent. “Nothing, Draco. Your werewolf did nothing. He never even threatened me.”

“He’s certainly not my werewolf,” muttered Draco, before saying in a stronger voice. “That can’t be true, though. You wouldn’t leave the Manor over nothing. You wouldn’t burst into tears over nothing.”

Now Narcissa was the one narrowing her eyes, turning to glare at her son. “He did nothing, Draco, but I was ill-disposed to rely on that continuing once I was aware of his affliction. Or do you think that a woman with child should take such a gamble?”

“Then why are you crying now, if you left before anything bad could happen?”

“It’s difficult to speak of it.” Narcissa huddled down into her shawl a little, her gaze seeking the floor. “I . . . I told Mr Potter that I have just spent some weeks with the Dark Lord tearing into my mind. And before I could even begin to recover from that, I had to endure my own sister cursing
me in such a heinous way. Only to now find myself married to a man who-- . . . How can you wonder that my emotions tend toward the fragile?"

“A man who what?” asked Severus from his position in the doorway.

Instead of answering, she turned her face completely toward the fire.

“A man who what?” asked Snape again, that time in a slightly harder tone.

“Who quite clearly disdains the very thought of me,” she said quietly, leaning over her hands a little, her face in profile a stark, drawn white.

Draco drew in a sharp breath and looked about to say something, but Harry couldn’t imagine what, not after the conversation upstairs. Snape didn’t trust his mother, and he knew it.

“Harry, Draco,” said Snape, finally stepping into the room. “Leave us alone for a time.”

Harry glanced at his father uncertainly. Even with a face ravaged by tears and tension in every line of her features, she managed to look like an angel. More so than usual, in fact. A desperately unhappy angel . . . well, she was a Slytherin, no doubt about it. She probably knew exactly how to leverage those looks of hers--

But Severus was a Slytherin too, and in love with somebody else, so probably he wouldn’t end up falling for any of her tricks. Or falling for her.

Harry hoped.

Shuddering a little, he nodded and left the room. Draco did too, but he was slow to follow.

And then the door swung gently shut, leaving them alone in the corridor.

Draco’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “We should . . . “ he made a vague gesture toward the place where the door almost met the dark carpet covering the floor. Then he started to draw his wand.

“Eavesdrop?” asked Harry, pitching his voice low. “No, we can’t. If Severus wanted us to hear what they were saying he wouldn’t have asked us to leave.”

“There you go, playing the good son again,” sighed Draco. “Don’t you understand? He asked us to leave so my mum would feel more comfortable. But he’s expecting us to eavesdrop. Plots inside plots, remember?”

A fiery line suddenly blazed along the threshold, running in a rapid streak up both sides of the doorway until it met itself up top and turned into a solid barrier.

“I think he wants privacy,” said Harry dryly.

“It does look like it.” Draco sighed again and leaned against the wall, one leg bent and resting on it as well. “Why did she start crying, Harry? You were there.”

“We were just talking about Remus,” said Harry, raising his shoulders a little. “I was thanking her for not doing anything worse to him when she realised he was an imposter. And then . . . I’m sorry, things got out of hand, and I kind of accused her of knowing more than she was telling us, and she started gasping-- that was when you burst in.”

“Yes, I’m going to know if she’s having trouble breathing,” said Draco in a hard, scathing tone.
“She’s still too weak, so I’ve set all sorts of spells to alert me if she seems to be faltering. But what you took it upon yourself to say to her? Did you want to send her into a full-blown panic?”

“Of course not--”

“She’d just told you she’d been interrogated for weeks by the Dark Lord, and you went and accused her of knowing more than she was saying! There’s probably no better way to trigger those exact memories, short of violent Legilimency!”

“I’m sorry,” said Harry miserably. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Evidently.” When Harry said nothing, Draco went right on. “She’s recovering from trauma, a whole series of terrible traumas! I know you don’t remember your own, but--”

“No, I do,” Harry interrupted. “Not . . . not Samhain, I don’t mean. But when I got whisked away from the Tournament and had to duel Voldemort and came back with Cedric’s body . . .” He shook. “The whole next year I was just . . . yelling at people, and so angry all the time . . .”

Draco drew in a long breath, and then another. He looked like he was striving for calm before he spoke again. “Then you should know, Harry. You probably had P.T.S.D. Er . . . post-traumatic shock . . . disruption, something like that. I read about it in a book Severus had. I should probably re-read it now that my mother’s gone through so much.” His grey eyes met Harry’s gaze. “Have a little compassion for her, Harry. Please. I know you don’t trust her, but . . . please.”

“All right.” Harry gave a decisive nod, because really, what else was he going to do? He didn’t want to fight with Draco, and if Narcissa was prone to bursting into tears so easily, questioning her didn’t seem like much of an option anyway. He’d just wait and watch, instead. Keep his eyes open.

“Thank you.” Draco looked him up and down as if trying to gauge his sincerity. Then he offered what Harry could only think of as an olive branch. “Well then, I suppose I’ll head back down to make more progress on the cellar. Fancy lending me a hand?”

The cellar? Why did the word fill him with a mix of curiosity and something almost like dread? But he didn’t want to stay at odds with his brother, so he just nodded a little and said, “Sure.”

“We spent most of the morning thoroughly clearing away the dust and debris,” said Draco as they descended the staircase to the underground level of the house.

Well, that explained why the cellar looked so clean, Harry supposed. The concrete walls were practically sparkling. A dim image wafted through his mind, of a much more dimly-lit space with dark, dank walls. Dusty furniture shoved up against the walls. A mobile phone.

A mobile phone?

Harry shivered, a terrible feeling of cold and doom sweeping over him. Which was ridiculous, of
course. The cellar was quite nicely heated.

"Harry?" Draco was asking. "You're ashen. What's the matter?"

"I . . . I . . . I don't know . . ."

"Fuck," said Draco softly, suddenly beside him and laying a hand on his shirt sleeve. "I'm sorry, Harry. I wasn't thinking. Let's get you back upstairs. Maybe Severus is done speaking with my mother and you can talk to him about this--"

Harry yanked his arm free. "About what? What aren't you saying? What do you know?"

"Oh, I thought you'd just realised, I thought they told you--"

Harry grabbed Draco by the edges of his robe and shook him, hard. "Told me what?"

Draco brushed off Harry's hands, cleared his throat and made a vague sort of gesture. "You were down here when it happened." He rushed to say the rest before Harry's temper could snap completely. "When you were captured by Lucius and taken to the Dark Lord so you could be--" He swallowed. "Sacrificed for Samhain."

The chill that had swept over Harry a moment before was nothing to the one that seemed to soak him now. He shivered violently and staggered over to lean against a gleaming black granite counter. "I . . . I . . . The Fidelius failed?"

Wait, no, that couldn't be true. Snape would never, ever have let him set foot again in this house if it wasn't safe. Harry was absolutely sure of that much.

"No." Draco shook his head even as he pointed. "That wall directly adjoins the cellar next door. When you were here last year after your bone marrow extraction--" Draco shuddered a little saying those last three words. "--there was a vent in the wall, connecting the two buildings. You crawled through it. Looking for your snake, I think. You ended up in the house next door without even realising, and that was when . . ."

Harry felt like he might vomit.

"So . . . you don't remember any of that, not really?"

"Some part of me must." Harry shuddered. "I feel like . . . well, the Muggles say a ghost has walked over their graves. It's sort of like that."

"Let's get you upstairs."

Harry held up a hand. "Let's not. I'd rather . . . face it down, you know?"

Draco gave him a dubious glance, pale eyebrows rising up to vanish behind an equally pale fringe. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea, Harry. Facing your fears was what decided you to stab yourself with needles."

"Well, if I start to have a real problem you can insist I leave!" snapped Harry. "I'm not a Hufflepuff and I don't appreciate people acting like I am!"

"There you go, judging by Houses again," said Draco, sighing theatrically. "How many times must I tell you--"

"Shut up. I know I'm not perfect."
Draco dropped the sarcasm. "Look, I don't think you're a Hufflepuff, Harry. What I do think is that you're human."

"Yeah, well I have another session with Marsha tonight again, so if I can't handle staying down here for a bit, I'll talk it over with her, all right? And for the record, I'm not bothered at all any longer. I'm too narked at you!"

"Narked at me for being a good brother. I like that!"

"Be a good brother and give me a tour of what you and Dad accomplished this morning."

Just as Harry had expected, hearing him say "Dad" like that distracted Draco completely. He beamed in approval. It actually made Harry feel a bit guilty, since he'd said the word on purpose, not because it had emerged naturally.

"Well, since you want to talk about Dad, I'd be delighted," Draco said through his brilliant smile. "So we conjured that central counter there." He pointed. "Then we transfigured the shelving across the far wall. We had a bit of a false start doing that. We tried rock magic first but it turns out that it doesn't work well on cement."

"You need actual rock," said Harry dryly.

"Well, yes, but we thought cement was made of crushed rocks. Isn't it?"

"No idea. I guess it's got other stuff in it?"

"No matter. Now it's just a matter of organizing the supplies," added Draco. His voice grew diffident. "Is that enough of a tour? Because we can stop at any time--"

"I'm fine!"

Draco looked him up and down and then nodded as if satisfied. "Severus had Dobby pop back to Hogwarts to gather a few basics. Would you start unpacking the boxes?"

Shrugging, Harry reached for the one nearest him and was startled to find five leather-bound journals inside. They looked pretty ragged, so . . . "Snape’s old notes, something like that?" he guessed.

Draco glanced his way and frowned. "No, those were down here when we started work," he murmured. "Everything in that pile of boxes. Sorry, I meant for you to unpack those larger ones." He gestured slightly to Harry’s left.

Draco glanced his way and frowned. "No, those were down here when we started work," he murmured. "Everything in that pile of boxes. Sorry, I meant for you to unpack those larger ones.” He gestured slightly to Harry’s left.

"Oh,” said Harry slowly, a foggy . . . something . . . emerging from the depths of his mind. “These were here already? So . . . they belonged to Sirius?"

"Or one of the older Blacks, maybe.” Draco raised an eyebrow. “Why don’t you open one and find out? Still worried about respecting others’ privacy?"

Harry scowled. He’d done his share of eavesdropping and Draco knew it. Did that mean that he had been trying to play the good son, upstairs? He just knew that he hadn’t wanted to annoy Snape. “They won’t open,” he snapped, sure of it even though he hadn’t really tried.

“Charmed shut?” Draco took the one Harry was holding and tried a few spells on it. “Hmm. I suppose you could ask Sirius about them--”
“No, I can’t,” said Harry, glowering. “I only have one shard left. I’m not going to waste it.”

“Then maybe you could try your...” Draco glanced at the light spilling down into the cellar from the floor above, and bit his lip. Maybe he was remembering he shouldn’t have mentioned Sirius so casually. “Your special magic.”

“Without a sweet,” decided Harry. “Maybe wanting to read the books will be just the motivation I need to make things work on my own, this time.”

He quickly looked through the other boxes Draco had indicated, finding mostly clothes and a few personal items like a comb that looked like it was made from solid bone and the mirror that was the companion to his own. Harry held it silently for a few moments, wondering how he could use it to keep on with his conversations with Sirius. But the way he understood things, he needed a mirror he had mastered, not one just linked to one he had. Besides, hadn’t he read somewhere that he could only use a shard of a mirror that had been accidentally broken? This one wasn’t broken at all, and if he smashed it on purpose... Harry sighed.

The boxes also contained a shortish wand that looked like it had seen better days.

“Sirius had his wand in hand when he fell through the Veil,” said Harry. “So why is there one here? Do you think it could be an old school wand of his, something like that?”

“A practise wand from before he went to Hogwarts, perhaps,” said Draco. “I think you know that the pureblood families have ways to allow their children magic lessons early on. That looks to me like a wand that’s been passed down for generations for just such a purpose.”

Harry abruptly set it aside. “It’s probably steeped in Dark magic, then.”

“I doubt it,” said Draco dryly. “Most families start their children with simple and harmless charms. Anyway, I doubt it belonged to your godfather in particular. After all, it’s not common for a wizard to switch wands after the age of eleven.”

“You did.”

Draco smiled, just a little. “I’m not common.”

Harry shook his head and started unpacking the other set of boxes, then, setting out cauldrons and flasks and jars of ingredients for Draco to put away. When that was done, though, he took the five mysterious journals into his hands and announced that he was going to go up to his room with them.

His brother nodded absently and waved him on his way.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Fifty-Six: Another Tapestry

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

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“Luncheon?” asked Snape after Harry waved his wand to open the door. The man hadn’t even knocked; Harry had heard his soft footfall coming up the staircase. “Dobby has prepared a bizarre assortment of canapés along with both lamb soup and bouillabaisse.”

“Canapés?”

“Small appetizers.”

Harry nodded as he tapped his wand to his spell lexicon to ward it closed.

“Any progress?”

“I couldn’t really concentrate.”

“Ah.”

A hot flush came up under his collar, so suddenly that Harry tugged on it a little. “That came out wrong. I didn’t mean it was your fault.”

“But you can’t help but wonder what transpired between Narcissa and myself.”

“No, your ward made it pretty clear you wanted to keep things to yourself--”

A gentle finger was suddenly beneath his chin, lifting his face up a fraction of an inch. “It is still quite natural for you to wonder.”

“Uh, well, I’m not asking--”

“Breathe, you idiot child.”

That broke the tension. Harry laughed, just a little.

“I merely sought to put her mind at ease,” said Severus. “She knows enough about my past to be wary, and it hasn’t helped that she understands the implications of my being able to counter the Withering Witch.”

Harry swiftly Occluded away the headache that threatened to bloom.

“So it is perhaps understandable that she worries I may mistreat her, I suppose.”

"She does seem . . . timid, around you."

"Hopefully she will be less so after our talk."

Maybe she was. It was hard to tell; when Harry and Snape seated themselves in the dining room, Narcissa abruptly stopped talking with Draco and sat quietly with her hands folded in her lap. But when the canapés started floating in on small plates, she began making small talk, mostly about the icing flowers decorating the little cakes.

"These are more along the lines of petit fours," she murmured at one point. "So beautiful and delicate. You are very talented indeed, Dobby."
"Dobby is thanking Mistress Malfoy!"

She cast a sidelong glance toward Snape, even as she seemed to lean slightly away from him. "Not Malfoy."

"Dobby is thanking Mistress," said Dobby, nodding in a way that made him resemble a wise old man.

Narcissa nodded too, her motion somehow regal, and resumed speaking in a low voice to her son.

When the meal was over, Harry realised that the woman hadn't said a single word to Snape. Or to him, for that matter. He could sort of understand that last bit, considering he hadn't been very nice to her earlier that day. But he really didn't understand why she was so skittish around Snape. The man had saved her, after all, and he hadn't done a single thing to threaten her since.

And how could his past as a Death Eater be the problem? She'd been married to one for decades!

Harry sighed then, his body clenching as he concentrated and managed to force away the headache trying to stomp his brain into mush.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Problem?"

"Just the usual," muttered Harry, feeling sort of sick with dread. What if Marsha couldn't help him with this? "Excuse me, please. I think I'll go back upstairs for a bit."

He wasn't sure how it was possible, but it seemed like he could feel Narcissa gazing steadily at his back as he walked away.

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Harry spent the rest of the day holed up in his room, safely ensconced behind privacy spells, working with the Parseltongue lexicon. This time, he couldn't claim that he wasn't concentrating -- it was all he was doing, in fact.

But he might as well not have bothered. As long as he had a ribbon sweet to chew, his Parseltongue spells worked fine. He kept setting a timer, and just like clockwork, his Parseltongue magic stopped working completely after nine minutes and forty seconds. He thought about chewing and swallowing two sweets at once to see if he could double that time frame, but decided it would be a stupid stunt that could land him in the hospital wing. And pointless, too, since he knew by then that taking one sweet after another was a perfectly safe approach.

He actually got a huge amount of practice in, even mastering some spells that previously, he'd only read about in the journal. Though in a way, that mastery didn't mean much, since he mainly just needed to focus on what a Latin incantation actually meant to him, or really, just concentrate on what he was trying to accomplish with the magic.

When practicing with the lexicon palled, he started trying out some incantations that weren't based
at all on earlier spells he'd learned. What if he just wanted something to happen, and there wasn't
an existing spell to get the job done? That he knew of, at any rate?

Harry's new approach turned out to be a hit-and-miss affair. He managed to make his wand pour
out mustard, but that was basically just a variant of *Aguamenti* or perhaps of Mrs. Weasley's
splendid cheese sauce spell. More interesting was the way he got rid of the stain left on the throw
rug he'd been sitting on during his practice session. His Parseltongue version of *Evanesco* removed
the glop but not the stain, so he thought for a bit and told the rug to grow like grass. Then it was
just a simple matter of figuring out a lawnmowing spell to cut the rug back down to normal length.
The result was something of a mess, even after he'd banished the lopped-off strands, and with
them, every trace of stain. But still, it was magic that he'd figured out on his own, without relying
on Parseltongue versions of existing spells.

The leather-bound books from the cellar caught his eye once he'd given up on getting the rug
surface to be more-or-less level again. Huh. If he could make strands of yarn grow like grass, he
could probably order the journals to open.

Popping another ribbon candy into his mouth, Harry set to work.

"Open," "Unlock," and "Surrender to me" got him nowhere at all. He tried ordering the pages not to
stick together, and even pretended that the journal in his hand was a banana that he could somehow
manage to peel with magic, figuring that if the cover fell off that would at least be a start. But the
books might as well be blocks of wood, they were so unresponsive.

Not even taking a page from Snape's bag of tricks with "Reveal your secrets" made any difference.

Sighing, Harry shoved the books to the bottom edge of his bed and snatched up Teddy to hug.

That was how Severus found him a few minutes later.

"I assume the hiss was meant to convey that I might come in," the man said as he stepped into the
room.

Harry nodded and pointed with his wand at the ghostly numbers floating in the air, which showed
he'd be able to speak English again in eight more seconds.

"So I take it that you are no closer than before to managing on your own?"

Harry shook his head and waited a few more seconds until the timer hit zero. "No luck, yeah. Um,
I started working on some new spells, though."

"Would that explain the rug?" Snape quirked a small smile. "Well, I imagine your lexicon will
always be a work in progress. You might make a habit, you know, of determining the Parseltongue
equivalent whenever you learn a new Latin incantation."

"What, just in case I lose my regular magic again?" asked Harry, one eyebrow raised.

"No, so that you can shift into highly powered wanded spells any time you need them. If you are
still determined to be an Auror, the talent will no doubt prove invaluable."

Something in the man's tone gave Harry pause. "If?"

Snape crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Since, rather."

"You sound . . . odd. What's the matter?"
The edge of the bed sank down as Snape lowered himself to sit just three feet from Harry. He stared at the wall, though, avoiding his son's gaze. "You would know this if your memories had returned in full, but I have never been ecstatic at the thought of you becoming an Auror, Harry."

"Too dangerous?"

"That is one concern," said Snape slowly. "Your magic is formidable indeed, but even the strongest wizard can be taken off guard."

"I'll have Draco with me."

"That only doubles my nightmares."

"One concern, you said. What else, then? Do you . . . do you think I won't be happy in that line of work, is that it?"

Snape shifted to look at him, then, his dark eyes haunted. "I am quite certain it will suit you immeasurably, which is why I never raised a serious objection to it, loathsome though I find the prospect."

"Now it's actually loathsome?" Harry moved forward so he could rest a hand on the robe covering his father's knee. "I don't understand, Severus."

"The problem is mine--"

"And you're my father, so I want to know," said Harry, his tone insistent. "What problem are we talking about?"

"You'll get a headache if I go into much detail."

Oh. "That problem," said Harry, sighing. The headache was blooming already, even without the details. He took care of it, but kept his hand where it was. "I think I get it. Back in your younger days, you met some Aurors who were . . . bad."

"Bad?" Severus snorted. "I've known several who were little better than thugs. And don't tell me that this was years ago and things have changed. Draco can tell you differently. He had a rough time with some of them just last year, when he came to Hogwarts to return your wand."

Harry nodded, even though it felt like something inside him was breaking into pieces. "All right, so you're worried I might go bad--"

"No!" The man abruptly clutched his hand, lacing their fingers together. "No, no, no. Never think that, Harry. You have a well of goodness inside you that is deep and lasting. It's why you could forgive Draco for five years of bullying and abuse, why you were able to come to terms with even worse from me . . . your mother had it too, you know. She knew how to love."

Snape gripped his hand a little more tightly. "Harry, you are so good inside that the mere idea you might go bad caused you to take a needle to yourself. I would say that there is zero chance you will actually go bad. But I do not like to think of you having to deal with the terrible types that are sometimes drawn to the DMLE. Witches and wizards who seek power over others for the sake of it."

Harry's chest felt tight, then. Not like something was breaking apart at all, but like it was strong and solid and swelling with happiness and maybe pride. He knew it was stupid, but he couldn't seem to stop the words. "You . . . you like me! I mean, you sound like you . . . respect me?"
"Certainly I like and respect you," sniffed Snape, raising his chin a little. "Or have you forgotten all the times I've said as much?"

Harry grinned. "You kept saying that you loved me, Severus. You never said the other bits."

He got an incredulous glance for his troubles. "You idiot child. Did you think I loved you for no reason at all?"

"Well, I just thought it was because I was your adopted son."

The man's gaze seemed to blaze through him. "I wanted you for my son in the first place because I had grown to like and respect and love you!"

Harry nodded, still grinning. He couldn't seem to stop. "Did you say so? I mean, back then when you were adopting me?"

"Not . . . not in so many words."

"That's all right. I know it can be hard to say . . . stuff. Like, um, I like and respect you, too. And I'm really glad now that you're my father." Harry tried to say the rest, but his throat started to close over. But maybe that was all right. He thought Severus probably knew that he loved him. Still, Harry tried again to say it. All that emerged was, "Can you let go of my hand? It's starting to ache."

He flexed his fingers several times, then started rubbing them with his other hand. Something about the pain felt strangely familiar, though he was sure Snape hadn't gripped him too hard like that before. Then, just as he was wondering where he'd had this hands-aching feeling before, it suddenly came to him that he should clear something up.

"Um, my Parseltongue spell journal? I think you misunderstood me, before. I wasn't trying to change more Latin incantations into Parseltongue versions. I was trying to see if I could invent completely new spells."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "And so?"

"I made the rug grow. Like grass. And then I sort of . . . mowed it? Do spells like that already exist?"

"Not to my knowledge. Harry . . . I do hope you were experimenting only with wandless magic."

"Yes. Wandless."

Snape blew out a breath. "That, at least, is a relief. I would still prefer it, however, if you had someone with you when pursuing untested magic. Even the wandless variety. Myself, or Draco, or even Mr. Weasley or Miss Granger. Just in case something goes wrong."

Harry furrowed his brow. "We've discussed this before, I think. Did you set me an essay on the topic?"

"Yes. I was more concerned then about untested wanded magic, but if you're going to delve into truly unknown realms of sorcery, even wandless spells could pose a danger."

"I'll make sure someone's with me," agreed Harry. "Unless there's an emergency and I can't wait."

"I'm not asking you to change your entire personality," drawled Snape.

"Of course not," bantered Harry. "You like me!"
"And since you like me," countered Snape with a slight smile, "do try to avoid giving me unnecessary heart attacks. Be sure there is no alternative before you dive alone into untested magic."

"Speaking of which, then . . ." Harry reached down to the foot of the bed and handed his father the stack of books he'd shoved there. "I think they're journals, maybe belonging to Sirius. But they're locked somehow and I can't break through their protections. Are they sealed with Dark Arts?"

Snape spent a moment examining the books, casting a series of increasingly complex spells against them. "I don't sense anything particularly dark about the books or their protections. It seems more as though they are simply secured with a personal password."

That sounded all right. "Then we just need to threaten them, like you did with the Fat Lady? What would a book be afraid of? Not turpentine, I don't think--"

He stopped talking when he noticed his father holding up one hand. "Portraits carry a person's life essence and are therefore sentient. The same cannot be said for these journals."

"Crap. It's not possible to scare them open, I think you mean."

"It is possible, however, to trick them open. It merely requires knowing the correct password."

"Good thing my regular magic's back then," Harry tried to joke. "Well, assuming these did belong to Sirius, how about, 'Padfoot'? Um, 'motorbike'? Hmm. How about, 'Bellatrix is a bitch'? No . . . um . . ."

"Say the password in a commanding tone, not as a question," advised Snape. "And tap your wand to the cover of the book on the last syllable."

Harry tried, but it didn't make any difference.

Snape patted his hand. "Password protections can be among the most frustrating of security measures. But if you make a list of things associated with Black, and work from there, you may stumble across the correct word or phrase."

Harry frowned. "You knew him for a long time. Longer than me, really, even if you didn't like him . . . Can you help me think of things to try?"

"Certainly." Snape neatly stacked the books on the bureau, and gestured for Harry to get up. "Why don't we work on the list over pizza? It's time we left."

Harry popped Teddy alongside the stack of journals. "I hope you know I'm not actually eager for pizza again so soon."

"We can go where we please. But stick to the cover story within earshot of Draco's mother. We don't want her asking questions about why you and I go out in the evenings."

"Maybe we should just Apparate from here instead of leaving through the door, then," suggested Harry. "Less to explain is always better, yeah? Have you already told Draco that we're off?"

At Snape's nod, Harry jumped up. "Good, then we can avoid Narcissa completely, and when Draco and she eat dinner, he can be the one to mention my burning need for pizza. So, what are you waiting for? Shift your clothes into something Mugglish."

After Snape had, he gave Harry a close look. "Do you recall the alley beside the pizzeria? I will go
first and you can follow. From there we’ll look about for some other type of restaurant."

Harry grinned. He liked that Snape had remembered he wanted to Apparate himself. It was a small thing, but somehow, it meant a lot that the man had remembered. Before he could decide if he wanted to say so, though, his father had vanished.

Still grinning, Harry concentrated hard, then did the same.

"Maybe next time we should stick to pizza," Harry grumbled a couple of hours later as he and Severus were sitting in Marsha's waiting room. "I mean, I thought I wanted to try something new, but that sauerbraten was just nasty."

"At least it was prepared from beef. In some places on the continent the chefs use horse meat."

Harry made a face. "Did you have to tell me that?"

"Apparently."

"Ha. Very funny." Harry swallowed then, thinking of his upcoming session. "Um, this might take a while. She said she's bringing in a documentary or something for me to watch. It might be long. Are you . . . are you going to pop out again like you did last night?"

"No, but if something should arise I trust you still have your charmed Sickle?"

Harry fished in his jeans pocket and showed Severus the top edge of it.

A slight creaking noise had him glancing up at Marsha Goode, who stood framed in the doorway to her office, the light streaming from behind her making her look slightly spooky. Harry shook his head a little and told himself not to be nervous.

But what if he couldn't get this problem solved? He didn't know how he could bear it, going through the rest of his life with a father he couldn't think too deeply about, even though he liked and respected and loved him. What was he going to do?

"Breathe, you idiot child," murmured Snape in a low voice as he stood up from his chair.

Not low enough, as it turned out.

"That's no way to speak to your son," said Marsha sternly. "Really, Professor Snape, I know you had almost no training at all for working with adolescents, but I would think it obvious that calling your own son names is hardly advisable."

Well, at least she'd broken the tension inside Harry's head. He chuckled as he rose to his feet. "No, that's kind of like a code we have," he explained. "He means he loves me."

Snape coloured, a wash of red flowing upwards to stain his usually sallow cheeks. Though he did
say, "That is quite correct."

"Hmph." Marsha sounded like she still didn't approve. "Well, Professor, I would urge you to take care. If Harry comes to *not* prefer such a mode of address, you should desist at once."

"Severus does not care to show emotion," Harry suddenly blurted.

Snape shot him an incredulous look. "I beg your pardon?"

Harry blinked. "Wait, that's not what I meant. You show me plenty of emotion these days. Well you should, you don't hate me at all-- Wait, that came out wrong too." He cleared his throat. "I think somebody else said that to me once. The first bit."

Snape rolled his eyes. "It quite sounds like the headmaster. He does so love to meddle."

"A new memory, Harry?"

Harry shrugged, the motion somewhat strained. "I guess so."

Marsha paused for a moment. "And the second part, about your father not hating you at all, was that a memory too?"

Harry didn't know. He was starting to shrug again when Snape spoke into the void. "It was. I said that to him."

Marsha stared a little. "You told Harry that you didn't hate him. That's rather an oblique way of putting it, don't you think?"

"Somewhat along the same lines as 'idiot child,'" agreed Snape in a mild tone. "But these days I do also tell him in direct terms that I love him, so I would say we have an understanding."

Harry opened his mouth to say, *I love you, too.* But nothing came out. Maybe because Marsha was standing there, watching them. Maybe because he couldn't remember ever saying that before, except to Luna, and this wasn't the same at all. He'd never, ever straight-up said it to an adult.

Maybe he couldn't.

"Come in then, Harry," Marsha was saying, drawing him out of his thoughts. "We have a good bit to discuss."

Harry gave Severus a feeble wave before trudging into Marsha’s office. He wondered if that was enough. Could the man tell what he was trying to say?

Probably not.

"So I'm not completely sure how much of this you'll be able to follow," said Marsha as she fished
“Just because I stopped going to Muggle school years ago doesn’t make me stupid,” objected Harry. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Boring, most likely. But fine.

“That’s not what I meant.” Marsha turned around, a videotape clutched in one hand, and gave him a strained smile. "It’s just that you might never have heard of Star Trek. You mentioned once that you weren't allowed to watch much telly?"

She wasn't going to show him a dull-as-ditchwater documentary? Harry had been willing to sit through it -- anything to help him with his headache problem -- but wow, was this a relief. "Oh yeah, Star Trek," he exclaimed, nodding. "Yeah, I know a bit. Captain Kirk, right? And an alien named . . . uh, Spork? On board a starship."

"Spock," she said, her eyes gleaming with mirth. "Yes, I can see you're familiar. But this is an episode from a later series in a similar vein. Star Trek, The Next Generation?"

Harry shook his head. "Sorry, never heard of it."

"Hmm. Well, the story is still very instructive. It won't matter a great deal if all the characters are new to you. The only one who matters much in this episode's plot is the ship's captain. Jean-Luc Picard. He's a man with a great deal of confidence and determination, as you'll see. Oh, and you should probably know that the character named Q is a trickster in human guise with . . . well, wizard-like powers is probably the best way to put it."

"Q?"

"Odd name, yes. I don't really want to tell you much else about the plot. I'd rather you discover it as you watch it unfold."

"Just absorb the events. Let yourself get lost in them, if that's possible. We'll talk everything over afterwards. All right?"

"But what am I watching for?"

"Just absorb the events. Let yourself get lost in them, if that's possible. We'll talk everything over afterwards. All right?"

Harry lifted his shoulders, supposing she knew best.

"Excellent." Marsha popped the tape into the VCR and dimmed the lights, then sat down in a chair a few feet from where he was perched on the edge of the sofa. "This episode is called ‘Tapestry.’ A very apt title, as you'll see."

Harry nodded. Tapestry. So it was going to be about family trees. Family relationships. Something like that. That impression was bolstered almost right away. The starship captain lay near death, then seemed to be transported to the afterlife to talk to this Q. But soon enough the captain's father showed up in the afterlife and started yelling at him.

"So it's about fathers who are disappointed in their sons?" Wait . . . what did that have to do with him? He didn't think Snape felt that way. Or at least, not most of the time.

"No, not at all. Now hush, Harry. Try not to second-guess why we're watching. For now, just watch and enjoy. Think of this as movie night at school."

"We don't have those at Hogwarts,” said Harry dryly. “But all right, I'll try."
He managed not to speak again during the episode, though at several points that was difficult. There were some aliens called Naussicans, but it was hard to take them seriously as a space-faring race because they were so brutal and stupid they'd have definitely all killed each other long before their civilization could have developed advanced technology. Besides, the make-up the actors wore was laughable. There was also a romance sequence he didn't really think worked.

*Probably a good thing,* he thought glumly. A believable romance would just have made him think of Luna. Or really, think of her even more than he already did.

At least the main thread of the plot was intriguing enough. The captain appeared to have died, but he was allowed to go back to a time in his youth when he thought he'd made a mistake. He acted differently during this re-do, but instead of improving his life, the change made it worse. In the end he was allowed to go back to his youth again to undo the re-do and set his life back on its original trajectory.

"That's a lot to think about," said Harry when the end credits started to appear on screen.

Marsha clicked a button on the remote to shut off the screen. "I take it you see the parallels to your own difficulties."

"Yeah." Harry cleared his throat. "It's about . . . regret, I suppose. The captain really regretted getting into that fight when he was young. But it helped forge him into the kind of person he ended up becoming, so when he went back in time and avoided the fight, he became a different sort of person. One without all the drive and determination that had made him . . . well, *him.*"

"And the image of the tapestry that was being discussed at the end?"

"Like they said, a person's life is like a tapestry, woven out of a lot of different strands of thread. If you pull one of those threads out, you won't just have the same tapestry but missing one strand. You'll unravel the tapestry instead, and the person's life won't turn out the same."

"Yes, exactly. But can you put that in your own words, instead of theirs?"

Harry tried. "Um . . . a person's life is made up of a lot of events that are . . . interconnected. You can't just erase one and have the rest of the life stay the same. It's like . . . a row of dominoes knocking each other over. If you take one out early in the sequence, the rest on that same path won't fall, and the person's life will follow a different path."

Nodding, Marsha sat back in her chair, hands folded in front of her. "I suspect you've been thinking of your father's life rather as though it were a light switch instead of a tapestry, Harry. He was a Death Eater, yes. But then he allied himself to Albus Dumbledore, instead. Like flipping a switch."

Harry hesitantly nodded.

"But that's not how life works," she said, voice soft and gentle. "The person he is today is the result of his experiences. All his experiences. Even the negative ones."

"Negative," scoffed Harry. The edge of headache that had crept in just a moment earlier grew teeth and started to chew on him, just behind the eyes. He knew he could force it down with Occlumency, but he didn't want to expend his mental energy on that. Not just now. This conversation was too important. Fishing in a jacket pocket, he pulled out his vial of Lillehammer and quaffed it.

Then he tried to concentrate on what she'd said. "Negative? That's what you're going to call it? It was completely *stupid,* him deciding to follow Voldemort!"
"But young people often undertake life-changing decisions that are very stupid indeed," murmured Marsha. "The captain's decision in the show, to fight with a Naussican twice his size, that was certainly brainless."

"Yeah," rasped Harry. He hated the most brainless decision he’d ever made. Even if he understood now that Bellatrix had been the one to kill Sirius, he still hated that he’d ever gone to the Ministry that night. It had been stupid. And life-changing? Oh, yes.

"But without that decision, stupid and destructive as it was, he became a different person.”

Swallowing, Harry tried to get his thoughts back on track. They weren’t really here to go over his own stupid mistakes. This was about Snape.

“So let's examine the tapestry of your father's life,” she quietly continued. “It was terrible that he ever joined the Death Eaters, of course it was. And I don’t want you to misunderstand this exercise. I’m not trying to suggest that it wasn’t stupid, that it wasn’t a mistake. What it also is, though, is a part of your father’s life experience. A part of his tapestry. If we pull that one thread out from the whole, what else follows?"

"He . . ." Harry stopped to think, then started over. "I guess my father, James I mean, would still have hated him. And vice-versa. That all started a long time before Severus was old enough to join Voldemort."

"Professor Snape hates your father?"

Harry lifted his shoulders. "Not so much now, I don't think. But before he adopted me? Hate's a pretty mild word for it, really. It was more like, um . . . vitriol, I guess."

Her voice was hesitant when she spoke next. And for good reason. "I see. So if Professor Snape had never become a Death Eater, would your parents still have died?"

"Yes," sighed Harry, reaching up to rub his head. That was just habit, of course. He couldn't feel it any longer, not even with his hands. He abruptly dropped them to his knees. "Voldemort had other spies following Dumbledore about. One of them would have overheard the prophecy and reported it back to him. Hell, even with him thinking Snape was on his side, Voldemort still had another spy overhear the prophecy. I guess the only difference would have been that Peter Pettigrew would have been in rat form instead of chameleon."

She probably couldn't have followed all that, but she didn't ask any questions.

"If he'd never become a Death Eater, though . . ." Harry tried to tug that thread away from the tapestry of Snape's life and imagine how things would have turned out differently. "I don't think he'd have become a teacher, really. I mean, he only did that because he wanted to stop being a Death Eater, and he went to Dumbledore for help, and got roped into spying on Voldemort instead of really serving him. And Voldemort wanted him to spy on Dumbledore, so he needed to be at the school. So . . . ” Harry blinked. “I’d have come to Hogwarts and there would have been someone else teaching Potions. I don’t think I’d ever have met Severus if he hadn’t become a teacher.”

“If he hadn’t become a teacher?” she asked gently, stressing the last word.

“I wouldn’t have met Severus if he hadn’t become a Death Eater,” sighed Harry. “So that’s it, then? If I like having him for a father, I have to accept his past because without it, I wouldn’t have him at all. Otherwise I’m just a total hypocrite?”

It seemed kind of like a cheap trick to Harry. Not like a real solution.
“That’s not quite what I mean,” said Marsha, fingers steepled in a way that reminded Harry of Snape. “First off, I’m not suggesting that you should ‘accept’ his past, not if what you mean is that you would condone it. It’s more a case of acknowledging that it happened, and that it helped to forge him into the kind of man he is today.”

That made sense, so Harry gave a cautious nod.

“Secondly, the point of this exercise isn’t to develop an alternate life sequence for Severus Snape. I’m not interested in how his Death Eater experiences shaped his career choices. Neither was the Star Trek episode, if you recall. Even when he’d undone his youthful mistake, Picard still became a Star Fleet officer. Serving on the same ship, no less.”

“Right . . .”

“The point is to examine how pulling one thread from your father’s tapestry would have changed him as a person,” Marsha went on. “His internal journey, if you will. Harry . . . he is the person you see today because he experienced life in a certain way. Because of his choices. If he’d made a better choice, would he in the here and now be a better person?”

That was a much harder question. “He hated James Potter,” Harry said slowly. “And then later, he was in the Order and had to work with him. This was after he’d turned spy, obviously. Severus said . . . my dad had grown up. And he stopped hating him. Then later--” Harry drew in a sharp breath, because even remembering Snape’s anguish during the conversation was twisting his stomach, somehow. “Later he said the only way he could cope with having played a role in his death was to hate him again, because to have killed a good man was so unbearable.”

“And what does that tell you?”

Harry turned his face away. “Without having been a . . . a Death Eater, he wouldn’t have been in the Order, either. So he wouldn’t have learned that my dad had grown up. He’d have kept on hating him.”

A memory suddenly blossomed from somewhere deep in his mind, spilling out his lips before he even had a chance to think about what he was saying. “Once upon a time he was an angry young man--” Harry grimaced. “He’d have stayed that way, I guess. Angry. Well, I mean, he was angry all the time my first few years at Hogwarts. But he explained that. After my parents died he could only bear what he’d done if he hated them again. But after he . . . he started to care about me, he couldn’t look at me and see so much James and still hate him, so he . . . came out of it again.”

Harry swallowed.

Marsha said nothing.

“It was being a Death Eater that led to him eventually renouncing his hatred,” Harry said slowly. “I mean, he did . . . uh, regress, I guess. For years. But he’d probably never have renounced it at all without having turned to Voldemort only to find out there was no solution there. It was only that experience that convinced him to work for the Order instead. To work for good, which is what he did all those years he was spying. Without that, he’d have . . . just stayed angry and hateful.”

Harry drew in a deep breath, his thoughts coming faster as new connections occurred to him. “I mean, he’d never have sided with Dumbledore if not for needing protection when he wanted to leave Voldemort. The headmaster . . . uh, when Severus was at school, my godfather arranged to have him attacked by a werewolf. Severus was very nearly killed. And Dumbledore . . . he just treated it like a boys-will-be-boys moment, when it was actually attempted murder. So if not for
something truly devastating, Severus would never have turned to Dumbledore for help.”

“It sounds like turning his back on the Death Eaters was the trigger for several kinds of positive personal growth,” murmured Marsha. “He grew up himself. He learned to work with people who had bullied and even betrayed him. He eventually learned even to trust them, perhaps.”

“Sort of,” mumbled Harry. “I think he trusts Dumbledore in some ways, at least. They seem to have . . . I don’t know. A difficult relationship, sometimes. But there’s no question that Dumbledore trusts him. He was a spy right up until Samhain and--”

Harry suddenly sat bolt upright, his eyes wide and almost feverish.

“What is it?” asked Marsha sharply. “You’ve gone white. Harry?”

“Samhain,” he repeated, feeling all at once like he was going to be sick, right there in front of her. “Oh, God. Samhain!”

Marsha quietly rose from her chair and moved to sit alongside him, but Harry barely even noticed that until one of her hands reached out and covered both of his as he clenched them together. “Shh,” she said, lightly stroking until his finger muscles relaxed a little.

“No, it’s--” Harry sighed, a barrage of memories sweeping through his mind. Old ones, this time. Years old. Snape had called him things over the years. Selfish. Spoiled. Ungrateful. Stupid. So many insults. They hadn’t wounded him much at the time, because he’d known that Snape was just an awful, bitter git who hated Gryffindors and lived to torment them.

Except, he’d been right. Harry had been selfish and ungrateful and a lot of the other nasty things he’d been called. Worse, he’d been an idiot. And not in a good way, either. Not an idiot child. Just a complete idiot.

What the hell was wrong with him? Resenting the fact that Snape had once been a Death Eater! That was so stupid that there wasn’t even a word for it.

Harry gulped, swallowing back something foul, but at least he managed not to actually sick up. “I . . . I’m . . . look, if he hadn’t been a Death Eater, he’d be a different person. A worse person. I get that. And he wouldn’t have adopted me, he wouldn’t even have known me, most likely. But that’s not the most important thing.”

He expected her to ask “What is?” but she just remained silent, still offering him warmth and support by her nearness and the hand that still hadn’t let go of his.

Harry couldn’t seem to stop swallowing. “I . . . I was kidnapped and brought to Voldemort last year,” he said, forgetting that she probably knew that already. “For a dark revel. Severus was there as a Death Eater. Well, not really as one. He was there pretending, I mean. And I don’t exactly remember, only bits and pieces, but I’ve been told the whole story -- I was tortured horribly, and Severus had to watch and wait for a chance to get me out of there. Which finally happened, and he took me to safety, which completely blew his cover.”

Harry moved his hands to clutch at hers, both of them, and shook them slightly, his green eyes searching her face to be sure she understood. “So that’s it, don’t you see?”

She nodded slowly. “If he’d never been a Death Eater, he wouldn’t have been at that meeting, able to rescue you.”

“No!” Harry’s hair flew wildly as he shook his head, trying to start over. “Well, yes, that’s true, but
it’s not just that he was there. It was that he knew what to do, exactly what to do! He . . . he cared about me already by then, you see. Anybody else who cared about me, they wouldn’t have been able to hold me down to be tortured! Anybody else would have broken from the sheer horror and tried to save me too soon -- and if Snape had done that, Voldemort would have killed me for certain. I only got out because my--”

Crap. He wasn’t supposed to tell her about his dark powers. But maybe he didn’t need to. This was about what he understood, not about making sure that she did.

“Never mind. I just know that if Snape had tried to save me from the torture, Voldemort would have realised how stupid he was being to toy with me when it might mean I could get away. He’d have cast the killing curse to end things once and for all.”

Some of what he’d said must have gone over her head, because it seemed like she’d only really heard one thing. “Professor Snape held you down to be tortured?” she asked, frost coating every word.

“He had to!” shouted Harry, jumping up to pace back and forth across in front of the sofa. “He was watching and waiting for his chance! He had to stay close to me so he could Portkey me out the instant the wards fell! But that’s not even the point!”

She didn’t look like she agreed, but he had to give her credit for not sidetracking him again. “Then what was?”

Harry stopped stomping across the carpet and tried to put in into words that would make sense, instead of this long rambling story that didn’t really matter. He felt like just saying it coherently, instead of the jumbled way it existed in his head, would help him understand it better himself. Because mostly it was a whirling lash of feelings, but if he could explain . . .

“He knew how to stand the sight of torture because he’d been an actual Death Eater,” he finally managed. “And he knew how to wait, and watch, and bide his time, because he’d spent years spying on the Death Eaters. He wasn’t able to Portkey me out in the end just because he was conveniently there that night, due to his spying. He was able to get me to safety because he’d learned how to control himself when somebody was being tortured right in front of him. And it was only being a Death Eater, a real Death Eater, in the first place that had taught him that!”

The whirling emotions inside him coalesced into something solid that seemed to lodge itself in the space beneath his heart. He felt like he understood now, even though he couldn’t remember. He didn’t think he’d understood things so well before the amnesia. He couldn’t have -- hadn’t Snape said that looking back, he could tell that Harry had always been uncomfortable with being adopted by a man who’d once pledged allegiance to Voldemort?

Now, he could only think that he was damned lucky Snape had joined Voldemort. It was a strange feeling to have, because it wasn’t like Harry thought it had been a good decision. He still knew that his father had made a mistake, a terrible mistake. But just like in the Star Trek episode, it was a mistake that had forged him into the kind of person he eventually became.

The kind that could hold down a boy he loved, doing nothing to help as he was tormented for hour after hour.

When Harry thought about it, he couldn’t even imagine the kind of strength that must have taken. The inner resources, the resolve. He felt kind of faint just contemplating it, and he knew then that his words to Severus earlier had been so much milksop. He respected Severus, did he?
Harry didn’t think “respect” was the right word at all. He didn’t know one that was. He just knew that he’d been horribly spoiled and ungrateful and selfish and stupid to have ever ever tried to pretend to himself that his father hadn’t been a Death Eater.

He glanced over at Marsha then, unsure how long he’d been standing there, lost in thought, only to see her eyes narrowed like she was still furious with Snape.

Crap bloody crap.

“Look, it’s not as bad as it sounds,” he tried to reassure her. “I mean, he did stop holding me down partway through the bit where my eyes were being stabbed over and over--”

That didn’t help. She made a slight gasping noise, her throat bobbing as she tried to get herself under control. “I’m just not used to hearing so much about torture,” she finally murmured.

Harry wondered then how much she understood about Voldemort, squib or not. He knew she read the Daily Prophet, but . . . actually, that might be part of the problem, considering how they liked to focus on gossip and ignore the real problems facing the wizarding world.

He chewed his lower lip a bit. “Well . . . maybe it would help if I told you I know for sure that Severus never tortured anyone. He made up some story to placate Voldemort, something about how he had to hold back or it would affect his brewing, and so he just . . . watched.”

“That hardly qualifies him for sainthood--”

“But that’s the point,” said Harry earnestly. “He’s not perfect. And it’s him not being perfect that made him into the person I needed at Samhain.”

At that, she gave him a barest hint of a smile. “My opinion doesn’t truly matter. Our purpose tonight was for you to be at ease with his past, Harry.”

“Am I, though?” asked Harry. “After that potion, I couldn’t get a headache now no matter what happened. But . . . you think I’m cured?”

“I very much doubt it.”

Harry flinched.

“It’s the light switch analogy again,” she sighed. “You probably can’t just flip a switch in here with me and instantly shed every trace of negativity you’ve associated with your father’s past, even if you understand that those strands are a key part of the tapestry of his life.”

“Then what was the bloody, fucking point?” screamed Harry.

The door to the waiting room suddenly blasted off its hinges, hurtling inward and to one side as Snape stepped through, wand at the ready, his black eyes beady and fierce as he scanned the room, his gaze furiously assessing every wall and surface, every corner, every square yard of ceiling--

“Professor Snape, really!” said Marsha as Harry stretched out a hand to pull her up from where she’d tumbled off the sofa in her shock.

“We’re fine,” said Harry, surprised at how gravelly his voice sounded. But he was shocked too.

Snape gave the room one last long stare and then tucked his wand away in a trouser pocket. “I do apologise. I heard Harry scream and . . .” Clearing his throat as though suddenly self-conscious, he
snatched his wand back out. “Reparo. Again, my apologies.”

Then he turned to Harry, one eyebrow slightly elevated. “Are you through?”

Harry glanced at his therapist. “Um . . . I think no?”

“Very well. I shall resume my place in your waiting parlour.”

He shut the door behind him so very softly that it was almost comical, after that dramatic entrance.

“So,” said Marsha as she dusted her hands along her sides. “Where were we? I believe you were expressing frustration that I hadn’t provided you with a guaranteed instant cure to ward off headaches.”

“Sorry I screamed at you, though,” mumbled Harry.

She waved that off. “I’ve heard far worse. Although, I will say I’ve never seen a client’s parent react with such . . . Well. He certainly does seem able to protect you.”

Harry just smiled.

“So, the point,” she resumed, voice brisk as she took up her place in her usual chair and waved him over to the couch once more. “I think you have the tools now to start to train your own mind to think in different patterns. Eventually the pattern should become ingrained, at which point you won’t need to worry about the headaches.”

Harry furrowed his forehead. “Tools?”

“Yes. Your intellectual understanding of the tapestry analogy. You appreciate now how your father’s past has made him the man he is. The man you love, I believe you told me yesterday?”

“Yes. Definitely.” Funny how he could say it to her. He still didn’t think he could say it to Severus.

“So those are your tools. But the headaches may still come. When they do, use your tools, Harry. Tell yourself, out loud if you can, that his Death Eater past is part of what has made him into the father that you now have and appreciate. Tell him the same thing. It’s not enough to have an intellectual understanding of the issue. You need to integrate that understanding into your emotions, your reactions, to your father. Really, you need to stop thinking of him as a light switch with two positions: Death Eater and now-he’s-all-right.”

“He’s a tapestry. He’s all of it,” said Harry, nodding.

“Yes. And the more you can tell yourself that, the more you can force yourself to believe it--”

“I do believe it!”

“In your head,” she said softly, shaking her own. “When you believe it fully with your heart, I think the headaches will cease.”

“All right.” Harry rose to his feet. “I think we still have a few days left in our holiday, but it’s all right if I don’t come again tomorrow?”

She shrugged. “Your father can get in touch with me if needed, but for now, I would think you should just try to use your tools. Come back if you have any difficulty.”

“I will.” Harry smiled. “Thank you. I think . . . well, I think I can probably manage, now.”
“Excellent news.” Marsha smiled. “But don’t forget I’m here if you need me.”

Harry nodded and shook her hand, then let himself into the waiting room, shutting it behind him.

Snape jerked his body to stand, his eyes wary and watchful. “Why did you scream?”

“Oh, doesn’t matter,” said Harry, starting to swallow convulsively again. “Nothing really was wrong. Sorry I alarmed you.”

Snape inclined his head. “Shall we go, then?”

In a minute.” Harry looked his father up and down, up and down, trying to force his thinking into new patterns, trying to see the man as a single being with past and present all wrapped up inside him. He had a feeling he’d rarely done this before, or maybe never. Ever since the man had been his father, Harry thought he’d probably looked at him and seen Snape-now, and deep inside he’d thought of Snape-then as something completely different. Like a light that had been switched off and didn’t exist at all any longer.

But that was stupid, of course. Even Sirius had tried to tell him that people were more complicated than that. The world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters. We’ve all got both light and dark inside us.

He was tired of being stupid. It was time, he thought, to start trying to use his new tools.

“Thank you for saving me on Samhain,” Harry finally said, holding up a hand to stop the man from replying, probably with some variant of don’t-thank-me. “I’m so, so grateful you were there, Severus. And grateful you knew exactly what to do, exactly how to be to get me all the way through that. It’s . . . I . . . I’m . . . um . . .” Sucking in a deep breath, he started over. “I guess it turned out to be a good thing that you were once a Death Eater.”

And then, while Snape stood there with his mouth slowly dropping open, Harry lost his nerve.

“See you back at the house,” he gasped, and Apparated away.
Harry frowned a little, wondering what was keeping Severus. He’d been 100% sure that the man would Apparate back to Number Twelve right after him, and about 98% sure that Severus would want to talk to him about that “good thing you were a Death Eater” declaration.

After about five minutes of waiting, Harry got up from the edge of the bed where he’d been sitting, and went downstairs to poke about a bit. Maybe Snape had decided he should check in on Narcissa before he came up to speak with Harry. Maybe he’d even needed to speak with Draco about something.

But no, the lower levels of the house were dark and quiet, with the sole exception of the kitchen. Dobby was in there, three ceramic bowls hovering around him, each one boasting a whisk busy beating something into a froth. One bowl looked to be full of whipped cream while the other two seemed to contain custard. Chocolate, maybe? And . . . rainbow? Harry blinked, because even though the rainbow custard was being furiously stirred, the colours weren’t mixing.

But then, who had ever said that magic custard had to make sense?

Harry was about to walk on past when the whisks suddenly stopped so Dobby could shove both his hands into the two bowls of custard. He scooped up great huge gobs and shoved them into his mouth, then followed that with handfuls of whipped cream. Then he scooped up more custard and started again.

Ewww. Harry had thought that Ron had bad table manners, but this was something else again.

He didn’t want to criticise, he really didn’t, but he also didn’t want to have any of this for pudding tomorrow, so he drew in a deep breath and crossed into the kitchen.

“Harry Potter sir!” yelped Dobby, bouncing on his heels as usual.

“Hi, Dobby. Er . . . are you making that for our dinner tomorrow?”

Of course, knowing Dobby, it might be for breakfast instead!

Huh. The question had made the tips of Dobby’s ears flush a more brilliant green. “This is not being for Harry Potter’s family. Dobby is enjoying a late-night snack.”

Oh. So why did he sound almost shame-faced about it? “That’s all right,” Harry assured him.

Clearly relieved, Dobby started bouncing again. “Would Harry Potter be liking some?”

“No, no, that’s all right,” Harry rushed to say. “It’s pretty late. I should get back to my room--”

Dobby cocked his little head to the side. “But these are being sweets for good dreamings--”

“Oh, do the house-elves at Hogwarts always whip up treats instead of using potions like wizards?”

That made the tips of his ears flush greener again. “The other house-elves is always saying that Dobby is using too much wizard sugar,” he muttered.

That explained a few things. “Well, you have as much as you like while you’re here,” said Harry, grinning. “Stuff yourself, yeah? You deserve a few treats for being willing to help us out.”
“Dobby is thanking Harry Potter! But Harry Potter’s father is already being paying Dobby for coming here, and Dobby would be coming anyway, anything to be helping Harry Potter!”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Harry dryly. “I should get back upstairs, though. Severus might be home by now, and I think he might want to talk to me. Good night.”

“Good night, Harry Potter!”

When Harry went back upstairs, though, it didn’t seem like his father had arrived yet. At least, there was no light coming from beneath the man’s bedroom door, and when Harry knocked, the only reply was silence.

Shrugging, Harry went into his own room and shut the door so he could change into his pyjamas. Then he sat cross-legged on top of the bed, Teddy resting on his lap, while he wondered just what was going on.

Oh. Oh, no. What if Severus were in some kind of danger? They’d Apparated directly into the waiting room from a location some miles away, so it really didn’t seem likely that Voldemort or his minions could have known where Snape would be, but Draco knew, of course. And Harry hadn’t seen him downstairs! What if he’d left the house and been captured and tortured into admitting something--

Shite! This could have been Voldemort’s plan all along! Get Narcissa into the family so she could send Draco out of the house for something and--

Harry’s thoughts immediately ground to a crashing halt. That last idea of his was simply laughable. He didn’t trust Narcissa an inch, but there was no way she’d have sent Draco into danger. That much, he was sure of.

Unless Voldemort was clever enough to know that, and hadn’t told her that he planned to torture her son . . .

But no, that wouldn’t work either, because Narcissa also wasn’t stupid. If Voldemort had told her to send Draco out alone, she’d have realised what a bad idea that was. And anyway, for all Voldemort knew, the three of them might have stayed at Hogwarts.

But Snape could still be in danger, Harry thought, chewing on his lower lip at the minutes ticked past. Maybe Harry should pop back to Marsha’s and check? Or maybe he should first make sure that Draco actually was in the house right now--

Before he could decide, he heard the tell-tale sound of Apparition in the hallway, and then a knock on his door.

Harry leapt up off the bed and yanked his bedroom door open, scowling. “Where have you been!”

Severus raised a single eyebrow and flicked his wand, casting a shimmering privacy ward that seemed to fill the entire hallway and half the stairwell. “Speaking with your therapist.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. “You’ve been speaking with Marsha all this time?”

Snape’s lips quirked, just slightly. “Yes, but it’s only been a quarter of an hour. Ah, but I see that you appear set for bed. Perhaps we should talk in the morning, you and I.”

“Oh, just come in,” said Harry crossly, marching across the room and plonking himself back down on the bed. Had it really only been fifteen minutes? He snatch up Teddy. Just for something to
hold, he told himself. “You had me worried, I hope you know. I thought maybe Voldemort had
snatched you! I was this close to rushing back to check on you!”

“You aren’t to rush out to save me just because I might be in danger,” said Snape, glowering.

Harry raised his chin. “That’s not very Slytherin of you!”

“I love you, you idiot child! You are to keep yourself safe, even if I am not!”

“I thought you said you weren’t trying to change my whole personality!”

Snape sucked in a breath through bared teeth, then clamped his mouth shut and dropped into the
chair he’d used before. It was a moment longer before he spoke again, “Harry,” he finally ventured.
“Were you truly about to rush out of the house?”

Harry swallowed. “Well, first I was going to go see if Draco was here. ’Cause I couldn’t figure out
how anybody could have known you’d be at Marsha’s unless he’d been tortured into saying so.
And if he wasn’t in the house . . . I hadn’t really planned out what to do next.”

“One would hope you would at least have tried to message me before leaving the wards. Your
Sickle, perhaps? Or failing that, a silver message?”

Harry groaned. Was he never going to learn? It was the same mistake he’d made with Sirius, only
worse. Then, he hadn’t known he had a magical way to communicate other than firecalling. He
really shouldn’t have forgotten this time.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Snape advised, clearly reading the guilt on his face. “By your own
admission, you hadn’t yet planned out what to do. I have every confidence that if you had found
Draco missing, you would have taken a moment to consider the options at your disposal.”

“Yeah, well I will now if something happens. I’ll . . . remember this,” muttered Harry. Then he
tried to get his mind off his near-panic. “So, um, why did you stay behind to talk to Marsha?”

“Your parting words were rather startling,” said Snape dryly.

Harry stared. “And you didn’t think you ought to talk to me instead of her?”

“There was also the issue of your scream. You had declined to explain, so . . .” Snape lifted his
shoulders.

Great, so now he knew how rude Harry had been. Except, he didn’t seem annoyed at all, did he,
that Harry had yelled profanity at a woman who was just trying to help him. “What did she say?”

Snape leaned forward. “Precisely nothing. Well, nothing of note, I should say. She had a great deal
of wisdom to impart on the subject of patient confidentiality.”

“Right, confidentiality,” said Harry slowly. “So she wouldn’t even tell you why I screamed?”

“Nor what led you to tonight’s apparent epiphany. I am instructed to bring my questions to you.”
With that, Snape leaned forward still more, his dark eyes intense as they searched Harry’s.

Harry blinked, something just then occurring to him. “Wait, though. I just realised. You heard the
scream, but if you have questions, that means you couldn’t hear the session?”

Snape tilted his head slightly to the side. “And so? . . . Ah. Yes, I think I see.”
Harry could hardly believe he hadn’t once thought about this sooner. Not yesterday, and certainly not today. “I knew you were going to be in that waiting room, nothing to keep you from overhearing me except Muggle soundproofing, which you could defeat in an instant, and it never even dawned on me to make a fuss.”

“Nothing to keep me from eavesdropping, I think you mean.” Snape’s throat bobbed a little. “I must admit, until your scream I had assumed that you had lain down a privacy spell or two. You certainly know how. The fact that you didn’t cast an enchantment, though—”

“I trust you,” Harry interrupted. “I mean, it didn’t even occur to me to wonder if you’d snoop. I just . . . I just knew you wouldn’t.”

Snape laced his fingers together, his hands clasped in his lap. “Well. That is progress, certainly.”

“And that was before I’d had my . . . er, epiphany, about your . . .” Harry gulped, just a little. “Death Eater days.”

Snape’s eyes narrowed. “So you say. Have you a headache?”

“No, but I took the Lillehammer during the session.”

“I will provide you with another vial.”

“No, that’s all right, I don’t think I’ll need it any longer—”

Snape was shaking his head, though his hair wasn’t swaying with the motion like it sometimes had. That was when Harry realised how limp and lank and greasy it was looking. Like his hair from years ago; lately he’d been looking better.

Because of Maura, Harry thought. Both the improvement, and now the return to old habits.

“I will provide you with another,” Snape repeated, every word firm.

Harry was hoping not to use it, but he gave a short nod, only wincing a little when Snape summoned a vial and it came flying. Harry set it down on the nightstand next to the bed.

“And now to return to the core of the wand,” Snape said, leaning back in his chair. “Why did you scream?”

A bit of nervous laughter bubbled up Harry’s throat. “It was stupid, Severus. I just got frustrated for a second. I mean, I thought I was cured and Marsha told me I wasn’t, not yet. I was being rude to her, if you must know.”

“Quite good of her to keep that to herself.”


Snape didn’t look amused. “Perhaps you could explain your epiphany.”

Harry didn’t know where to start, he really didn’t. Probably not with Star Trek, at any rate. “She showed me . . . it was kind of like a case study, I suppose. About how a person’s past experiences are always going to be a part of them.”

“In my case I should think you would find that rather horrifying.”

Harry frowned at that and hunched over his crossed legs as he struggled to figure out how to
explain. Maybe with an analogy Snape could appreciate. “You always say we have to learn by experience,” he murmured, glancing up briefly, but unable to hold the man’s gaze for long. “I was talking things over with Marsha, and it struck me that you had, Severus. When you were a Death Eater in truth, you had to learn how to stand by and watch people be tortured. And that, that ability, you took it with you when you left that life. And then later, when I needed you . . . well, you knew how to do it. Er . . . watch me be tortured, I mean.”

Snape drew in a sharp breath. “Samhain.” And then, more tentatively. “You have remembered what happened that night?”

Harry curled a hand into the bedcovers, crushing the fabric with his grip. “I . . . no, not really. I sort of remembered flashes of it a long time ago, but it was like my mind flinched back from seeing the full picture. But I know an awful lot.” He glanced up again. “From you. From Draco. I guess he was there that night but didn’t admit it to me for a long time?”

“That’s another discussion.”

“Yeah.” Harry swallowed. It felt like something was lodged in his throat. “Well, it seems now like I spent a long time trying to forget you’d ever been a Death Eater, since that’s not who you are today. But Marsha helped me see that it helped you to become the person you are today. The person I . . . the person that I . . . that I have for my father,” he finished, feeling like a right tosser that he still couldn’t force the right words out. It shouldn’t be so hard to say that he loved Severus, not now that he was so sure that he did. “And I only have you because you learned things from your experiences. Even the really terrible ones.”

Severus laid a hand on top of his, lightly stroking his fingers until Harry relaxed them. Then he drew his arm back, but only a few inches. “And so now you feel that you’ve no more need for the Lillehammer?”

Harry grimaced. “Well, not exactly. I just don’t want to keep using it as a crutch, is all. I need to use my tools.”

“Tools.”

“Yes. When I start to feel . . . conflicted, about you, I’m supposed to consciously remind myself how fortunate it is that you were once a Death Eater. And eventually it’ll finally sink in for good, and then the headaches will stop. Or, that’s the theory, anyway.” Harry tried to smile. “I have to learn to see all of you, everything you are, instead of just the . . . the more recent bits.”

“Hmm.” Severus seemed lost in thought for a long moment. “It strikes me that this isn’t precisely a new skill for you. Last year, you were reluctant to come to me about an unfair teacher.”

“Imagine that,” muttered Harry.

Snape gave a brief nod. “We confronted the issue, eventually. I think after that you stopped trying so hard to ignore how I had once treated you.”

“Well, that’s hopeful.” Steeling himself, Harry tried again to use his tools, even with the Lillehammer protecting him from a headache. He stared at Snape, forcing himself to consciously think about how the man had once been a Death Eater. About how he’d followed Voldemort, and hated all things Muggle.

No headache attacked him, but that didn’t prove much.

Snape merely looked back at him steadily until Harry dropped his gaze. Only then did he break the
moment. “I have also had to learn to see all of you,” he remarked. “For years I saw nothing at all but a brash Gryffindor, and once you became my son I tried to see you as a Slytherin instead, for you have those traits in abundance too. But you are both. It took me some time to truly integrate the ‘two Harrys’ into one in my thoughts. So . . . I know that such a task can be a difficult one.”

Harry smiled a little. “Do you think adoption’s always like this? With such complicated relationships?”

“I very much doubt it.”

“I’m really glad you adopted me,” Harry suddenly blurted. Maybe if he couldn’t say ‘I love you’ to Severus, he should find other ways of making the man understand. “I mean, it was so, so good of you. Especially considering how we’d always been, before that.”

Snape sighed. “Don’t start thanking me. I did it because I had come to love you. No child should have to thank a parent for that. You’re entitled to your father’s love.”

“It was still good of you.”

Snape’s eyes actually darkened at that, going blacker than black.

“What?” Harry asked, confused. “It was good of you! And you’re a good man--”

“I may come to hate that word,” he softly snarled. ‘‘Good,’ you keep saying. It was good that I was once a Death Eater. I am the one who lived through the experience, and I can tell you that it wasn’t good at all! It was a dreadful thing for me to ever have done, and I can’t have you thinking otherwise, just because it proved useful afterwards!”

Oh. Harry had gone over all this with Marsha, so it made sense inside his head, but he could see now that he hadn’t explained. Not properly. And in his obsession with himself and his own emotions, he’d been a perfect idiot. He’d overlooked the obvious: that Snape would have feelings of his own about his past. Issues of his own.

“I don’t think otherwise,” he said, scooting closer to Snape. “Joining the Death Eaters, that wasn’t good at all. No, of course not. That’s not what I meant. That was a terrible mistake on your part. Maybe the biggest mistake you ever made.”

Snape’s lips twisted. “Maybe?”

Harry ignored that. “But made you the person that you are, Severus.” He thought better than to use the word ‘good’ again so soon. “You ended up being able to spy for the Order, and that saved lives, I know it did. And then on Samhain, you were there for me. And you knew just what to do to keep me alive.”

“The good outweighs the bad, is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Not exactly. It’s more like, the past can’t be changed. But people can . . . and you changed, Severus. You took something absolutely terrible and . . . made the best out of it that you possibly could.”

Snape stared at him, then gave a sharp, short nod.

Harry knew what that meant. The man had heard, but he wasn’t convinced. Which just proved, didn’t it, how good a person he really was, these days. He regretted his own past so much that he didn’t like to contemplate it as good in any way.
A memory glimmered inside Harry, then, shining as fierce and bright as a shooting star. “Hey!” he suddenly exclaimed. “Weren’t you the one who told me that even the most unfortunate decisions could turn out well, when one takes a longer view of matters?”

Snape blinked, clearly startled. “I . . . did.”

“Take your own advice,” said Harry, very gently. “Stop letting your past torment you. You were wrong to join Voldemort, but it did turn out well. In the long run.”

Snape looked away. “When I told you that, I believed it. Or rather, I thought I believed it. Getting to know you last year, and then getting to know you better still after the amnesia, and falling in love with Maura all over again . . . it has caused me to examine and then re-examine a great many things.” Snape signed again. “Or perhaps I’m lying to myself again. Perhaps I had never surmounted these conflicts. It seems to me now that I’ve only been repressing them.”

Harry smiled, very slightly. “I know a good therapist.”

“Hmmph.”

“I’m only half joking, Severus.”

“Please do drop the subject.”

Harry nodded. “All right. But, er . . . speaking of touchy subjects, um . . . can I see your Dark Mark?”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “You’ve seen it.”

“Yeah, I know. But I want to practise using my tools. Unless you object?”

The man rolled up his sleeve in answer, pushing the fabric upwards with a harsh gesture. He peeled off some kind of self-sticking plaster, then rotated his arm to place the mark fully on display.

It looked . . . strange. Not at all like it had when he’d caught a glimpse of it after the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Where once it had been black, now it just looked . . . raw. All thought of using his tools went away in an instant, he was so appalled.

“What happened?”

“I’ve been cutting the Dark Mark off whenever it grows back.”

Harry felt sick. Worse than sick. “That’s . . . um, your way of punishing yourself?”

“It’s to keep Voldemort from torturing me through the Mark.”

Well, that was better. But not by a lot! “That still looks painful as hell, sir--”

“Sir?”

Harry flushed. “Sorry. No idea why I said that. Honestly.”

Snape glanced his way, but nodded. “The extra marks were also proving useful in our ruse with Lupin. We would craft a Dark Mark for him to wear out of one of mine, imbued with Lucius’ magic to fool Voldemort. From time to time we needed to graft a new one onto his arm.”

“So there is a frothing vat of Dark Marks in the dungeon!” exclaimed Harry.
“There is.”

“I remembered that ages ago and didn’t think it could be true.” Harry hesitated before verifying the rest of the memory. “Do they really scream?”

“They do.”

“ Weird.” Harry glanced again at the awful mess covering most of his father’s lower arm. “I assume you’re doing what can be done to dull the pain?”

“I have a salve that helps a good deal. Your brother actually took my original formulation and improved upon it.” Snape shook his head. “He insists on calling it the Lotion Potion.”

Harry burst out laughing. Inappropriate, maybe, but he couldn’t help it. Lotion Potion was a hilarious name.

“Teenagers,” Snape muttered. Then he brightened slightly. “The batch I’m using at present is losing efficacy. Perhaps the three of us could brew together tomorrow.”

Once, brewing with Snape would have been a dreadful prospect. Now, Harry just smiled. “Sure. But will the cellar have all the ingredients you need?”

“I can conjure whatever’s lacking from my supplies at Hogwarts.” Snape twisted his arm to and fro. “Have you seen it enough for the moment?”

“One minute more,” said Harry, staring at it this time for what it represented and ignoring its current appearance. He couldn’t seem to use his tools, though. Couldn’t seem to force himself to contemplate how Snape had been a Death Eater and how fortunate he’d been to have a man like that on his side at Samhain.

He couldn’t think of anything like that.

No, all he could feel was sorrow that his father had suffered so much, and was still suffering.

“All right,” Harry said finally, looking away. “Thanks for showing me.”

“Remind me in the morning to provide you with another vial of Lillehammer,” said Snape as he applied the plaster once more and flipped his sleeve down over it. “I would prefer you to have several on hand.”

“Like you ever forget anything.”

“I try not to.” Snape blew out a breath. “I have a great deal on my mind.”

Harry didn’t have to ask what. That mention of Maura earlier . . . yeah. “I can always Occlude, you know. I won’t start misusing it again.”

“As long as the potion works without causing issues, it’s a better tactic than Occluding the headaches away,” said Snape, shaking his head. “Temptation being what it is.”

Harry could see that, so he nodded.

“But now, you really should get some sleep.”

Harry was pretty exhausted and knew he probably looked it. “All right. G’night, Severus.”
To his amusement, he got a soft pat on the head once Snape stood up. “Good night, Harry.”

“How are you this morning?”

Harry dropped into a chair and tried not to look surprised at the question. “Um, fine. You?”

Draco made a scoffing sound, but Harry ignored that. So he didn’t speak the way a purebred would. She could get used to it, or not. He didn’t really care.

“Really, Draco,” Narcissa murmured in a critical undertone, then turned her attention to Harry once more. “I am still weak. But well, all things considered. I would like to ask you if I might issue instructions to your elf.”

“Dobby’s not my elf.” Harry ate a few bites of porridge before going on. “He’s free. Didn’t your husband tell you that?”

Narcissa went unnaturally still for a moment, then gave a delicate shrug. “Well, yes, but that’s rather unusual, you know. I’ve no idea of the conventions that apply in such a situation. And as he’s here at your behest . . . ?”

“You don’t need society manners here, Mother. We’re all one family now--”

“The elf is here at my behest,” Snape interrupted. “And he has his instructions already. What do you need?”

Narcissa seemed to shrink back a little, even as she turned her face away. Her voice emerged only faintly. “It’s nothing, Severus. You’ve already been more than kind.”

“Mother,” said Draco in an exasperated tone. “He’s not going to bite your head off if you need something!”

Personally, Harry thought that Snape had sounded like he might.

“Or just tell me what it is,” Draco was saying.

“No, tell me,” corrected Snape. His tone that time was a little less harsh. “Narcissa?”

She bowed her head slightly. “I wanted to ask the elf if there could be a way to have fresh fruits and vegetables at table.”

Snape inclined his head. “Certainly. Dobby!”

Dobby apparated in at once, the cracking noise of his arrival strong enough to make the windows shake. To Harry’s amusement, he had what appeared to be a smudge of icing sugar smeared above his lips. It looked rather like a mustache. “Yes, Professor Snape sir? Dobby is here!”
“Mrs. Malfoy would like--”

Draco cleared his throat rather loudly.

Snape gave him a glare, then started over. “Mrs. Snape would like fresh fruits and vegetables with every meal. Will that be possible?”

“Yes, yes, yes, Dobby can be getting what Dobby is needing from Hogwarts’ kitchens, yes!”

“Thank you, Dobby,” said Narcissa in a soft tone.

When the elf had vanished again, Snape leaned forward then to assess Narcissa with a critical eye. “I thought that Poppy had provided you with nutrition potions to see to any deficiencies.”

“Oh, she did.” Narcissa didn’t look up.

“You still have enough, Mother?” pressed Draco. “I can brew you a few more vials.”

At least that got her to look somewhere besides the tablecloth. “No, I have sufficient. But thank you, Dragon.”

“Then why--”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head as if trying to get Draco to stop talking.

But he didn’t. “Then why ask for that, if it’s not to help with nutrition? For you, for the baby?”

She went pink in the cheeks.

“Narcissa,” said Snape, sighing a little. “Are you having cravings?”

“N- n- no--”

“Narcissa.” That time he said it in a warning tone.

“I don’t want to trouble you,” she said, barely moving her lips as she looked down once more. “I thought it simplest to inform the house-elf. But, but . . . I didn’t want to do anything that could offend Mr Potter.”

“So you are having cravings.” Now Snape sounded like he was reluctantly amused, of all things.

She glanced up, just briefly, her cheeks flaming by then. “Yes.”

“Mother. You know you’ve only to say the word and I’ll arrange for anything you’d like.”

Her hair flew out as she snapped her head to face Draco. “And you know, or should, at any rate, that this is something not usually discussed in the presence of wizards!”

Interesting, Harry thought, that she could speak to Draco that way when just the moment before she’d seemed so reticent with Snape.

“We’re not just wizards! We’re your family now! All of us.”

Harry managed not to make a face.

Snape sighed again. “Dobby!”
That time, the elf had a chocolate-icing mustache. “Yes, Professor Snape sir? Dobby is here again!”

“I do believe that Mrs . . . Snape would like to specify which fruits and vegetables she would prefer.”

Dobby hopped around the table until he was at Narcissa’s side. She spoke to him in a low voice, but he didn’t seem to catch on that she was trying to keep their exchange private. “Bilberries, yes, yes!” he shouted with glee, clearly delighted. Maybe, Harry thought caustically, he was thinking of all the side-desserts he could make with them. “And kumquats, yes, Dobby can be fetching you kumquats! And courgettes and endive.”

Dobby was a lot less enthusiastic about the vegetables, Harry noticed.

After the elf had popped out again, Snape tossed his napkin to the table and stood up. “I take it all is in order, then?”

“Yes. Thank you, Severus.”

He gave her a brief glance, but of course she wasn’t looking back at him. “Harry, Draco. Will you join me in the cellar when you’ve finished? I’d like your company while I brew.”

Narcissa seemed more animated after he’d left. She started talking to Draco about possible baby names. To Harry’s surprise, she made an effort to include him in the conversation, asking if he had any ideas.

Harry couldn’t come up with anything much. Deep down, he thought she was just being polite. He didn’t really believe she cared about a half-blood’s opinion. That she would ask anyway, though . . . he supposed it actually was pretty polite.

“Your father’s family favoured ancient Roman names,” she said, a thoughtful look on her face. “And mine tended toward constellations or stars.”

“Sirius,” Harry said, nodding. “Draco. Right. But I don’t think we learned about a Narcissa in astronomy.”

“No, my parents broke from the pattern for me,” mused Narcissa. “My name either derives from the myth of Narcissus, who was known for being rather conceited, or from a family of flowers also called Narcissus. They’re rather lovely, actually. Daffodils.”

“Flowers, right,” said Harry. “My family did that. The Evans, I mean. Not the Potters.”

“Oh, of course.” Narcissa’s lips curved in a slow smile that made her eyes sparkle, just a bit. “I remember Lily. What other flower names has your family used?”

“Petunia.”

Narcissa blinked. “Oh, dear. I prefer ‘Lily.’” Then she added, almost at once, “But I don’t mean to cause offense.”

Harry shrugged. “Eh, it’s not my favourite name either. But . . . do you mean you knew my mum?”

She favoured him with another one of those smiles, though it seemed a milder version. “Not well, I’m afraid. She was several years below me at Hogwarts.”
Harry couldn’t help the wistful way his next words emerged. “So you don’t remember anything much about her?”

That time, her smile looked a little sad. “How much do you notice about this year’s first-years?”

Harry gulped. “Yeah. I understand. Then why did you say you remembered her?”

“When the Dark Lord first fell, her name was suddenly everywhere. I think anyone who had been at school with her could suddenly recall seeing her in the corridors.”

“Yeah,” said Harry again. He cleared his throat. “We all try to call him Voldemort.”

She glanced at Draco, both her eyebrows lifting. “Truly? You say the Dark Lord’s name?”


Her eyes seemed to dim. “I don’t think I could ever dare that. There’s too much . . .” Her hands fluttered in some sort of gesture, then dropped down to her lap.

Draco’s eyes were a little hard when he looked across the table at Harry, but softened when he returned his gaze to his mother. “Perhaps it’s too much to ask of someone who’s just spent weeks in his company, being forcibly Legilimized.” He looked back at Harry, his gaze fierce again. “Don’t you think?”

“It was just a suggestion,” said Harry mildly as he pushed his empty porridge bowl away. “I’m going to go help Severus now.”

“Do that,” said Draco sharply.

-------------------------------------------------------------------

Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Comments very welcome,

Aspen in the Sunlight

-------------------------------------------------------------------
Snape had all his ingredients laid out in a neat row by the time Harry joined him in the cellar. Three cauldrons were set up, but none of them had a flame going yet.

Harry paused at the foot of the stairs, a slight chill passing over him. Closing his eyes, he tried to force the feeling away, the effort making him shudder.

“Problem?”

“Uh, not really.” Harry opened his eyes and stepped forward. “This cellar just gives me the heebie-jeebies, that’s all.”

Snape narrowed his eyes. “Do you know why that is?”

“I didn’t when it happened yesterday, but then Draco . . . explained. About me crawling through the wall.”

“How much does it bother you to be here?”

“Some.” Harry cleared his throat. “But, uh, I don’t want to leave, if that’s what you mean.”

Snape pursed his lips. “You’ve nothing to prove, Harry. I should have realised that the cellar might present you with difficulties.”

“I’d rather stay. I think it’ll help me get over it. Because already it’s milder today than it was yesterday.”

“If you’re certain.”

“Yeah, I am,” said Harry, trying to project confidence. Flicking his wand, he added his own privacy ward to the one he could see shimmering against the doorway at the top of the stairs. “That was good thinking,” he added, grateful for a chance to change the subject. “Realizing that Narcissa might try to give Dobby instructions for something a lot worse than fetching fruit.”

“He understands my concerns, so I doubt that he would obey her in anything questionable. But as a safeguard, I instructed him to bring Narcissa’s requests to you or me before acting upon them.”

_You or me_. It was nice to be included like that, so casually. More proof, he supposed, that Severus really did respect him these days. It was all at once a strange thought and yet a familiar one.

Sometime, Harry wondered if he’d ever get used to the whirling mix of impressions that came from not being able to remember his own bloody life. But he didn’t want to explain all that, so he just nodded. “Good thinking, like I said. Oh-- you, um, you wanted me to remind you about the Lillehammer?”

Snape hadn’t forgotten, as it turned out; he silently withdrew two small vials from within his robes and passed them over, then moved to peruse his neatly arranged ingredients.

For some reason, the thing Harry wanted to say next tried its best to stick in his throat. But now
that the thought had occurred to him, he had to get it out. “Severus?” He waited until the man turned completely toward him. “Why do you never talk about my mum? She was in your year, wasn’t she? I think you must have known her?”

Snape sat down on a tall stool and gestured for Harry to do the same. “I knew her, but only very slightly. I suppose I don’t speak of her much because there isn’t a great deal to say.”

Harry grimaced. “Because she was Muggleborn? You thought she was beneath you back then?”

Snape grimaced, too. “I am sorry to say that I did. But that is not what I meant. I simply didn’t have many interactions with your mother, Harry. We were sometimes in the same classes; I dare say we must have been paired together for assignments a time or two. But it’s not as though we shared much else besides that.”

“There must be something,” said Harry, frustrated. “I mean . . . not to bring up our own bad times together, but I saw her, you know, that time in the Pensieve? She tried to stop my dad when he was flipping you upside-down.”

“I would regard that mainly as an interaction between her and James.” Snape raised his shoulders slightly. “It’s not as though she afterwards came to speak with me, to ascertain that I was all right.”

“You had just called her a filthy little Mudblood!”

“Well, your father more than paid me back for that.”

Harry didn’t understand at first, since all James had done after Snape’s nasty remark was turn him upside-down a second time, but then he remembered something awful, absolutely awful, and he quickly looked anywhere but at his father. Oh, God. James had threatened, with that “Who wants to see me take off Snivelly’s pants?” question, but Harry had been yanked out of the memory right then. He’d sort of assumed that James hadn’t actually done such a horrid thing. But . . . it seemed like now that he must have. No wonder Snape had been so angry at Harry for looking in the Pensieve!

“More than paid—,” gasped Harry in a choked voice. “No, it’s not all right, what he did, no matter what you said—”

“No,” said Snape calmly. “But it wasn’t your doing. Don’t let it trouble you, Harry. I have forgiven him.”

“It didn’t seem like it to me.” Without realising, Harry started rubbing his upper arm, just at the point where Snape had gripped him so tightly, that day.

“Yes, I’m sure I bruised you there.” Snape sighed. “We’ve spoken of this. That was when I was back to hating James with every fibre of my being. Anything, rather than acknowledge that he had grown past his cruel, bullying ways. That I had helped to kill someone who had turned out to be a fine wizard, a fine man.”

“Fine man, ha. I’ve never seen him that way,” said Harry miserably. “Not really. I mean, so many people have told me how great he was when he was alive, but the only thing I’ve seen for myself was him being the worst sort of arsehole. And Sirius said it was just him being fifteen and an idiot, but I can’t—” He felt like an idiot himself when a couple of tears dripped down one cheek. “He was just like Dudley! Worse than Dudley! I mean, Dudley was never creative enough to—”

Harry couldn’t say it, couldn’t admit that he’d realized what James Potter must have done.
“You have seen the fine man he became,” said Snape, very gently. “You took Truthful Dreams and remembered some wonderful moments from your early childhood.”

“Fat lot of good it did me,” muttered Harry. “And anyway, I wanted to know about my mother, and here we are talking about nothing but James again!”

“I think that may be unavoidable. James and I were at odds from the very beginning, and our animosity went on for years, creating a wealth of memories. Imagine that you’d never become friendly with Draco. Twenty years later, wouldn’t you still remember your conflicts with him fairly well?”

“Young, of course.”

“But what would you be able to tell someone about Miss Brocklehurst?”

Harry didn’t even have much to say about her today. “Um . . . she’s in my year. Ravenclaw. I think.”

Snape nodded. “And that is your mother to me. In my year, but not my house. You understand the difficulty?”

“Yeah, of course, but what about later, when you were in the Order with my mum?”

“Our paths did not cross much.” Snape lifted his shoulders. “We all took direction from Albus, you understand. I would run across James because I was brewing battlefield potions and he would sometimes be the one to collect them. Those exchanges were . . . fraught with tension at first, and then strangely civil. But I only recall encountering Lily in larger meetings. I remember that she would usually sit alongside James, and that she didn’t hesitate to speak her mind, even when it meant contradicting him in front of the entire group.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Nothing else comes to mind at present. But Harry? I will think on all this, I promise.” Snape hesitated for a moment, then ventured in a diffident tone, “Would you pulverize the vervain for me?”

A distraction was probably a good idea, so Harry glanced at the counter. “Sure . . . er . . . would you tell me which one it is?”

Snape indicated a mortar already filled with pale lilac petals.

Well, that was embarrassing. He knew what a mortar and pestle were for, after all. The fact that the man hadn’t said anything caustic, though, not even in jest? Harry liked that. He liked it a lot.

Sliding off his stool, he got straight to it.
Draco joined them a little while after that, the three of them brewing in a companionable silence punctuated by the occasional friendly remark or short conversation. Mostly, though, it seemed that his father and brother really needed to concentrate on their tasks. The Lotion Potion, it turned out, was so intricate that Harry would personally call it fiddly.

They broke off at mid-day, with Draco going to his mother’s room to let her know they were having lunch, but she was fast asleep. When Dobby appeared to serve them all cheese-and-tomato sandwiches topped with slices of pineapple, he assured them all that Mistress Narcissa had eaten a mid-morning snack of endive stuffed with kumquats.

Talk about weird cravings!

Their second course was brought in on a tea tray, but when Dobby tipped the teapot to serve, what came pouring out the spout into their teacups turned out to be chicken noodle soup, steaming hot.

Harry thought that was kind of funny, and the way Snape and Draco both winced only made it funnier.

The afternoon’s brewing session was a little more stressful, and not just because the Lotion Potion had to be charmed with a long series of interlocking spells. Draco got the timing of one wrong, somewhere in the middle of the sequence, which meant they had to start all over. But at least they didn’t have to brew the actual potion again from scratch.

The other thing that made it stressful was the argument they got into when the Lotion Potion was finally finished and bottled.

“The good doctor will be seeing you, this evening,” Severus announced, directing the words at Draco.

“What? No, she won’t. I have enough to be getting on with.”

“After all that has transpired recently, she’d like to speak with you and see how you’re managing.”

So that was why Snape had taken so long with the therapist the night before. They’d been discussing Draco. Strange . . . Harry had a feeling that once, that would really have annoyed him. Now, it just seemed like a good thing for Snape to have done.

“I’m sure Harry can tell her at his next appointment that I’m managing just fine.”

“I’m sure that she would like to hear that from you instead of your brother.”

Draco’s tone grew sniping, then. “Well, I’m sure that as an adult, I can make my own decisions about which professional services I choose to avail myself of!”

Snape didn’t exactly snipe back, but he certainly didn’t sound pleased. “And I’m sure that as the man who has married your mother, much against my will, I quite assure you, I expect the respect that is due me as both your father and your step-father!”

Draco froze in place, the blood draining from his face. He opened his mouth, then closed it, then opened it again, all without saying a word. Then finally, just two words emerged. “Yes, sir.”

Snape pursed his lips, then took a step toward his son. “I didn’t mean to be so harsh, Draco. But can’t you see? This is very far from a usual occurrence. Anyone in your position would benefit from the insight a good therapist can provide.”
Draco shoved his hands in his pockets. “Oh, it is not usual for a boy’s father -- oh, so sorry, I mean step-father, to abhor his mother? I hadn’t noticed!”

“If I abhorred her I wouldn’t see to her every comfort,” Snape said patiently. “But I do not trust her. And Draco? I’ve never made any secret of the fact that this marriage is not to my liking.”

A choking noise emerged from between Draco’s teeth as his posture sort of crumpled. “I know, I know! But I thought, I mean, I thought maybe it would be like a new broom?” He raised hopeful silver eyes. “It takes a while to get used to it, and you’re not even sure you like it at first, but then you realise it’s actually brilliant, and . . . ?”

When Snape just shook his head, Draco backed up to lean against a counter, his pockets jiggling strangely. It took Harry a second to realise that his brother’s hands must be shaking. “Then . . . why don’t you just say it, Severus? Why? I’ve ruined your life! Go on, say it!”

“I don’t say that because it isn’t the case. None of this was your doing, Draco.”

“Of course it was! I begged you to marry her!”

Snape went to Draco’s side and laid a hand on his shoulder. “You did. But the need for this marriage was quite obvious to me, even without your entreaties. I could not let your mother die when it was in my power to prevent it.”

“And you don’t blame me, sure--”

“I blame Voldemort, and Bellatrix, and even Lucius, for if he’d never led his family into the Dark Lord’s clutches, your mother would not have been caught in this trap. But I don’t blame you, Draco. None of this was your doing.”

Draco gasped, turning to lean against Severus, his hands flying out of his pockets to grasp the man. “I-- I-- I believe you, or I think I’m trying to believe you, but I just keep thinking, how long until you change your mind and hate me?”

Severus enfolded him in a close embrace and spoke against his hair, fine strands of it blowing as he breathed on them. “And this is why I think it a very sound idea that you have a few sessions with the good doctor, Draco.”

“You could have said that, instead of calling yourself my step-father--”

“You aren’t the only one bearing up under a frightful amount of stress.”

“Yeah, all right.” Pulling away, Draco smoothed down his hair and straightened his robes. “Fine. I’ll go see her. But you don’t have to come with me. I can Apparate on my own.”

“Absolutely not. I will accompany you there as I do for Harry.”

“I’d rather go by myself--”

“Her office isn’t warded the way this house is. I’ll come with you as a precaution. I don’t want to lose you, you idiot child.”

“But, but--”

“And too, the good doctor may well wish to speak with the two of us together, considering the subject matter.”
“I don’t want to leave Harry here alone with my mother!” blurted Draco. “Just yesterday he made her cry! And this morning he insisted that she ought to say the Dark Lord’s name! He’s got no judgement, none at all, and she’s in a delicate condition, and--”

“Fuck you,” said Harry, but without much heat. Mostly he just wanted Draco to stop talking. “I’m not going to hurt her.”

“You already have--”

“Yeah, well I’ll be more careful, I promise. Yesterday was a mistake, I admit it. And this morning? I didn’t insist, Draco, I just mentioned it. And she didn’t even get upset, not really. She just said she couldn’t. Did I argue?”

Draco shook his head.

“And I won’t, all right? I won’t even mention it, word of honour.”

Draco still looked hesitant. “Don’t mention anything else that could trouble her, Harry.”

The truth was, Harry didn’t know all the things that might trouble Narcissa. But it wouldn’t help to say that, so he answered in a tone rich with warmth and promise. “Of course not.”

“Well . . . all . . . all right, then.”

Snape nodded at both of them. “Go upstairs and get dressed in Muggle clothes, then, Draco. We’ll maintain the same ruse that worked so well with Harry.”

“That I’m dying to eat pizza?” Draco scoffed. “She’ll never in a million years believe that.”

“That you’re intrigued after hearing Harry sing its praises.”

“And what’s the story for why Harry isn’t going with us, then?” asked Draco caustically.

“Why, that would be terribly rude, leaving her with no-one but the elf for company.”

“Hey, Dobby’s good company!” objected Harry.

“And we can say that we thought it a good idea for Narcissa to have more of a chance to get to know Harry,” Snape continued smoothly.

“Well, that has the advantage of actually being true. Fine, then.” Draco glanced about the potions lab. “Shall I stay and help you clear up, first?”

“Harry and I will see to it.”

“Good, because I could do with a shower.”

Once Draco had gone, Harry and Severus made short work of the clearing up. It really took almost no time at all when you used magic.

When the work was done, Snape turned toward Harry and regarded him with a solemn black gaze. "Do try your best to avoid upsetting Draco's mother. I can't think he'll agree to a second session if you do."

"And you think he needs more than one session."
Snape's lips twisted slightly. "Oh, yes. Don't you?"

"He has seemed . . ." Harry shrugged. "So he's been on edge. Look at the situation. Anybody would be a basket case. I think he's torn between proving himself to her and worrying he's going to lose you over this. If you ask me, though, she's the one that should be proving herself to him. She abandoned him just when he needed her most!"

"Yes, but he loves her."

That said it all, didn't it? "Well, I'll try to keep things perfectly pleasant this evening," Harry sighed. "For Draco, not for her. But I can't guarantee much. How should I know what might upset her? She seems a little . . ."

"Delicate?" asked Snape with an arched brow.

"Hardly," scoffed Harry. "Unstable, I think. She's weak right now, from the curse. And she's pregnant, yeah. But the one thing she isn't is delicate."

"I concur. As to what might upset her, though, I'd advise you to steer clear of the most obvious conversational pitfalls: Voldemort, the curse, and Bellatrix."

Harry tried to think if there was anything else. "Remus, too, I think. I mean, talking about him before didn't seem to set her off, but last time it seemed to trigger a panic attack or something. And I was just asking how she'd known he was an imposter. Though I was asking pretty forcefully, I guess."

"Perhaps tone is an issue." Snape shrugged. "I've tried to moderate mine. It's not always easy."

"Well, if we can believe her story, she's basically recovering from being tortured."

"She's recovering from the Withering Witch, regardless. I'd consider that a form of torture."

"True . . . I should know what that's like, but I can't remember much about it. Draco was tortured too, wasn't he? He said something about a snake pit?"

"Yes, I do seem to have a penchant for adopting boys with--"

"Issues?"

"A certain history, I was going to say." Snape turned toward the stairs. "Perhaps because of my own. Still, I wonder sometimes what else it says about me."

"That you're good," Harry said, figuring he might as well try to underline that for the man, since he didn't seem to know it on his own.

"Good," scoffed Snape.


Snape glared, but somewhere deep in his black gaze, Harry thought he looked pleased. A little. Well, maybe.

"I am most decidedly none of those things," he growled.

"Of course not," retorted Harry. "It's not like you got me a Teddy bear, or basically did nothing at all to punish Draco and me for being such blithering idiots, or--"
“That could always change!”

“But it won’t,” said Harry confidently. “I know it won’t. You think that with everything that happened just after, we have enough to be going on with. It’s part of your essential goodness.”

“Do shut up.”

That was such an uncharacteristic turn of phrase for the man that Harry figured he’d better heed it. So he just nodded, and started to head up the stairs. “I’ll go work on Parseltongue casting in my room until you and Draco are leaving.”

“Wandless,” cautioned Snape, passing a hand over his eyes for a moment. “And please limit yourself to spells you recorded in your lexicon. I don’t want to have to deal with an experiment gone wrong—”

“You don’t want anything to interfere with Draco going to Marsha’s.” Harry smiled. “I said I wouldn’t experiment alone again, Severus. Remember?”

“I remember. I’m also well-acquainted with the vagaries of teenagers’ capacity to follow instructions.”

“Well, you do like us to learn by experience,” murmured Harry, smiling more widely to show he was just joking. “Don’t worry, Severus. I’ll be good.”

Was it his fault if he put a little extra emphasis on the last word?

Severus gave him a rather dark look, but said nothing of it as he thrust the cellar doorway open and strode through.

“Their paper towels are a little too thick.”

That was the last thing Snape said to Harry as he left the room.

“Pizza,” said Narcissa doubtfully as she set her cup of tea on a round table close by her chair.

“Harry simply insists,” said Draco with a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Though I really can’t imagine why. It sounds like an oversized quiche crust dripping with oil and slathered with bizarre assortments of ingredients.”

“You’ll love it. Just... maybe don’t order anything with sardines.”

“Oh?” Narcissa’s voice lilted with curiosity. “Aren’t you going as well, Harry?”

“No, we thought it would be better if I kept you company,” said Harry, trying to keep his own tone light.

“That’s not necessary, surely. I’ll be fine here on my own for a few hours.”

Oh, God. He was going to have to insist. And he could only think of one way. “Well... or... you are actually my...” Oh, God. “Step-mother now, and we thought... well, I thought, it would be a
Narcissa looked uncertain for a split-second more, but then she favored him with a warm smile, her eyes sparkling so much that Harry thought she must know some sort of charm. “What a lovely idea, Harry. I should like that. I think I should like that very much.”

“That’s wonderful, Mother,” said Draco, bending down to drop a brief kiss on her cheek.

Narcissa caught his hand in hers, holding it for a moment before letting go. “Well, at least I understand your attire, now. The Muggle look . . .” She slowly shook her head. “I don’t think it suits you.”

“Ah, but just think, I can write a special report about my outing for Miss Burbage. Perhaps she’ll give me a spot of extra credit.”

Her voice was pure scandal. “Oh, my stars. You’re taking Muggle Studies, Dragon? Whatever for?”

“Loads of reasons. But one that matters most. I have to be able to fit in when I meet Hermione’s parents, you see.”

Harry sucked in a breath, shocked that Draco would drop a bombshell like that so casually. And then he braced himself for the explosion sure to follow. Not that he expected Narcissa Malfoy . . . fuck, Narcissa Snape, to scream and yell; he thought she was probably too committed to looking like a lady for antics like that. No . . . she was more the type to freeze the room solid with a disapproving glare.

All that happened, though, was that the sparkle in her eyes dimmed away. “Hermione, of course,” she murmured.

Harry figured it out, then. Draco must already have told his mother how he felt.

“I’ll present her to you at the earliest opportunity.” At the sound of a soft footfall, Draco turned slightly. “You as well, Severus.”

“I feel quite certain that Severus is already well-acquainted with your Miss Granger,” said Narcissa, almost whispering.

“I should still present her properly,” Draco insisted. “Don’t you think so, Severus?”

Snape inclined his head. “Certainly, if you wish to follow formal pureblood custom.”

“I have to. I’m not going to have Hermione thinking I don’t believe her fully worthy of my regard.”

“Very well, then.” Snape glanced toward Narcissa, his gaze seeming to slide over her and beyond. “I trust Draco has explained our outing?”

“Into Muggle London, yes.” Narcissa shifted in her chair. “I’m sure Harry and I will have a lovely evening as well.”

Snape gave a brief nod before taking hold of Draco and Disapparating, leaving Harry alone with Narcissa. Harry hurriedly plonked himself down in a seat and tried to look like he felt at ease. He was pretty sure he was failing at it.

“Did you often eat pizza, growing up?”
Harry hadn’t, of course. Beans on toast was more like it. He wondered what sort of answer would be best, though. “No, not so much. It was a special treat, you know? So it’s no wonder I grab every chance I get.”

She gave him a strangely bland look. “Really.”

“Yeah,” insisted Harry. “I mean, it’s not like Severus and I get a lot of chances to get away from Hogwarts during the term, so—”

The corners of her mouth tilted up in clear amusement. “Oh, Harry. This pizza pretext is really very silly. I know perfectly well that the house-elves at Hogwarts could prepare you a pizza if you explained the dish to them.”

Pretext? Uh-oh. “Well, I never thought about asking them, you know students just get served whatever shows up in the Great Hall—”

“Seven years at school and you haven’t learnt how to tickle the pear?” Narcissa shook her head. “I’m perfectly well aware of what’s really going on, Harry. Enough with the pretense.”

Harry hoped he didn’t look as panicked as he felt. “It’s not—”

She spoke right over him. “It’s entirely understandable that you and Draco would each appreciate spending some time alone with Severus, Harry. What I don’t understand is why anybody felt the need to make up stories about Italian food.”

Oh. Well that wasn’t so bad, if that was what she’d figured out. Actually, it was like Draco had said before: It had the advantage of being true. “Well . . . I guess we did feel like it was kind of rude, leaving you out.”

“Nonsense. I dare say Severus would think it entirely reasonable if I desired time alone with my son.” Her eyes suddenly narrowed as a little tremor passed through her. “Pardon me. With one of my sons, I should have said. It’s not lost on me that you are one as well, now.”

“Eh, I’m just a step-son—”

“That’s true, of course, but then again, you could also claim that you were just Severus’ adopted son. But that’s not the case at all, is it? It’s clear as Lubaantum that you’re quite fully his son.”

“Yes, but that’s different,” said Harry, desperately wishing for a way out of the conversation. Was there a way to call Dobby without making it obvious? “I’ve known him for ages.”

“And such a pleasant relationship you had,” she lightly mocked. “Draco mentioned a few things over the years, you understand.”

“Well, we got over all that.”

She gave him a level look. “Perhaps, as time passes, you and I will reach a similar accord.”

Not bloody likely, thought Harry. Outwardly, though, he smiled a little, trying to make it look shy, and said, “Perhaps.”

She spent a moment looking at her nails, reminding him of Draco. But then, she said something that made Harry lose every trace of his hesitation to spend time with her. “I spent a while today thinking on your query, Harry. The way you spoke this morning, it seemed that you’d never been told much about your mother. So sad, I thought. So I tried to think back to those years for you.”
Harry sat up straight. “Oh! Really?”

“Yes, of course.” Narcissa gave him another one of those smiles so kind they almost radiated heat, but this time, Harry couldn’t resent the way it made her face light up. “I was rather tired, and it almost seemed I went into a trance as I lay in bed thinking, but that turned out to be quite a good thing. It was like it unlocked some part of my deep memory, things I hadn’t thought on practically since they happened.”

“So you did remember some things!”

“Yes.” Narcissa looked away. “Nothing terribly profound, I’m sorry to say. But some things, yes.”

Harry just waited, feeling like his heart had risen straight up into his throat.

“It was Valentine’s Day,” said Narcissa, looking straight at him. “Your mother was in her first or second year, I’ve no notion of which. She couldn’t have been any older than that, or I’d no longer have been at Hogwarts. We were all in the Great Hall for a meal, and the owls came soaring in. I was no different from any of the other Slytherin girls, so I was watching them avidly, hoping a card or package would be dropped at my place.”

She paused to pick up her cup of tea and sip at it.

“Our attention was distracted by squeals coming from the Gryffindor table,” she continued after a moment. “It took a few minutes before we understood that one of the younger girls had been owled an trio of ever-blooming spell flowers. After a moment more I could see the girl that had been so favoured. I don’t think I knew her name at the time, but I remember her face, glowing with delight at such an unusual gift.”

“My mum,” said Harry softly.

“Yes.” Narcissa laughed, just as softly. “It was the talk of Hogwarts for a day or two, since they’d been owled anonymously. We Slytherins, though, knew that such a gift could only have come from a wizard of means, and most likely a pureblood.”

“My dad?”

“Possibly. But you must understand, Harry. James was far from the only rich pureblood in attendance. Nor even the only one in Lily’s year and house. Though of course, the flowers could well have been sent by an upper form in another house.”

“Nobody ever found out who it was?” asked Harry, a little sadly.

“Not while I was at school, certainly.”

A horrible thought suddenly occurred to him. “I hope it wasn’t Sirius.”

Narcissa gave an elegant little shrug. “I have no idea.”

“Well, thanks for telling me,” said Harry. She was right; it wasn’t much of a memory, but somehow it still meant the world to Harry. It was like a jewel. One more precious jewel to store in a small pile of gems, the sum of them representing everything he knew about his mother. “Did you remember anything else?”

“One small thing.” Narcissa sipped at her tea again, wrinkling her nose a little.
“Oh, is it cold? Dobby!”

The elf appeared at once, hopping from one foot to the other in his enthusiasm. “Yes, Harry Potter?”

“Can you fetch us a fresh pot of tea for us? And a few biscuits, and . . .” Harry took a wild guess. “A little bowl of bilberries? With cream?” When he glanced at Narcissa, she nodded, so he thought he’d done all right.

Dobby was back in a flash with everything, vanishing again just as quickly.

Harry poured her a fresh cup of tea and watched her nibble at a few bilberries. After a moment, he was pretty close to telling her to just get on with the story. In the end, though, she continued without his prompting.

“There was a time I passed by a branching corridor and I spotted her giving Peeves quite a talking-to.”

“What was she saying?” asked Harry eagerly.

“Some sort of rebuke, but I don’t recall the details.” Narcissa sighed and suddenly looked down at her hands, her teacup shaking on its saucer as she held it in her lap.

“Wait, what’s wrong?”

“Well . . . the full story doesn’t do me much credit, I’m afraid.” She glanced at him for a single second, and then appeared to find her lap of great interest once again. “Quite likely, I only remembered the incident because I stopped to ridicule her.”

“Ridicule her!”

“Well, truly, it’s not the done thing to speak at length with poltergeists,” explained Narcissa, sounding apologetic, at least. “That she would do so, and in full view of passers-by, no less? . . . I’m afraid I loudly remarked on her blood status to the Slytherin girls who were with me. We all . . . laughed.”

“And what did my mum do?” Harry asked in a tight voice.

“Oh, she just carried on as though I hadn’t said a word.”

“Good for her.”

“I wasn’t disposed to think so at the time,” admitted Narcissa slowly, her shoulders lifting.

Harry just stared.

“But now . . . well, what am I to think, Harry? It turned out to be a good thing that your mother was such a formidable witch, even willing to take on a poltergeist at such a young age.”

All right, that was going so far that Harry suddenly wondered if anything she’d said had been true. For all Harry knew, she just wanted to get on his good side. Because she was spying for Voldemort, maybe. The fact that he’d tortured her, after all, could work either way. Maybe she saw Harry as safety, now. But maybe she thought that betraying him, and Snape, was the way to get back into Voldemort’s good graces.

But didn’t she understand how much that would hurt Draco? Even if he was somehow kept
physically safe from whatever horror Voldemort had planned?

But then again . . . she wouldn’t be stupid enough to trust Voldemort. Would she?

All Harry really knew was one thing: trying to figure her out was making his head spin.

Still, he couldn’t resist challenging her last statement. “You do not think it was a good thing my mum was able to make Voldemort’s killing curse bounce back at his worthless head.”

“I didn’t when it happened, certainly,” she admitted. “It led to great difficulties for my family. But now, after everything that’s happened, what else can I think, Harry? I’m grateful to have a place of refuge from . . . him.”

“That’s got nothing to do with me, though,” said Harry slowly. “It’s all about Draco. I think you know that.”

She smiled, but for once the expression looked almost melancholy. “Of course. But you’re a part of this refuge, too. And I can’t think this marriage will work out very well if I can’t establish peace with you.”

Harry frankly doubted the marriage was going to work out well no matter what. But she didn’t know that. She didn’t know a thing about Morrighan.

Still, it was something that she wanted peace, he supposed. Assuming he could believe a word she said. He just didn’t know, any longer. But there was nothing to be gained by showing his doubt openly.

“It was nice of you to tell me a few things about my mother.”

Her smile that time looked like relief. “Of course. If I recall anything more I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“Thanks. That’d be great.” Harry stood up, wanting to get away. But of course that wasn’t really possible, not yet. “You made short work of the bilberries. Time for dinner, do you think?”

“Oh, that would be lovely.” She pushed to her feet, a little awkwardly, her robes hanging at odd angles due to her heavy state of pregnancy. She slowly followed him to the dining room, where Harry called for Dobby.

“Did you make something already for dinner?”

“Dobby is not knowing what to make,” the elf said, looking at Harry with huge, doleful eyes. “Dobby is being all out of good ideas!”

Harry hadn’t been expecting that. “Um, all right. Could you make us whatever suits, then?”

Dobby’s round eyes grew even more enormous. “Dobby is sorry sorry sorry! That is being community magic special to house-elves. Dobby cannot be sensing what is suiting all by his Dobby-self!”

“Well, don’t worry about it. I didn’t know, is all. Could you make me . . . um, a ham-and-cheese sandwich, maybe? With tomato soup?” He suddenly remembered Narcissa was right there. “And what would you like? I think Dobby can probably make most anything.”

Narcissa blinked as if she hadn’t expected to be consulted. “Oh! Perhaps a salad, with a few slices
of roast chicken, and a light vinaigrette to accompany it? And some of that tomato soup, yes.”

Harry cleared his throat, then tried to speak in an undertone. “Don’t serve it from a teapot, please.”

Narcissa must have heard him; she suddenly looked like she might burst out laughing. “Oh, and a spot of wine would be most welcome, Dobby. Something white. Perhaps a Chablis?”

Harry’s eyes went almost as wide as Dobby’s had the moment before. “What? No, no! Forget the wine, Dobby!” Then he rounded on Narcissa. “What are you doing? You’re pregnant! You can’t have alcohol!”

She looked as befuddled as if he’d said she mustn’t breathe. “Whyever not?”

“Why not!” erupted Harry. “Don’t you people know anything? It’s bad for the baby! It’s terrible for the baby! It could be born, I don’t know, deformed or something. I just know it’s bad!”

“Truly?”

Harry just gaped.

“Alas then, I shall forego the wine.”

“How can you not know something so basic?” Then a terrible thought struck him. “Oh, God. Did you drink a lot when you were pregnant with Draco?”

“Well, yes. Wine with dinner on a nightly basis. I was under a mediwitch’s care the entire time, taking all the proper potions.”

Oh. Well maybe the wizarding world took care of the drinking issue with magic. Draco certainly didn’t seem to have suffered any ill-effects. Unless alcohol caused pointiness? But that didn’t seem likely.

“I have the same potions from Madame Pomfrey,” she added.

“Yeah, well no alcohol anyway,” Harry insisted. “Just in case.”

“I already said I would forego it.”

Oh, right. She had. “I guess that’s all then, Dobby.”

The little elf nodded maniacally and vanished.

They sat in silence as they waited for the food, though of course that didn’t take long. Harry wanted to pump her for more memories of his mother. But he of all people knew you couldn’t just remember on demand.

“So tell me about Hogwarts,” he said instead. “I’m guessing it wasn’t very different in your day? I don’t think the wizarding world changes very fast.”

Narcissa drizzled what looked like a trace amount of dressing onto her salad. “In my day, indeed. You make me sound positively ancient.”

“Well, not like Dumbledore, but . . .”

She pursed her lips a little, then relaxed them. “I had a good many of the same professors as does Draco. Though not for Potions, certainly. No, we were taught to brew by Horace Slughorn.”
“But you’re quite right about change. Most of my textbooks were the same ones still in use today. Though we purchased new for Draco, of course,” she quickly added.

She made learning from a used textbook sound like a fate worse than death, but Harry managed not to make a face.

Her mention of Snape not teaching Potions back then made Harry realise he’d been at Hogwarts at the same time as Narcissa. He almost grinned, thinking this could be very interesting. “Do you remember much about Severus at school?”

“We only overlapped by two years, but it would have been hard to overlook him, certainly. Severus was always very gifted in magic. Really, he should have been invited into the Slug Club, he was so formidable, but I think Horace actually feared that Severus would one day eclipse him in his chosen field. As indeed he has."

Harry would have asked about this “Slug Club,” but he didn’t want to interrupt her train of thought. He didn’t want to do anything that would stop her from rambling.

Narcissa paused to eat a few forkfuls of some curly-looking lettuce. “And too, your father seemed to be constantly getting into conflicts with the Gryffindors. Not all of them, of course. Mainly with Sirius and . . . oh, dear. Your father.”

Harry waved a hand. “Don’t worry you’ll offend me. I know about their history with each other.”

“No, I meant . . . I called them both ‘your father.’”

“Well, they were. Are.” Harry shrugged. “It’s all right. Though I suppose you could call them James and Severus if it helps your stories make more sense.”

“I really think I oughtn’t tell you such tales,” she said, lifting her chin a little. “It might very well annoy Severus, and I would much rather not.”

That was understandable, Harry supposed.

“And you must realise, I was already in sixth year when he was sorted. That I recall anything at all about him as a child is rather remarkable. Hmm . . . Perhaps it’s mainly due to the points.”

“He earned a lot of points for Slytherin?”

“Not a lot, I wouldn’t say. Some, on occasion.”

“Then what did you mean?”

She glanced away, shaking her head a little.

“Oh.” Harry almost laughed. “He lost a lot of points, you meant. Because of his fights with my father?”

She gave another one of those little head shakes, like she was stopping herself from saying anything.

“It’s all right. I don’t think Severus would mind if--”

“I didn’t truly begin to get to know him well until much later,” she interrupted. “Not until he
became a frequent guest at the manor. Lucius began inviting him after--"

Her face suddenly went so pale that she looked pasty.

Harry’s nostrils flared. What was she playing at? “Look, I’m sure you know that I already know he was a . . .” oh, God.

_Death Eater_, he’d been going to say, but the instant he’d heard the phrase inside his mind, before it could even reach his lips, pain had seared through him like lightning striking, so violently that he thought he was going to sick up. Of its own volition, his hand darted into his pocket and started frantically clawing for a vial of _Lillehammer._

“Oh, great Merlin!” gasped Narcissa, but then her voice ascended to a full-throated scream.

“Dobby! Dobby! Harry Potter is ill! Something is wrong with Harry Potter--”

The elf appeared at once, the usual _crack_ of his Apparition sounding like a crashing thunderclap going off inside Harry’s skull. He vaguely managed to take in the sight of Narcissa, lurching awkwardly to her feet--

And then he remembered, even through all the pain. Tools, his tools. He was supposed to use his tools--

“Dobby will be fetching Professor Snape!”

Harry scrunched up his face, waving a hand toward the elf. “No, no, wait,” he managed to grind out. “Just wait--”

_Tools, tools_ . . . Harry sucked in a huge, wheezing breath and forced his thoughts back to Samhain. Or what he knew of it, anyway. Mistake, maybe, because all he got from that was a sensation like a blazing hot knife slicing into his eyeballs. Both of them at once.

Gasping, Harry flung out an arm to ward off the imaginary attacker, so violently that he toppled straight out of his chair.

“Fetch Severus as you said!” shouted Narcissa, almost into his ear, it seemed.

“Dobby is summoning Harry Potter’s father this very instant!” shrieked the elf.

“No!” roared Harry, determined to get this under control by himself as staggered to a kneel.

_Samhain, Samhain, tools, tools_ . . . “I have a potion! Snape gave me! It’s fine, I’m fine, just let me, just let me--”

But he didn’t reach for the potion again. He wanted to use his tools! He wanted to so much, so very very much. Fucking hell, he loved Severus! He couldn’t keep on like this, unable to see the man for who he was today, for who he really was! He didn’t want his father to feel like he had to hide pieces of himself--

“Samhain, Samhain, tools, tools,” he chanted, some part of him aware the words were escaping his mind through his lips, this time. The knives seared him again, and there was pressure against his shoulders, somebody holding him down, but _God, oh God_, the pressure somehow felt like love. Even against the sickening pain.

Harry focused on it, his eyes clenched tightly shut, and started a litany that thankfully stayed inside his own head. _It was a good thing that Snape had been a D- D- D- Death Eater. It was. A good thing, a good thing. He was a good person, he’d known how to save Harry, and he was good, he_
was. He’d been there for Harry when nobody else had been, he’d gone where nobody else could possibly ever have gone, right into a D- Death Eater revel, and he’d done it because he was good, and because he could, and he knew what to do, he knew what to do, he knew what to do--

A ghostly image reared up to taunt him, filling his entire field of vision behind his clenched eyelids. Snake and skull, the Dark Mark.

But it looked cartoonish, somehow. Or maybe stupid. Well, it was stupid. And Severus had been very stupid to ever be branded like that, but Harry had lived through Samhain, and someday he was going to kill Voldemort. And he was only going to be alive to do it because his father had been so very, very stupid.

“D- D- Dobby is not knowing, not knowing what to do!”

Harry opened his eyes, grimacing a little at the way the light seemed to stab them. But that didn’t last long, and the headache was receding now. Not gone, but more a murmur than a roar. And then the stabbing sensation stopped, and Harry blinked, suddenly realising that Narcissa was on her knees right beside him, an arm pressing into his shoulders.

He managed to shrug her off. Gently, though, because he remembered that she was Draco’s mother and she was pregnant, and he didn’t want to hurt Draco or the baby.

Or her, he grudgingly admitted to himself.

“It’s all right,” he grunted, then cleared his throat and tried to sound less like a torture victim as he pushed to his feet to prove he was fine. The murmur trickled off until it was more like a whisper, and then his head was washed completely clear of pain.

He almost staggered as he stood there, it was such a relief. Actually, it felt glorious. He was positive his head had never felt this good in all his life. Because he could feel it; this wasn’t like with the Lillehammer. And there was no pain.

Harry didn’t think he could adequately describe it, even though there’d been plenty of times in his life when he hadn’t had a headache. This was different, somehow.

He suddenly realised that Narcissa was still next to him, but on her knees, and Dobby was hopping frantically from one foot to the other, wringing his hands, and looking like he was ten seconds away from starting to bang his head against the table.

“Heart,” he said, reaching down to help Narcissa to her feet. She stared at his fingers like they were teeth that might snap at her, but then she slid her hand into his and leaned against his strength as he pulled her upwards.

Then Harry took care of Dobby, taking two steps to reach the little elf and pat him on the head.

“Thanks, Dobby. I’m feeling good now. You did the right thing, letting me deal with that on my own.”

Dobby tilted his head and stretched up on tip-toe so that Harry’s hand connected with his cheek, instead, rubbing his face against it like a Crookshanks did when he wanted affection. Harry smiled and let him do it.

Narcissa stared at them both. “Are you truly . . . what was that?”

*You are handing me weapons*, Severus cautioned inside his mind, and Harry couldn’t help but smile again. God, but his father was brilliant, and even the ugly context of that particular memory
couldn’t taint the sheer wisdom of the advice he’d imparted that day.

“Yeah, uh, well . . .” Harry cleared his throat, but he thought the hesitation was all right. She wouldn’t know he was making up a story to keep her from knowing he had a bit of an issue with Snape’s past. She’d just think he was embarrassed to have to admit a weakness. “I get fits, sometimes, all right? The Muggles call it epilepsy.” He shifted his voice a few degrees toward belligerence. “You don’t have to look at me like that. Loads of people have it.”

She wiped her face clear of expression at once. “But are you truly recovered? You said you had a potion but you didn’t take any.”

Harry drew in a breath. “I would have, if I’d needed to. Severus and I have been working on ways for me to get the fits under control on my own.”

“But . . . why?”

Harry almost felt sorry for her, because she sounded so genuinely confused. What must it be like to see the world the way she did, he wondered? To believe that magic was the only solution to a problem? To be so dependent on it?

“It’s like how I don’t think you should have wine even if there’s a magic way to cancel out its effects,” he said, a little curtly. “Sometimes it’s good to be able to manage without, you know.”

Except, she maybe didn’t know.

“Well, you do seem recovered, I suppose.” Now Narcissa was the one clearing her throat, though it was the most ladylike version of the sound he’d ever heard. “I . . . I truly don’t wish to impose on you, Harry, but I . . . I . . .”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “What do you need?”

“No, nothing,” she instantly denied. “It’s just that I know you don’t want me for your step-mother, but that’s in fact what I am, and I cannot help but feel I have a certain responsibility toward you. I . . . I’m afraid I must insist you tell Severus what happened.”

She’d started off rather forcefully but by the end she was hesitant again, like she truly was worried about alienating him. Harry wasn’t sure why he found that slightly amusing, but he did. Maybe it was the way she seemed to actually care. Well, he was sure she’d care plenty if Draco had claimed to have epileptic fits. But when it was Harry?

“You insist, do you?” Harry asked, a little gruffly, because really, he had no idea what to say.

She lifted her chin in that Draco-like way he’d noticed before. “Yes, I must insist. So if you won’t tell him on your own, I’m afraid I shall have to.”

“Oh, I’ll tell him, don’t worry,” said Harry, smiling at her.

She swallowed, her throat bobbing slightly.

Harry read the truth in her eyes. For once, he was sure it was the truth he read there. “You’re going to check up on me, aren’t you?”

She almost looked afraid of doing it, but she nodded.

Harry wasn’t sure why he wanted to see how far she’d take this, but he couldn’t stop himself.
“Are you aware that I’m seventeen? An adult?” he asked, keeping his tone light. He didn’t want her to think he was getting angry with her. It was quite the opposite, in fact.

Her eyes blazed slightly. “You may resent me for it all you like, but--”

“I don’t resent you for it.” When Harry smiled again, he could feel it reaching his eyes. “Really. It’s kind of sweet.”

She stepped backwards, away from him. “Sweet? Oh truly, that’s not at all--”

“It’s exactly the kind of thing Ron’s mum would do if she saw me having a fit and thought Severus should know. Ron Weasley,” he added, since her brow was wrinkling like she was trying to place the name.

“Weasley!”

Well, that sounded more like something he would expect from Narcissa. It didn’t annoy him as much as it would have an hour ago, though.

“Is Harry Potter wanting Dobby to be fetching him a fresh dinner?”

Harry realised then that Dobby was still rubbing his cheek against him. He gently, slowly drew his hand away. “No, that’s fine, Dobby. I’m feeling pretty knackered, actually. I think I’ll go up to bed and maybe read until I nod off. But get Narcissa more food if she likes.”

Dobby turned enquiring eyes her way.

She seated herself again and picked up her fork. “Perhaps some fruit in a few moments.”

Harry nodded to them both and headed off to his room.

He hadn’t been lying about feeling knackered, though he didn’t really want to go to sleep. He was hoping to still be awake when Severus returned so he could tell him about the “epilepsy” and he’d be prepared in case Narcissa really followed through with what she’d said.

So Harry summoned Draco’s Transfiguration text and read for a while, then spent even longer testing out passwords on the journals he hoped had belonged to Sirius. He got nowhere, though.

When he got frustrated enough with that, he popped Teddy off the dresser and had a little mock-conversation with him, asking him if he thought Sirius had ever had any plushies, among other things. It was sheer silliness, but it also helped Harry to relax a bit, so that was all right.

When he flicked his wand and saw that it had gone nine, Harry decided that he might as well get comfortable as he waited up, so he changed into pyjamas and settled himself beneath the covers, Teddy at his side. Then he read again, trying his best to get interested in the boring intricacies of the magic, when really, all he wanted to know was how to cast the spells.
It was perhaps fifteen minutes later when he heard an odd sort of thumping noise that he couldn’t quite place. He sat up straight and summoned his charmed sickle in case he needed Severus, and then silently slid out of bed, headed to the spot just beside the door, wand at the ready in case someone or something unwanted came through.

A light tapping sound on the door was the next thing he heard. And really, what sort of intruder would knock?

“H- H- Harry?” called Narcissa, very softly. “Are you still awake?”

Sighing half in relief and half in annoyance, Harry tucked his wand away and pulled the door straight open. “Yes. What do you need?”

She stood there just beyond the threshold, looking absolutely awful. Her face was red and puffy. And wet. Even worse, she was panting like she’d run a marathon, her body slumping as if all the energy had been drained from it.

“My God,” said Harry, before she could even answer him. “You look terrible.”

She didn’t seem to notice the insult, though of course Harry hadn’t intended to say that. He was just shocked. Then he glanced down the short corridor and realised she’d dragged herself up four flights of stairs. Clearly, it had been more exertion than she could manage in her weakened state. “Why didn’t you use Sonorus?” he asked as he ushered her into his room so she could sit down. She sort of flopped her body into the chair, her usual gracefulness completely missing. “I’d have heard you!”

“My magic.” When Narcissa looked up at him, he saw that the usual blue of her eyes was muted now, like they were covered in shadow. They certainly weren’t sparkling. “It’s very weak at present.”

Harry shook his head, but at himself, not her. He should have remembered about her magic. He sat down on the edge of his bed, facing her. “Well then, what was so important that you had to drag yourself all the way up here?”

“I had to.” Drawing in a deep breath, she slowly moved her hands to rest them atop her protruding belly. “I know you don’t trust me. So I had to. I . . . I found a portrait of Lucius in the back of my wardrobe. I don’t know why such a thing would be here, in this house! And . . . I didn’t know what I should tell him! I . . . I’m married to Severus now! I don’t know what I should tell him!”

Harry’s mouth dropped open in astonishment that she had come to him about it instead of just
deciding on her own whether or not she wanted to speak with her dead husband.

Thankfully, Narcissa misread why he was astonished.

“Oh, you didn’t know either,” she gasped, clearly relieved. “Does Severus?”

Harry pursed his lips like he was annoyed, and said the only thing he thought could redeem the situation. “I don’t know.”

“Draco can’t possibly know,” she said, fingers twisting around and around. “He’s very angry with his father. I’m positive he’d have words with Lucius if he knew the portrait was here.”

Which showed that she knew a lot about her son. Draco had gone to great lengths to have it out with that portrait of Lucius.

“All right . . . so you came up here to ask me if you should admit you’re married again?”

Narcissa went still, her hands falling back to her belly. “I’m not explaining myself very well. I came up here so you would know I wasn’t talking to him, telling him things!”

Harry tried to look confused, wondering if he was finally going to find out if the statue and the portrait had a link like they’d suspected. “Why would it matter if you told him things? He’s dead. He can’t do much with the information.”

She gave him a pitying look. “Has nobody ever told you how magical portraits work, Harry?”

He deliberately furrowed his brow even more. “Uh, I guess not, not really.”

“Portraits of the same person can leave one frame to visit the other.”

“Wait, you mean there’s another painting of Lucius, somewhere?” Draco had been sure there wasn’t, Harry remembered. He’d said it most specifically when he’d been telling Harry about Lucius dying.

“Yes, yes of course.” Narcissa flinched, just a little. “It’s in the-- the-- Vold--” She stopped and cleared her throat. “It’s in the Dark Lord’s possession.”

Harry swallowed. He couldn’t really see why she’d tell him that if she was planning on betraying him. Because this, here . . . it was more like she was betraying Voldemort. Or his secrets, at least. But then again, it might not even be true.

“So anything you told your husband, he might turn around straight away and tell it to Voldemort?” he asked, playing for time as he tried to figure her out.

“And I couldn’t have you thinking I was doing any such thing. So I came up here, straight away.”

Harry made sure his voice was very gentle. “I appreciate that, Narcissa.”

She didn’t know, of course, that he could check to see if she was telling the truth. For all he knew, she’d talked to the portrait for hours in secret before deciding to play the innocent card like this. But they’d know soon if she’d ever talked to it, or not.

“I’m a little puzzled why you didn’t find it before this, though,” Harry mused, just to see how she’d explain. It seemed like a discrepancy to him.

“Draco’s been looking after me so well that there’s been no need for me to open the wardrobe
myself,” she said, her gaze steady on his. Some of the blue was back in her eyes. “But tonight, I
needed to get ready for bed on my own.” Her lips twisted, a little ruefully. “I tried to summon a
nighrobe, but my spell misfired and it fell to the bottom of the wardrobe instead. So I went to fetch
it by hand, and my fingers brushed against something very odd. When I pulled it out, that was
when I realised what I was holding.”

“And you didn’t speak to it, not at all?”

“I think I might have gasped ‘Lucius!’ Or perhaps not. I’m not entirely sure.”
Harry nodded. “We’ll wait and see what Severus thinks about all this. But I don’t think it’s an
emergency, so I don’t want to interrupt his time with Draco. Why don’t you go back to sleep for
now? Just turn the portrait to face the wall, and . . . what?”

She looked incredulous. “I can’t go back to that room. Severus might not believe me that I’ve not
said a word!”
Oh. Right. She didn’t know they were monitoring the portrait. Or she did, and she was playing
some kind of game. “Well, I still think you should go to sleep, if you can. The baby needs you to
get lots of rest. So stay up here.”

“I can’t think Severus will much appreciate that,” she said dryly. “Seeing as he made certain to
place his bed four storeys away from mine.”

“No, I meant in my bed. I’ll wait up.”

Her face went blank for an instant, and Harry wondered if she was debating whether she could bear
to touch sheets a half-blood had slept in. But . . . she’d thrown an arm around a half-blood
downstairs, hadn’t she? So maybe she was shocked he would offer.

“Thank you,” she murmured, starting to lurch to her feet. Harry jumped up to help her cross the
room, and then he pulled his rumpled sheets back so she could get into bed. “Um, sorry, but I don’t
think I should go into your room to get that nightgown. Not with the portrait sitting out.”

She shrugged, then slid in and pulled the covers up to her chin. “I can manage. I’m certainly tired
enough.”

“All right.” Harry used “Nox” to extinguish his bedroom light as well as the one in the hallway.
“Good night.”

“Good night,” she murmured, already sounding sleepy.

Harry pulled the chair out into the hallway and sat there for a long time, thinking.

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Coming soon in A Family Like None Other:

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Comments very welcome,
Aspen in the Sunlight

----------------------------------------
By the time Severus shimmered into being a few feet from his chair, Harry had already set up a pair of privacy wards: one to shield conversations in the corridor from Narcissa, and another to keep people downstairs from hearing them. The first one might not have been necessary, since Draco’s mum truly did seem to be sound asleep, but Harry wasn’t in a mood to take any chances.

“Severus,” Harry quietly greeted his father. “Did Draco’s session go all right?”

The man’s lips twisted in an expression Harry couldn’t readily identify. “Tolerably well, I suppose. Your brother has another session tomorrow. Why are you sitting in the hallway at this hour?”

“Narcissa’s asleep in my bed. She found the portrait and came up to ask me about it, and she didn’t want to go back to her room—”

Harry would have explained more, a lot more, but he didn’t get a chance. At that moment, Draco Apparated right in between them, his face convulsed with panic. “My mum’s missing! She’s not downstairs anywhere—” He rounded on Harry. “For fuck’s sake, Potter! You were supposed to be watching over her!”

“I have been.” Harry gestured toward his open door.

Draco took three steps closer, and peered within. Then he turned incredulous eyes on Harry. “What happened?”

Well, at least he hadn’t said something stupid or rude about the situation. “I was just trying to explain to Dad. She found the portrait of Lucius, and—”

That was all he got to say.

Draco fairly dived into the room, dashing across it to reach the bed, where he feathered a hand across his mother’s brow.

“Dragon,” she murmured, shifting awkwardly under the covers. “You’re back.”

“Are you all right? Was it very upsetting? Harry says you found—”

Thankfully, she cut him off before he said the portrait, which might have tipped her off that he’d already been aware of its presence.

“I’m all right, but I thought it best to come up here straight away,” said Narcissa, sounding a little dazed, like she wasn’t even close to fully awake. She yawned, then added in a wandering tone, “Your brother was very good about everything, Draco. I didn’t wish to go back to my room . . . he very kindly offered me his own bed.”

Harry wanted to explain his whole plan to Severus, but there wasn’t any time. Any second, Draco might let slip something that could ruin it. “Follow my lead,” he said in a low, serious voice as he rose to his feet. “And blame Dumbledore.”

“Follow your . . . Dumbledore?”
“Yes. Trust me.”

Snape blinked. “Very well--”

Harry didn’t waste any more time.

“That’s right,” he announced as he took down the privacy ward and stomped into his bedroom. “Your mother found a portrait of none other than Lucius Malfoy hidden in the back of her wardrobe! I can’t imagine how it got there and I’m sure neither of you can, either!”

It probably worked in their favour that Narcissa was still sleepy, and that the room was only dimly lit by light trickling in from the hallway. It meant she couldn’t see the way Draco wrinkled his brow in confusion.

“But--”

“Dumbledore,” Snape suddenly snarled, his voice so fierce it swallowed up the sound of Draco’s single syllable. His own eyes, Harry noticed, were focussed on Draco and blazing with intent. “That meddlesome old man has gone too far this time! Merlin’s teeth, sneaking an infernal portrait into your mother’s very wardrobe! It’s an outrageous intrusion into your personal life, Draco, and I for one would not be displeased in the least if you chose to register an official complaint against him with the Governors!”

Well, at least Draco seemed to have caught on. He stopped objecting to the story being spun into existence in front of him. “I . . . er . . . well, yes, it is,” he said faintly. Then he seemed to rally, and Harry could somehow sense that he’d started Occluding. “An intrusion, that is. But I don’t know that complaining to his superiors is the best strategy,” he added, raising his chin. “I have to think of the long game. I want to join the Auror Corps, and his positive recommendation could be most useful.”

Snape gave Draco a tiny, pleased nod. “It could indeed. But make no mistake, I shall certainly have words with him about the matter!”

Narcissa shifted again, this time to laboriously pull herself into a half-sitting position. “He must think it justified, Severus. I have lately been in close confines with-- with the Dark Lord, and he is head of the Order of the Phoenix, after all.”

She said that like a simple fact, not like she was fishing for information, but Harry noticed that Snape was careful to give her none, even so.

“And you with child,” Snape retorted, every word clipped. “Outrageous is too kind a word for it!”

“I think you should give Dumbledore a piece of your mind tonight,” Harry put in. “Who cares that it’s late? He certainly doesn’t seem to care what this might have done to Narcissa! Or Draco!”

Snape caught his gaze, then abruptly nodded again. “I do believe I will. You and Draco can see to his mother’s comfort, I feel sure. Under no circumstances are any of you to go anywhere near such a portrait. Is that quite clear, Draco? I know you must be beside yourself to find out that such a thing is here in the house, but it is imperative that you give your former father absolutely no chance to attack you again, this time with words. And it is even more important for your mother. A shock like this, when she’s more than eight months along? It’s unconscionable.”

“Oh, we’ll stay away from it,” said Draco grimly. “Trust me, Severus, now that I know what a father is supposed to be . . . I’d sell my vault before I’d come within a thousand leagues of that monster. Harry . . . is it all right if my mother and I stay up here tonight? I don’t want her
“Well done, Harry.”

_Crap._ Harry knew he shouldn’t let her approval settle over him like it was a warm blanket, but knowing that didn’t help. He liked it when she acted like she was sort of his mum, too. He liked it a lot.

“Is there anything you require of me before we go?” asked Snape, turning his head to regard Narcissa solemnly.

She hesitated, then shook her head. “I don’t believe so. But thank you, Severus.”

Snape inclined his head, then held out an arm to Harry. “I’ll Side-Along you into Hogwarts.”

Harry almost reacted to that, but then he noticed the glint in his father’s eyes. It seemed to say, _Follow my lead, now_, and it was directed at both his sons. Draco narrowed his eyes and said nothing while Harry nodded and grasped the man’s elbow so he could whisk them away.

They didn’t Apparate into the castle, of course. They appeared downstairs in Grimmauld Place, and Snape wordlessly gestured for Harry to go first through the Floo. A moment later, both of them were back home in Snape’s living room.
“Why would you imply that you can Apparate through Hogwarts’ wards?” Harry asked, straight away.

“If Narcissa is here as some sort of spy, we could do worse than to mislead her. Perhaps she’ll get word about it to Voldemort, and he’ll waste his time on Apparition research.”

“Good plan,” drawled Harry. “Except you forgot that even from upstairs, she could probably hear us whooshing away through the Floo!”

“Through the privacy wards you left filling the stairwell? I had no idea your magic was so weak.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “All right, I’m the one who forgot something.”

“More than one thing, I would say.” Snape raised an eyebrow. “So you have some sort of condition known as . . . epilepsy, do you? What was that all about?”

Harry wasn’t sure why he suddenly felt embarrassed. “Oh, that . . . I was having one of those headaches and I was trying to deal with it just using my tools. It was pretty violent, I fell off my chair, and I must have looked like some kind of nutter. But I didn’t want her to know my real issue, so I claimed it was an epileptic fit.”

“Did you manage?”

“Well, you saw, she seemed to believe me about that--”

“Did you manage to rid yourself of the headache on your own?” Snape asked, leaning down a little to peer at him.

Harry smiled. “Yes, I did. I just had to focus my mind on how very good you are. Dad,” he added as an afterthought.

“You know perfectly well that makes me uncomfortable,” snapped Snape. “Would you please desist?”

“I thought you liked it when I called you ‘Dad.’”

“I am not talking about that and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know,” admitted Harry. “But I think I’m not the only one with issues about your past, Severus. You should get over them too.”

When Snape just glared, Harry sighed. “Do you think it was comfortable for me to get used to being adopted? Hell, I bet it was a huge struggle both times, though Draco certainly doesn’t make it sound that way. I think he just doesn’t know what was going on inside my head. But I did it, Severus. Twice! If I’d only done what I was comfortable with, I’d’ve missed out having a better life, one where I have a father who loves me!”

“It is good that you finally accept that,” retorted Snape, though he certainly didn’t look like he thought it was good. His nostrils were flaring with annoyance. “But we are drifting rather far from the point. We are here to apprise the headmaster of developments. I assume you had a reason for directing me to ‘blame Dumbledore,’ as you put it?”

Harry decided to let him get away with changing the subject. For now, at least. “Well, he was the only logical candidate. I didn’t want to confirm that we suspected Narcissa of anything. If she thinks we’re still in the dark, she’s more likely to slip up.”
“I fear it’s quite unlikely that she’ll ‘slip up,’ after this. She’s far from stupid. She must have realised that we could be dissembling when we claimed to know nothing of the portrait.”

“Far from stupid is right,” said Harry, shaking his head. “Damn. We should have thought of this beforehand! I mean, it’s kind of obvious that she might find the portrait and come ask us about it, instead of just going ahead and talking to it.”

Snape pursed his lips for a moment. “Indeed. I fear we have failed to imagine her complexly.”

That was a new phrase for Harry, but he could see what his father meant. He could also see something else. “It might all be totally innocent. I mean, coming to me like that, straight away, it is what an innocent person would do.”

“And it’s also exactly what a trying-to-appear-innocent person would do.”

“Yeah, I know.” Harry frowned. “That’s the problem. Everything she does can be seen as good or bad. How can we ever be sure she’s not a spy?”

“It’s an old axiom that one simply cannot prove a negative.”

“Great,” said Harry sarcastically. “That’s fucking great.”

Snape patted him on the shoulder. “Did she truly claim that she came to you straight away upon encountering the portrait?”

“Yeah, she said she didn’t speak to it at all, not one word, except maybe to exclaim ‘Lucius.’”

“We should be able to prove that particular statement true or false,” Snape assured him. “But we will need the headmaster’s assistance.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” asked Harry. There was more he could have said, of course, but he thought it was probably better for Snape to hear about his plan at the same time as the headmaster. That way, if there were objections, he’d only have to argue about it once.

Kneeling down, Snape tossed some Floo powder across the hearth, called out “The headmaster’s sanctum!,” and thrust his head into the flames. Harry didn’t know what he said, but in less than a minute he was backing out. “We are instructed to come through.”

“You go first this time,” said Harry.

Snape gave him a puzzled glance, but he didn’t hesitate for long. A moment later, Harry followed him through the flames.

“Interesting, interesting,” murmured Dumbledore after Harry had told him the whole story of Narcissa finding the portrait and coming upstairs to ask Harry about it. “Well, well, well. She seems to have entirely scuppered our plan of seeing what she might discuss with her husband.”
Dumbledore abruptly stopped stroking his long beard. “Oh, I do beg your pardon, Severus. Her late husband, I should have said. Of course, of course.”

“I think you know I’m not enamoured of the word ‘husband’ at the moment, Albus,” retorted Snape. “And it’s entirely possible that she talked at length with Lucius before throwing herself at Harry to plead her innocence.”

Throwing herself? Harry thought that was a bit harsh. “Can you monitor the portrait from here or do you need to be in the room with it?”

“Oh, that would be most impractical, my boy.”

“Well, let’s have it then,” said Harry impatiently, bouncing his legs as he sat in his chair. “I want to know if she’s a liar.”

“She’s almost certainly a liar regardless,” snorted Snape. “Though perhaps not about this particular incident.”

“Well if Dumbledore would cast the spell, we’d know, wouldn’t we?” At the look in his father’s eyes, Harry gulped. “Professor Dumbledore, I mean. All right.”

“Better, at least.”

The headmaster fairly glowed as he sat there watching them. “I say, it is a lovely change to see the two of you getting on so well. Why, the family feeling is fairly dancing in the air between you. I’m almost overcome, it’s so delectably sweet.”

Snape looked like he was having a hard time not rolling his eyes. “Harry is a fine son.”

Harry saw his chance and ran with it. “And Severus is a fine father. Good, you might even say.”

He was probably lucky that Snape ignored that. “Shall we proceed, then?”

Dumbledore was still beaming at the pair of them as he smoothly drew his wand and swished it through the empty air. “Oh, indeed. *Avanti il turbine!*”

A ghostly image began to stream out from his wand, spinning in place in mid-air. Harry sat up straighter, leaning forward to get a good look. He’d had no idea that the eavesdropping spell would let them see as well as hear!

A moment later he was glad he hadn’t said anything, since the image wasn’t resolving into Narcissa, or Lucius, or even the portrait. It was more like a whirlwind, silently spinning in place.

“I’ve been checking every evening since the day of your marriage,” Dumbledore explained, nodding gently in Snape’s direction. “There’s been nothing but silence. Though I haven’t yet checked today, so . . .”

The whirlwind suddenly threw a phantom tendril out as it spun, and then another and another. After that, it spun silently for a moment more, then gradually unwound itself into a sheet of fog that slowly dissipated and sank toward the floor. The three tendrils were all that remained.

“Three,” said Harry suspiciously. “She said three things!”

“We shall see, my boy, we shall see.”

The tendrils assembled themselves as three horizontal lines, each floating in alignment with the
other two, and then the rightmost one began vibrating like a plucked guitar string as Narcissa’s
voice echoed through the stone chamber. “L- L- Lucius?” she gasped, sounding alarmed and
horrified and shocked and frightened, all at once.

The string in the middle began vibrating, and Malfoy’s voice boomed out. “Narcissa! What is the
meaning of this, why are you--”

Malfoy’s voice was abruptly cut off as the left-most string began vibrating and a horrible crashing
noise issued forth from it.

Then the strings went still and silent. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow as he flicked his wand to
vanish them. “I don’t think we need to hear that exchange again. Though I can always spin them
forth once more if it comes to that.”

Snape shifted in his chair to face Harry. “Did Narcissa say anything about Lucius speaking to her?”

“No.”

“Well, there we have it, then,” pronounced Snape. “She didn’t tell us the whole truth.”

“Oh, really, Severus, that’s a rather bleak outlook, don’t you think? I dare say the crashing noise
was the portrait hitting the floor. Face down, I should think, since it went silent. I believe it likely
that Narcissa tossed it from her in alarm upon seeing her late husband’s face. She may not even
have heard him.”

“Or she may have.”

“Well, it’s not like he was telling her all Voldemort’s secrets,” said Harry impatiently. “Or asking
for ours.”

Snape leaned his head back against his chair and just sighed.

“The only true question,” continued the headmaster, “is how we proceed from here.”

“Yeah, I spent most of the evening thinking about that,” said Harry. “I’ve got a plan. It... well, it
won’t really work at all if Narcissa’s lying about Voldemort having another portrait of Malfoy. But
if she’s telling the truth, I think we can use it against him.”

Snape sat up straight, peering intently at Harry while Dumbledore looked at him over the top of his
half-moon spectacles.

Where to start… “So it goes like this. We have Narcissa pass Lucius some false information, kind
of like you were trying to do earlier with the Apparition thing. Except, we can’t trust Narcissa to
actually be on our side, so we don’t really involve her at all. Instead, it’s Remus using Polyjuice,
right?”

“Lupin,” said Snape in a slow, considering voice.

Harry thought he knew what that tone meant. “I don’t know how he’s doing, of course. Nobody’s
told me much. He might still be in pretty bad shape. Has he recovered from going through
Narcissa’s werewolf wards?”

“He is in the process of recovering, but I don’t have all the details to hand,” answered the
headmaster.
Harry sighed. He wished Remus was fully recovered by now, and not just because they needed him. “Well, I thought of him because Draco told me how he trained in theatre and knows how to mimic people, right? People besides Lucius, I think that would mean. And he’s spent enough time with Narcissa lately that he could probably pull it off.” He bit his lip, wondering again about Remus’ health at the moment. “I mean, we only need him for a short conversation.”

“I see,” said the headmaster thoughtfully.

“I don’t.” Snape’s gaze grew even more piercing. “If Narcissa is following instructions from Voldemort to spy on us, then this could possibly work. But if she truly came to Draco of her own free will, simply because she was ill? It is not credible that she would then, of her own accord, seek to help the monster who lately tortured her. And thus any information she imparts to that end would be regarded with extreme suspicion.”

“No, no, I thought of all that,” exclaimed Harry. “I’m just not explaining very well. I got distracted wondering if Remus is all right! And the whole thing is kind of complicated!”

“Have a sherbet lemon, my boy,” offered Dumbledore, lazily waving his wand to float a dish of them over to Harry. “I’ve always found the thorniest of problems to be infinitely more approachable with a sweet in hand.”

“You would,” muttered Snape.

“Liquorice for you, my dear boy? Or Galliano, mayhap?”

“Tea.”

“And biscuits as well? A lovely assortment, with perhaps a scone or two?”

“Tea. Nothing else.”

Ignoring their squabbling, Harry popped a sweet into his mouth and crushed it with his molars to release the tangy liquid in the centre. He took another one, but kept it in his mouth to savour as he thought about how to explain. “All right, so I already figured out that we can’t have fake-Narcissa actually be the one to give away my ‘secret.’ But we need Remus to play her so there can be a conversation of some sort going on when the real plan gets going.”

“Hmm,” mused Snape, fingers steepled beneath his chin. “That could work. But what is this secret?”

“Oh,” said Harry. He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten that bit. “I got the idea from what happened earlier. We get Dobby to scream that Harry Potter is having another one of his epileptic fits and Harry Potter’s father must come at once, something like that. Maybe he can give some details like how I’m collapsed and foaming at the mouth and I don’t know, manage to imply I’m unable to defend myself, blurt out something about how stress brings my fits on--”
“Pardon the interruption,” said Dumbledore abruptly, every trace of his usual good-natured humour missing. “Another one of your epileptic fits, Harry? Is Poppy Pomfrey aware of your condition? Are you under treatment?”

“Uh, no.” Harry bit his lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you. I don’t have epilepsy. Uh, so you know what it is, then?”

“Oh, yes. It’s quite rare, but I do recall a young lady so afflicted a few decades back.”

“Oh, that’s good—”

“Is it?”

Harry flushed. “I just meant, when Severus hadn’t heard of it I wondered if maybe wizards couldn’t get it. And that would ruin my plan.”

“The point of which is to funnel false information to Voldemort,” murmured Snape.

“Yeah, and not just to waste his time,” said Harry, nodding. “If Lucius turns around and tells him I have epilepsy, I think Voldemort might see it as a way to swing the prophecy to his side. I mean, it just says that one of us will kill the other, right? He’ll want some kind of guarantee that he’ll be the one to do the killing. Well, with this, he’ll figure he can disable me when we fight. Like, medical shows on the telly are always going on about flashing lights causing seizures. He might try to use something like that. But of course it won’t disable me, and while he’s distracted, I’ll be able to cast against him.”

When Harry had finished, total silence reigned in the stone chamber. Harry looked from Snape to Dumbledore and back, a little confused. He thought he’d explained well enough. Or wait, they both sort of had a look he’d seen before, like they were silently communicating.

Before he could decide how he felt about that, his father cleared his throat and turned his gaze away from Dumbledore’s. “Harry,” he said, voice rough yet threaded through with warmth. “Your plan is most impressive.”

Uh-oh. Harry knew that tone. There was more. Of course there was more. “You thought of something I forgot, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but not in the way you mean.”

“Um . . . huh?”

A hint of a smile glimmered in the depths of Snape’s dark eyes. “I don’t think you remember what I told you at the very start of our acquaintance.”

“Our new celebrity, that bit?”

“Our real acquaintance,” Snape quietly corrected. “In my mind it began when we went to Surrey together and I began to truly know you for the first time. We were discussing the Houses—”

“I was talking about the Houses,” said Harry dryly. “With you. Really.”

“ar to be more precise, I had remarked on your Slytherin tendencies and you accused me of insulting you.”

“That sounds a lot more likely.”
Snape’s eyes were gleaming more than before, if anything. “I told you what I really thought about you.”

“Oh, God--”

“No, it wasn’t dire in the least. I said that you should have let the Sorting Hat do its job, because winning this war would require cunning, something you’d have long-since mastered if you’d been placed in my House.”

“Oh,” said Harry, in a completely different tone. “That . . . that doesn’t sound so bad . . .”

“Indeed not.” Severus rose to his feet and went to stand in front of Harry’s chair. He seemed to be waiting, so Harry stood up too. Then the man grasped him by both forearms and squeezed, just enough to underline his words with grave intent. “I think you have mastered it all the same, Harry. Your plan is impressive indeed. It may well be your cunning today that wins us the war.”

Harry felt his face growing hot. “Because I ended up in Slytherin after all, yeah--”

Snape’s grip grew even tighter, his eyes all but blazing as he leaned down closer to his son. “Because you are you,” he corrected. “Both. But above all, I think, a most singular Gryffindor. Your plan would avail us very little if you were not also brave enough to step out into the thick of battle. But this, today? I am very, very proud of you, Harry James Potter.”

Harry didn’t know how it happened, but somehow his whole body was jerking forwards, his arms flinging off his father’s grip so he could wrap them around the man instead. It was the James that had really got to him, he thought. Severus never, ever called Harry by his full name like that. For him to do it now . . . it meant a lot. Maybe the whole world.

“Thank you,” he said, face muffled against soft black robes that smelled of clove and cinnamon and smoke. “Thank you.”

“As if I want thanks, you idiot child,” murmured Snape as he hugged Harry back.

A slight noise had Harry suddenly remembering that they weren’t alone. He glanced to the side to see the headmaster calmly scratching a quill against parchment, his attention directed downward, just as if he hadn’t noticed that his Potions Master was showing an astonishing amount of emotion. *Severus does not care to show emotion,* whispered Dumbledore in his memory.

Except, sometimes he did.

Harry’s heart suddenly twisted, because he wasn’t some shining Gryffindor like Snape seemed to think. “I don’t want to, you know,” he admitted, face still pressed into his father’s robes. “I don’t want to kill anybody, really. Not even him. I don’t think I wanted to kill Malfoy, either, did I? Draco made it sound like an accident--” Panic suddenly clawed inside him, raking furrows straight through his soul. “What if-- what if-- what if I can’t? If I do it on purpose, it’s murder, isn’t it-- I don’t want to be a murderer--”

“Shhh,” soothed Snape, one hand coming up to stroke the back of Harry’s head. “You won’t be anything of the sort. You aren’t hunting him so you can strike him down in cold blood. It’s not murder if you’re forced to kill someone in self-defence.”

Snape stepped backwards, just enough that he could look down at Harry with his dark eyes. “And you won’t be alone, Harry. I would never dream of sending you into battle by yourself. I will be there, at your side, come what may.”
Harry knew that. Even without remembering if Snape had said it before, he’d still known. But he
didn’t like it. “I don’t want you to,” he said miserably. “I don’t want you to die.”

“And I don’t want you to have to be the one to slay him. But I can’t stop a prophecy from
unfolding, any more than you can stop me from standing by your side.”

Put like that, there wasn’t a lot to argue about. Harry wiped at his face, his hand coming away wet.
“And you don’t want thanks.”

“No more than I expect you will for dispatching Voldemort.”

Dispatching. Harry shivered, even as he appreciated his father’s choice of word.

Dumbledore looked up from his scratchings. “I will be beside you as well, Harry. Truly, I would
‘dispatch’ him myself if the prophecy did not speak to the issue.”

Harry just nodded. Most of the time, he tried not to think about it, or only let it cross his mind in
vague terms. But setting a plot in motion to try to gain an advantage in battle . . . he couldn’t avoid
thinking about it forever, he supposed.

“Now, as to your scheme with the portrait,” added the headmaster. “I concur with Severus. It’s
rather a masterstroke. But are you quite certain that Dobby is such a skilled actor, as it were? It all
hinges on that.”

“Oh, well that’s kind of why I thought of it,” Harry admitted, lifting his shoulders. “He already
thinks I have epilepsy. He saw me having what he thought was an attack. But it wasn’t. Um, don’t
ask, though. Severus knows and it’s all sorted.”

The old wizard’s blue eyes shone with curiosity for a moment, but he heeded Harry and didn’t ask.
“Very well. I would just ask that you keep one thing in mind, my boy.”

Harry raised his head. “Yes?”

“When plotting anything, large or small, it’s a sound notion to expect the unexpected.”

Harry almost snorted. “If it’s unexpected, how can I expect it?”

“Just don’t assume that all will go perfectly to plan,” explained Snape. “Because it almost never
does.”

“But I spent hours, I’m sure I’ve thought of everything, I mean, I even plan to have Draco take his
mother out to the back garden for some air so she won’t even be in the house when Remus starts
talking to the portrait, and I’m going to tell him to ward for sound so she won’t hear Dobby
screaming no matter how loud he gets, and, and--”

“You’ve thought of everything you can think of, I have no doubt. But life has a strange way of
twisting circumstances to suit itself instead of us. Rather like how we didn’t anticipate that
Narcissa would act as she did this evening.”

Harry did snort, that time. “Yeah, because we didn’t imagine her complexly.”

“I didn’t think of everything,” Snape admitted, finally letting him go completely. “You probably
haven’t either, but that is no matter. Because you are a fine Slytherin as well, you will be able to
adapt your plan to whatever contingencies arise. And I will help you with that, also.”
“All right.” Though Harry still really did think that his plan was . . . well, not perfect. But it would work. He was positive. Dobby would be happy to help him, and Remus was a really talented mimic to have fooled Voldemort himself for so long—

“Wait,” Harry suddenly said. “Every single bit of this is useless if Voldemort doesn’t really have a second portrait of Malfoy. And now I’m suddenly wondering how on earth he could. I mean, if he did, he’d have known right away when Malfoy died, right? And Remus couldn’t have got away with impersonating him for a single day, let alone months and months!”

“Oh, that’s easily solved,” said Dumbledore, his fingernails glinting as he waved a hand. Harry tried not to stare, because it really didn’t matter, but . . . was he wearing polish? “Portraits do wake up at the instant of death, true, but it’s not as though they can announce it to anyone not in the room with them.” He popped a glowing green candy into his mouth and spoke around it. “I suspect that after Severus’ rather spectacular public declaration of loyalty to our side after Samhain, Voldemort had paintings made of all his leading Death Eaters so he could interrogate them dead or alive. But he wasn’t expecting Lucius to die so very soon, certainly. Really, the man could have easily lived another hundred years if he hadn’t made such poor life choices. So the portraits were simply stowed away somewhere until such time as they might be needed. Voldemort would have had no reason to fetch Lucius’ out unless he’d heard about his death. And we, of course, prevented that from happening.”

Dumbledore grinned, showing off teeth stained neon green. He looked like a certified loon.

“How can you know all that?” Harry demanded. “You weren’t there, you didn’t see him stowing portraits away.”

“Oh, Harry.” Dumbledore began clucking like a chicken. “I’ve lived long enough to know quite a few things, you know. Age truly does bring wisdom.”

“I suppose it’s entirely beside the point that Grindelwald once did something similar,” drawled Snape.

“Why Severus, you know your modern history! That’s brilliant, my boy!”

“All right, fine, maybe it’s really true about the second portrait, then.”

“It even makes sense that Narcissa would know of its existence,” added Snape. “I presume Lucius mentioned it before . . .”

“You can say, ‘before you killed him.’ I mean, I know it happened.”

“I prefer, ‘before he grew to be quite so statuesque,’” mused Dumbledore.

Harry burst out laughing.

Even Snape cracked a small smile. “I presume this second portrait is the reason Lupin’s mission ended when it did,” he went on. “That’s most likely how Voldemort found out that ‘Lucius’ was an impersonator. He must have gone to where the portraits are stored, and Lucius took the opportunity to announce he’d been killed.”

Harry could put the rest of the timeline together. “And Remus somehow realised he’d been discovered, but he managed to give Voldemort the slip, and he went straight away to where Narcissa was hiding from him. How would he know where to go, though?”

Snape shrugged. “Lucius probably had a means to trace her whereabouts. Some object in the
Manor, perhaps. Lupin could likely have traced her earlier, but he found his ruse easier to maintain with her out of the picture.”

“Makes sense . . . so then Remus went to warn her . . . I wonder why he still pretended to be Lucius. Oh, maybe he was stuck because of the Polyjuice, and he didn’t want to delay warning her? And anyway, he didn’t know for sure that she’d realised he was an imposter. But she knew he was a werewolf and she was afraid of him . . . but she must have believed him about Voldemort all the same, since she fled to somewhere else, somewhere she thought Voldemort couldn’t find her. Except, a little while later, he did.”

When Harry finally fell silent, Dumbledore gave a brisk nod. “That all seems to be in order. Shall we get down to iron spikes, then, as the Muggles like to say?”

“I think you mean brass tacks.”

“Oh, surely not, my boy. Those don’t sound nearly as effective.”

Dumbledore rose from behind his desk and suddenly looked every bit the powerful headmaster and war leader he was. “I will get in touch with Remus Lupin and ascertain if he’s yet well enough to play his part in this. If not, we will have to delay the scheme until such time. If he’s able to help us now, I think it best that you and Harry brief him here at the school, Severus, not at headquarters, for a matter of such secrecy. Likewise with Dobby.”

Snape inclined his head.

“Harry, you will of course want to make sure that your brother says nothing whatsoever to his mother that might cast doubts on your claim to epilepsy. And you will bring him fully into your scheme. Any other course of action might cause him to trip over it without realising. We mustn’t have that.”

“Right. Yes.”

“I shall leave the Whispering Whirlwind in place. Though after tonight, I don’t expect that Narcissa will be sneaking words with the portrait. Still, I see no reason to remove the protections in place. Do you concur, Harry?”

Harry blinked, more than a little startled to be consulted. “Yes.”

“Very good. Have I forgotten anything, Severus?”

“No, Headmaster.”

“Well, I’m only a firecall away. That goes for you as well, Harry.” Dumbledore paused and glanced them over, his blue eyes looking pleased with what he saw. “For now, I think it best if the two of you return to Grimmauld Place to check on Narcissa and Draco.”

Oh. One more thing, Harry realised. “Um . . . sorry about this, Professor Dumbledore, but I needed to make it believable for Severus to suddenly leave to speak with you. So, we . . . um, we kind of blamed you for the portrait being in Narcissa’s room at all, and we all pretended to be furious with you.”

“Ah, of what value are my many titles if I can’t prove useful in a myriad of ways?” asked Dumbledore, sounding like he was pondering the secrets of the universe.

Then his voice grew brisk again. “If I want you to return to the castle tonight, Severus, I will send
you a silent silver message; my patronus will merely nod to indicate that Remus is waiting for you in your quarters. If he is not yet well enough, we will delay, as I said. And Harry? You should certainly help to brief Remus when the time comes. In the meantime, though, say nothing whatever to Dobby.”

“I could mention my epilepsy a couple of times, though--”

“No, no, no, my boy. I think that most unwise. You must go on exactly as usual.”

“Or I might overplay my hand. All right, that makes sense.”

“Very good then, Headmaster,” said Snape, moving toward the Floo. “Good night.”

“Good night, my boys. I think this a very good night, indeed.”

Harry waved, then followed his father through the Floo.

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Next time in A Family Like None Other

Chapter 60, in which the best-laid plans can go awry....

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Chapter End Notes

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Special Note: I've taken the liberty of lifting a well-known phrase from one of my favorite YouTube personalities. 10 points to the Hogwarts House of your choice if you can guess who! Leave your guesses in comments and don't forget to tell me which House you're in!!

I'll announce at the beginning of the next chapter who this YouTube luminary is. And also pay the person a wee bit more tribute, since the title of Ch 60 will be another reference to him/her/it/them.... :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!