No Hiding Place

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Summary

During Harry's seventh year at Hogwarts, everyone is getting ready for the Second Voldemort War. Battlelines are being drawn, decisions made.

But what happens when the famous Harry Potter doesn't want to deal with Voldemort anymore? When friendship and love will only serve as weapons, Harry needs to find trust and honesty to stay sane throughout the war.

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area, everyone engaged in sexual activity in this story is considered a consenting adult in this
universe and also in the Muggle United Kingdom.

Several canon characters will die in this story, since it's a story about a war: it also means
people on both sides will die. There is heavy violence, torture and maiming in the story, most
of it non-graphic, but it's still there. There's also an offscreen rape of a Hogwarts teacher that
will be mentioned several times.

Also, I'm not tagging for noncon/dubcon, but one of the characters is extremely confused
about his sexuality and preferences and engages in sexual activity that could be perceived as
dubcon. Also some more or less angry sex. And stupid sex.

The story follows Harry Potter canon up to his year four at Hogwarts (in other words, book
/movie four), then diverges from canon. That means people who died in canon will be
around. Also, things revealed in later canon will not be a part of this story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Dungeons

Part 1

Once again, the dormitory was filled with soft snoring.

Harry lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He'd missed the sound of other people around him, especially when Ron had spent the holidays with his family. Yuletide at Hogwarts had always been fun, their time together; sneaking down the corridors, spending evenings at Hagrid's drinking tea and pretending to enjoy rock hard cookies.

This time, he'd done all the sneaking around and tea drinking alone. It hadn't been fun at all. Not even the Christmas Dinner and the presents had made him feel better. If anything, they'd made him feel worse.

Opening presents and stuffing yourself with sweets wasn't much fun when you didn't have your best friend with you. It reminded Harry of his childhood, of the times Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia had dressed up and taken Dudley to church and then spent the evening opening presents, while he sat alone in his cupboard under the stairs.

Harry had spent the holidays telling himself he was just having the blues. Nothing more. It was quite normal for people under a lot of stress to be depressed during the holidays. When his friends returned, things would be all right.

Ironic, that even after all the things he'd been through, he could still lie to himself.

There had been a moment of utter joy when he'd seen Ron and Hermione in the Gryffindor common room. They'd chatted about their vacations, and for one magical hour everything had been perfect. Then reality had once again crashed in, and Harry understood that nothing had changed at all.

Most of the things that had kept him awake at night during the few weeks he had the dormitory to himself were still here.

Seamus muttered something in his sleep, and Harry listened, wondering if his friend would wake up. When there was silence again, he sighed. Talking with Seamus would have been better than wallowing in his own dark thoughts, although he wouldn't have talked to Seamus about anything important.

There was no one he could talk to, not about those things. He'd tried. When Sirius and Remus had joined him for a couple of days before New Year's, he'd given in to the need to talk, and had babbled about some of the things that were troubling him. After all, they'd been in his position once, a long time ago. They'd know what he was talking about.

Sirius had been very understanding. He'd listened quietly as Harry had told him how difficult the seventh year was; not only the extensive studying, but also because the school term would end soon, and he'd have to go on with his life. He knew leaving school wouldn't necessarily take him away from Hogwarts. The fight against Voldemort was still on and as long as the Dark Lord lived, he wouldn't be safe on his own. Still, things would be different.

After talking about his worries, Harry had watched Remus and Sirius exchange a look of shared memories. Sirius had then told him about the time they had left school, about the way they'd feared the same thing, the loss of friendship, of growing up too soon. There had been losses, yes, but some bonds had remained, the ones that really mattered.
Sirius talked about how much fun it had been to find something he really wanted to do. About dating, falling in love. Seeing his friends happy with their lives.

It had been wonderful for Harry to hear about those years, mostly because Sirius’ stories contained new information about his parents, about their lives after Hogwarts. Somehow that made them seem more real, hearing about two young people getting engaged and marrying. Sirius’ eyes shone with happiness when he talked about the moment James had casually mentioned Lily’s pregnancy, remembering the completely ridiculous smirk that had spread over his friend’s face a second later.

Harry had listened to every word, loving every second. Until the moment Sirius’ gaze had darkened. The story didn't have a happy ending. After all the joy and love and friendship would come pain and death and years spent alone.

Remus had changed the subject at that point, looking worried as he softly touched Sirius’ arm.

That look had made Harry swallow his words. He knew he couldn't burden Sirius with his other worries. His godfather was still in hiding, still fighting against Voldemort. That meant he had enough worries of his own. No need to add to them.

Harry rolled onto his side, squinting into the dark room. He still had his glasses on and could see the faint outlines of his best friend in the other bed. Ron was snoring softly, burrowed under his blankets. For a moment the urge to wake him up filled Harry, but as always, he quenched the impulse. Ron would... Ron wouldn't understand.

Realizing he wouldn't be able to sleep, Harry got up, and tiptoed to the window. It wasn't very dark outside with the full moon shining above. He thought about his godfather for a moment, smiling a bit. Snuffles was probably running through the forest with Remus’ lupine form right this moment.

A happy thought, but also a sad one. He wondered what it would be like to be so free. To be able to leave everything behind, even for just a brief moment and run wild. Not something he'd ever know.

His life was here, in the small tower clinging to the main castle. His only freedom was the moments he defied rules and sneaked down the corridors while hidden under his father’s cloak. Not running carefree, howling at the moon, but sneaking around in silence all alone, trying not to catch anyone's attention.

The stray thought was building up a need. Harry tiptoed back to his bed and opened the trunk next to it. He grabbed the cloak quietly, not wanting to wake anyone up, not even Ron. He couldn't deal with his friend now. The desire to share his fears and doubts was almost painful, but he simply couldn't.

He knew exactly how to push the door open so that the hinges wouldn't creak. Knew how many steps there were leading to the common room, instinctively counting them. He didn't need light to know his way to the doorway, hadn't needed any for years.

Outside in the corridor, Harry wondered for the first time where to go. Usually he simply wandered around, trying to empty his mind so that he could return to the dormitory and fall asleep for a couple of hours before he'd have to get up and face yet another day. Now, the need and the loneliness weighed heavy on his mind, taking up residence in his head with no intention of leaving.

Everything just hurt too much, and he knew he needed someone, some help, or he would explode.

The problem was, he had no idea where to go. Funny, being the Boy Who Lived usually meant that he had people fussing around him all the time. Helping him, understanding him.
Harry shuddered at the thought. No. No one could understand him. Not really.

Walking softly through the corridors, he passed by the Ravenclaw rooms, smiling faintly. Once he'd thought he might find that special someone there. It had been a stupid dream. He'd caused too much pain -- however incidentally -- to that house for anyone inside to really care about him.

Not even pausing his strides, he went on, making sure his steps didn't attract any attention. It was late, but apparently it was never too late for Filch to make his rounds. Mrs. Norris, with her gleaming eyes, would also be around at this hour. Hunting, not for rats and mice, but for stray students.

Harry didn't really fear them anymore. There were worse things in life than Filch and detentions. Oh, there were, like fear, and regret, and pain and doubt. All the things that kept him awake at nights.

Things that were now driving him on.

He stopped for a moment before the gargoyle, staring at its unmoving eyes. There was one door that would always open to him. He knew that. It didn't matter if it was day or night, he could always count on Dumbledore to be there for him.

For a second, he wondered how it would be to go up those stairs and then sit on a couch and talk while Dumbledore poured him tea. Talk about everything and nothing, about hopes and dreams and fears and nightmares. He took one involuntary step towards the gargoyle, almost burning with the need.

Then he stilled. He couldn't. Dumbledore counted on him. Trusted him. He was an important member of the Order, needed to be strong and fight the evil. He couldn't risk seeing a flicker of disappointment in Dumbledore's eyes when the old wizard realized that the champion of the wizarding world was not perfect after all. He knew Dumbledore would never say anything about it, but the mere fact that he'd know he wasn't strong enough after all would be too much to bear.

Gaze full of desperation, Harry turned around and walked away.

The corridors were all dimly lit, shadows casting from the occasional torches. It was comforting somehow, as if the darkness were protecting him. No one was here to see him and he didn't have to hold his head up high or smile at anyone; the dark shadows protected him like his cloak did.

Reaching the main hall, Harry thought for a second about going out. To maybe meet Hagrid, or to walk around the Quidditch pitch, or even borrow a broom from the shed. He shook the latter from his mind immediately. Flying in the dark was suicidal, and he wasn't that far gone yet. Going to see Hagrid sounded very nice, but he knew he couldn't. Mainly because he would worry his friend too much.

Hagrid was a good soul, who didn't see anything wrong with him. He couldn't shatter those illusions.

Harry sighed and then moved on.

His bare feet didn't make any sound on the stone floor. No one would detect him, even if he walked right past them. Silent, invisible. Almost like a ghost. One more in a castle full of ghosts.

It was like he wasn't even there. Or simply was not. Was not Harry Potter, the most famous wizard in the whole land. Was not worshipped. Was not walking around the dark castle, all alone at night.

A comforting thought. Harry smiled cynically. His whole life had come down to things he really was not. Brave, strong, happy, wise. Somewhere beyond everything, or between being something, like an adult and a child. He had the vague feeling he was perhaps nothing.
He would have laughed out loud if he'd dared to. But he didn't, knowing that if he allowed the hysterical laughter to bubble up, he would never stop. Just like he didn't dare to cry anymore.

From a lonely child living in a cupboard under the stairs into a lonely almost adult feeling completely and utterly alone in the only place he'd ever really called home. In a way it had been easier back then. At least he hadn't known how good life could be. How it would feel to have friends and a sort of family.

Gloomy thoughts. As gloomy as the corridor ahead. Harry looked surprised as he realized where he'd come, swaying a little as he recoiled back. On his quiet walks around the castle, he'd never come to the dungeons before.

It was cold down here, cold and damp. Dark. Somehow the corridor that during the daytime looked like the doorway to the worst thing on earth looked inviting. Like a good place to hide. From what, Harry couldn't say. He simply felt the need to hide right now, and the Slytherin dungeons seemed perfect for that.

Making sure he wasn't making any noise, he crept down the corridor. He had to hold his hands out to find his way, because there were no lights. It should have been frightening, but for some reason it wasn't.

Harry walked through endless hallways, enjoying the silence. There was a light coming from afar, and he could see the entrance to the Slytherin common room. He remembered how he and Ron had followed Malfoy on their second year, both feeling nervous about keeping up the appearance of being Crabbe and Goyle. It had all been so simple back then.

Not the complicated mess his life had become.

There was darkness beyond the single torch and Harry headed that way. He wasn't ready to turn back yet. His mind was cataloguing his surroundings even without the visual aid. A few corridors to the right was the Potions classroom. He could walk by it and would in time come back to the more lighted corridors. Instead of going there, he decided to go forward. Hands out, he continued through the darkness.

It was fortunate he'd decided to be cautious. His hands hit solid rock a few seconds later, and he froze, knowing he'd reached the end of the corridor. Feeling his way in the dark, he found that it wasn't exactly the end. The corridor curved to the right. Keeping one hand on the wall and the other out in case the next turn came soon, he went on.

He realized soon that he didn't need the precautions. A soft light was emanating from the end of the corridor, a lone torch burning on the wall.

Feeling a bit curious, Harry sneaked to the door guarded by the light. He'd never been here before, but could well guess whose quarters they were. There was no portrait on the door, no sign. Only a small snake painted on it.

The snake looked realistic, details perfect. It was not curved into a shape one might have assumed, but it was coiled into a small curl. Sleeping. Harry wondered if it portrayed the current state of the occupant, and then discarded the notion.

Professor Snape would never reveal such things to a casual passer by; he was too private a person. That was why he lived down here, away from curious eyes.

Harry kept staring at the snake, wondering why he wasn't at all intimidated by the fact that he was
standing outside Snape's door in the middle of the night. If the man caught him here, there'd be hell to pay. He knew Snape wouldn't want to kick him out of Hogwarts now, but he'd definitely issue detention. With Filch no doubt.

It wouldn't matter that they were now both working for the same goal. The pressure they were all under would be seen as a poor excuse. Harry's status as the resident celebrity wouldn't sway Snape. He'd be punished.

That was the weird thing about Snape. He'd never coddled him or praised him. Quite the opposite, actually. Always a mean, cold hearted bastard, or a sarcastic git.

Harry's eyes widened. No, Snape had never seemed to be impressed by him. Had never praised him for things he hadn't really done and had always demanded him to do his best, not to be his best.

The realization hit him hard. Here was the one person in the world he couldn't disappoint, mostly because the man had never held him in high regard. Snape would know all about the dark place he'd found himself in. Would... understand.

Yes, he might also slam the door in his face after telling him he was in trouble. Might laugh at him. But that wouldn't really make things any worse.

Before his brain could stop him from making a complete fool out of himself, Harry raised his hand and knocked on the door. He waited for a moment and then knocked again.

There was no answer.

"Snape?" The Slytherin dormitory was far enough for him to say the word out loud as he knocked for the third time. When there was still no answer, he glanced at the snake. "Sssnape?" The image didn't even move.

Harry had to swallow as his throat tightened. How typical. He'd finally figured out a person to talk to and he wasn't home. It would be too difficult to go back to his dormitory and come back tomorrow. The need that had driven him out was stronger than ever and he feared if he left, he'd finally fall apart.

He sat down, leaning his back against the wall. It wasn't damp here, and the stone floor was actually very comfortable. He'd wait. He could wait as long as it took. Wrapping the cloak tighter around himself, Harry closed his eyes.

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**Part 2**

Snape was swearing as he entered the dungeons.

Everything had been going so well until he returned the castle. It was the first full moon since the Winter Solstice, and he'd gone out to the Forbidden Forest to collect some herbs. He knew he could have got the same plants from the greenhouse, but they wouldn't have been as powerful as the ones cut by the light of the full moon.

Right outside the entrance, he'd stumbled into Sibyll Trelawney. She'd been rushing outside in her most flimsy robe, muttering something about going to the spring to see the future. Snape had been eternally grateful he hadn't met her later on. The way she liked to dance naked in the moonlight was legendary.

Being disrupted by an annoying colleague had almost ruined the night. It wasn't until she'd
disappeared from sight that Snape had realized he'd dropped his sickle, and had to spend a few minutes searching for it in the bush next to the door. He hadn't really minded the delay. Tearing his robe and getting a scratch on his face were quite different.

It was safe to say that he'd seen better nights.

Still muttering to himself about the lunacy of a certain Divinations professor, Snape strode towards his rooms. It was late, but he'd taken a nap right after tea. He was prepared to work for most of the night. Too bad tomorrow would be a workday, but he'd manage. It wasn't like he'd get any crankier by losing sleep.

Closing in on his quarters, Snape didn't sense anything was amiss until he saw a dark form outside his door. He stilled immediately, his eyes narrowing.

This was new.

No one should be here. All the students should be in their dormitories, sleeping. Any colleague needing his help would have contacted him through the floo or owled him. If his former Master had needed his presence, he would have been rolling on the floor in pain earlier that night, holding his arm in agony.

Snape sneaked closer, his boots making no sound on the floor. He could see the person now, lying on his side, facing the wall. By the clothing, he could tell it was a student.

Even though he couldn't see the person's face, Snape recognized the boy. Only one person in Hogwarts had such a messy black hair and an invisibility cloak. Only one person would be foolish enough to have the said cloak folded into a makeshift pillow instead of having it on, hiding his presence. Only one person would be foolish enough to be here in the middle of the night.

His first thought was to walk past the boy and inform Filch that their resident hero was once again breaking the rules. He had too much to do without having to take care of him right now. He discarded that thought immediately. Maybe Potter was here on official Order business, and in that case, he didn't want Filch anywhere near the dungeons.

"Potter." Voice quiet, Snape addressed the sleeping form. When the boy didn't wake up, he sighed and then nudged him with his foot. "Potter! Wake up!"

There was a protesting sound, and then Harry Potter rolled onto his back, his eyes opening slightly. "Shut up, Ron. I wanna sleep for five more minutes." Then he closed his eyes again.

Snape was both annoyed and amused at being mistaken for Weasley. He nudged Potter again, his voice a bit louder this time. "Wake up, Potter. You'll catch pneumonia if you stay there." The thought was horrifying. Harry Potter in the hospital wing for a week, all the young ladies in the school worrying about him, the teachers coddling him.

"Huh?" Harry opened his eyes again, trying to process what he'd just heard. Obviously, he wasn't in his bed, because his back was starting to cramp from lying on something hard. The voice calling out his name was also familiar, and definitely not Ron's. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, but when he could see clearly, he sat up immediately. "Professor Snape!"

"Would you mind telling me why you're here, Potter?" Placing his palm over the snake, Snape opened the door. Feeling characteristically impatient, he stepped through the doorway. "Hurry up, then."

Harry clambered up, grabbing his cloak. He couldn't believe he'd actually fallen asleep waiting for
the professor, squirming on the hard floor for minutes before using his cloak as a pillow. Whatever had possessed him to do such a ridiculous thing? He cringed as he remembered the desperation he'd felt earlier. Of course. He'd had a bout of madness, thinking he could come and talk to Snape about his problems. Maybe he should have gone to see Madam Pomfrey for some sleeping draught. At least that way he wouldn't have made a complete arse of himself.

He followed Snape, shivering a little as the door slammed shut behind him. He felt trapped somehow. The strange calmness had disappeared completely.

Snape put the plants he'd gathered on a table and tossed his heavy outer robes onto a chair. Grimacing as he pushed his sleeves up just a bit, he grabbed a knife and began slicing the herbs. This was important. Potter could wait until he was ready.

Some of the herbs were simply cut and then left to dry. Others went into small vials to soak. He chopped unnecessary parts off and rinsed the dirt away from the few roots he'd dug up, content to do his work. Everything was going perfectly, not counting the unwelcome presence huddling next to the door.

Finally finished, he turned back to Potter and sighed, "Sit down! You look ridiculous hovering there." Without waiting for him to comply, he walked to an armchair and sat down. He yearned for a glass of whiskey, but didn't think he should indulge in front of a student. Feeling his annoyance grow at the thought, he watched Potter sit down and then waited.

The silence stretched between them. Harry was trying hard to think of an excuse of why he was here. Now that he was facing Snape, he wasn't sure of his brilliant idea anymore. The thought of Snape laughing at him seemed more certain and definitely more devastating now.

Snape waited. He knew that sooner or later Potter would open his mouth and stutter some excuses. If this had been about something urgent, the boy would have blurted it out a long time ago. He sat there in silence, trying not to feel the dampness of his left sleeve.

Why the hell wasn't Snape saying anything? Harry fidgeted on his chair, feeling even more nervous. Finally he couldn't stand the silence anymore. "I... Um. I was..." Nothing plausible came to mind.

Instead of commenting on the totally inane stammering, Snape raised an eyebrow. He suppressed an evil smile as he saw the boy blush.

"I wanted to see you." At least that was a whole sentence. The words made Harry blush even harder. He felt like an idiot. Deciding the truth couldn't possibly make this any worse, he sighed, "I was feeling low. And needed to talk to someone. So I came here."

That was definitely unexpected. Snape stared at Harry like he'd gone utterly mad. "Mr. Potter." His use of the 'mister' was as sarcastic as ever; a clear reminder of the first Order meeting a few years ago. "I suggest that the next time you have the urge to bore someone with your personal problems, you go to someone who cares." It wasn't like Potter didn't have an army of people just waiting to offer him a shoulder to cry on.

Harry wasn't sure how to feel about the harsh words. They were so like Snape; cutting and cruel, but somehow relieving. "They wouldn't understand." He knew he was now being cruel. To Ron and Hermione and all the others.

"Indeed. What makes you think I will?" Even though Snape didn't really want to get involved, this was starting to intrigue him. He had no idea why Potter would be here. They didn't know each other that well. He didn't like the boy, and let it show in the class. Even though they both worked for the
Order, his missions were solitary by nature; would have been difficult to explain why he dragged anyone along to the Death Eater soirees.

"Because you know what I'm talking about." Surprisingly, Harry hadn't even thought about that before the words came out. He blinked at his own words and then added, "I think."

Snape highly doubted Potter was capable of thinking. "Let me assure you, I have no idea of what you're talking about." He did know what they'd be talking about next. Detention.

Harry let some of his weariness show on his face. "I'm talking about being tired of everything. Losing interest. Feeling lonely as hell and scared of everything." Nothing but resignation in his words.

Strange, how saying it out loud made him feel better somehow. Not good, but better.

For a moment there was a rather shocked silence. Snape stared at Potter, not believing what he'd just heard. It wasn't so much his words, but the voice that echoed with tiredness that was so familiar to him.

The words would have been almost laughable without that wooden tone; words he'd never expected from the famous Harry Potter. Snape wanted to laugh at him and then toss him out of his rooms, but something made him realize this wasn't simply a teenage pity-trip.

He'd felt like that on occasion. Completely lost. Devastated. Had tried to work it out with the help of his best friend the first time he'd hit rock bottom, only to find himself in hell. Didn't need a memento to remind him of that time; the tattoo on his arm was a reminder enough. Joining Voldemort hadn't filled his life and neither had wallowing in self-pity. The only person he'd ever told of his pain and misery was Albus Dumbledore. He'd been stunned to realize that talking had actually helped.

Now here was Harry Potter, the golden boy, looking suddenly quite human to him. He didn't know if that was such a good thing.

"You should go to see Albus." Snape said calmly. This was no time for harshness. He could torment the boy later. "He is always ready to listen."

Harry stared at him. Then he shook his head. "I can't. The Headmaster's counting on me, and I don't want him to be disappointed." He could deal with almost anything, but not that.

Snape knew the feeling well. He also knew that Harry was wrong. Albus was never disappointed in people who were lost and lonely. "I don't..."

"Look, Snape. I can't talk to him or anyone else. Can't!" Even thinking about it made Harry sick in the stomach. "They'll all... You won't think worse of me because of what I feel. You hate me already. That's why I need you." Now all Harry needed was for the floor to swallow him up. Maybe Snape wouldn't be disappointed in him, but he'd sure see him as an idiot. A ridiculous little twerp.

Ignoring the deflated look on the boy's face, Snape squinted his eyes. He was actually impressed by the logic Harry was showing. "Let's say for one moment you're right." It surprised him that the words had come out without difficulty. "Why would I waste my time listening to you?"

The drawl was so familiar, Harry actually smiled. "From the goodness of your heart?" He cursed himself as he saw Snape's gaze burn with anger at that. "Sorry. Um... I could do some work for you. Clean cauldrons. Organize your cupboards. Do something disgusting you don't want to do yourself."

Snape was quiet for a moment, still glaring. He didn't want to show his amusement. The boy might...
lack brains and a sense of protecting himself, but at least he didn't lack courage. The smile that was
tugging at his lips came out as a sneer. "Well, since you Gryffindors haven't been your dismal selves
recently, I do have some chores one might do. You can start tomorrow after class. In detention."

"Detention?" Harry couldn't believe his ears. He'd expected a dismissal, accented with a hex or two.
And at least a hundred points from Gryffindor. "But... Oh." Of course. Because of his nightly trek
through the school.

"Yes. Two hours of detention for breaking the rules. Again." Others might be lenient with the boy
because of the circumstances, but Snape would not. He understood Potter's motives, but he could
have approached him during the next few days, after class. He'd done worse in his life, but he'd
always accepted the consequences of his actions. "And ten points from Gryffindor."

Harry barely kept from repeating that. He knew Snape was being easy on him. "Thank you, sir." He
stood up, still not knowing what had just happened. Had Snape agreed to listen to him or had he
simply punished him for his actions? "Oh, and sir? Do you mean I can..." He left it open.

Snape nodded curtly. "If you need to talk, I'll listen. But no more nightly wandering around the
castle." It was clearly a threat. "If you need to talk at night, you'll contact me from your common
room. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." Relief flooded through Harry. He could do that.

"Now, unless you want to bare your soul to me, I'd like to go to bed. It's quite late." The sneer was
almost blurred by a yawn. Amazed by how tired he felt after all, Snape decided the herbs could wait
until tomorrow. At least he didn't have to clean after the classes, so he could concentrate on his
ingredients.

Harry didn't flinch at the sarcastic words. He knew Snape and had never expected the man to
actually be nice to him. "I'll be going then." Gathering his cloak into his arms, he turned to walk to
the door.

"Not through there." Snapping the words, Snape shook his head in disappointment. The boy might
listen, but he didn't get any of the words. "I don't want you wandering through the hallways with
that." He glared pointedly at the cloak.

"Oh." Of course.

Snape gestured towards his fireplace with his wand. "Patefacio. The floo powder's on the mantel.
Try not to drop any of it outside the fireplace." His expression clearly showed he didn't believe Harry
could manage not to make a mess.

Hands shaking a little, Harry went to the small jar. He still hated flooing, but tried not to show it. At
least Snape's fireplace was big enough for him to simply step in. Crouching and crawling into a
fireplace was always so damn messy. He could see Snape was already up from his chair and heading
to a door at the other end of the room, not even interested in seeing if he could actually manage to get
out on his own.

Harry stared at the man's back, and muttered, "Thank you, sir." He knew Snape probably couldn't
hear him, and even if he did, he wouldn't care. Still, he had to say it out loud. Then he tossed the
handful of floo powder down and stated, "Gryffindor common room." The next moment he
disappeared.

Fingers already brushing the door handle, Snape stilled. He didn't look back, hearing the familiar
sound of flooing. Only when he was certain he was alone, he glanced back over his shoulder. Yes. At least Potter had managed that all right.

He was still stunned by the way the night had turned out. Maybe this was all about the full moon, when crazy people did crazy things. Didn't call them lunatics for nothing.

Shrugging, he walked to his bedroom. He didn't really mind Potter's request. Better to have him babble to him than to have a nervous breakdown. No matter what he thought of the boy, he was needed in the fight against Voldemort. He might be rather inept in Potions -- probably more due to his lack of concentration than to lack of brains -- but he was quite powerful. And he was needed as a symbol of hope.

At least he'd get someone to do some cleaning and labelling for him. It wasn't actually a bad trade; he could handle listening to the boy on occasion.

Going through his evening routines, Snape pushed Potter out of his mind, already thinking about what to do with his new Potions ingredients the next day. He slipped under the covers, turning down the light with a simple word. He'd have a lot to deal with tomorrow, classes, the freshly cut herbs and roots. Poppy would probably want more cold potions, because no matter how freezing it was, some foolish students still insisted on going outside to catch cold every day.

Amused by the thought of Sibyll Trelawney freezing her naked bum off in the chilly January air, Snape drifted off to sleep.

Part 3

Harry was amazed to realize he was actually feeling better the next morning.

Last night, he'd stumbled out of the fireplace in the common room, covered in soot, and almost coughed up a lung. He'd done that as quietly as possible, trying not to wake anyone. After climbing up to the dormitory, he'd sneaked into the shower. Cleaning up had actually felt wonderful. He'd stood under the warm spray of water for a long time, enjoying the feeling.

When he'd padded out of the bathroom, he'd felt really tired. He had no idea how long he'd slept outside Snape's rooms, but since it was still dark outside, it couldn't have been long. His own bed felt so much better than the hard stone floor, and it didn't take long for him to fall asleep.

He'd been the last in the room to wake up, this time seeing Ron's smiling face as he'd opened his eyes. Muttering darkly at the cheeriness of his friend, he'd dragged himself up, going through his morning routines. Then he'd followed the others to the Great Hall.

"Double Divinations after breakfast. I'm definitely not up to it this early. You know how Trelawney will be. She's probably seen some dreadful omen in the full moon or something." Not letting the prospect of suffering through the dreaded class affect his appetite, Ron shoved eggs in his mouth between sentences.

Harry smiled a little. "You'd think she'd have run out of doomy predictions after all these years, but no. I'm rather impressed with her skill." He was quite surprised to be actually hungry this morning. Reaching out, he piled sausages on his plate.

"Mnh." Chewing hard, Ron nodded. "I bet Lavender is ecstatic about it. Gah! I think double Divinations is worse than anything. Even Potions."
The words made Harry glance at the Head Table. He saw Snape talking with professor Sprout. The sight made him shake his head. What on earth had he been thinking last night? "I don't know."

"Don't know what?" Sitting down next to Harry, Hermione grabbed a roll. She seemed rather grumpy this morning. No surprise there. She didn't have any classes on Tuesday mornings, and that always made her surly.

"About double Divinations being worse than double Potions." Ron managed the whole sentence before stuffing his mouth again.

Hermione smiled wickedly. "I'd say Potions is worse. At least you can sleep through Divinations and don't have to suffer Malfoy." Her last words were accompanied by a nasty glare over her shoulder.

"I agree." There was annoyance in Ron's voice. He stopped eating long enough to glower at the Slytherin table as well. "That git is just getting worse every year."

Harry blinked. He hadn't really been listening to his friends lately, concentrating on his own gloomy thoughts. "What did Malfoy do this time?" Had to be something extra nasty by the look on Hermione's face.

"The usual. Comments about my parents, causing trouble." Slicing her roll in half, Hermione huffed, "Ever since the holidays, he's been acting like a total idiot. Like he owns the whole world."

"Maybe someone should check out his arm." Ron was certain Malfoy was a Death Eater in the making, if not one already. "I bet he got a nice new tattoo as a present."

That made Harry and Hermione exchange looks.

Harry had tried to pay attention at the Order meetings, and knew Dumbledore had opposed Ministry's suggestion to inspect every Slytherin's arm upon the beginning of the spring term. The Headmaster had said that was prejudiced, and that if even one student was inspected, then everyone should be, including the teachers and everyone on the board of governors.

That had ended the conversation.

"Maybe we should do some research. On how to spot a Dark Mark through magic." Hermione suggested. "We could meet at the library after classes."

Almost nodding, Harry groaned. "Can't. I have detention." Seeing the questioning looks, he said, "Um... Went out to check something out last night. Snape caught me. Detention."

"How many points did we lose?" Glaring at Harry, Ron actually lowered his fork. "Are we at minus yet?"

"Actually, he took just ten points. And gave me detention." It was quite hilarious to watch Ron and Hermione gawk at him. Harry shrugged. "He will probably make me scrub cauldrons with my toothbrush."

He couldn't tell anyone about the things he told Snape the night before. Didn't think anyone would believe him even if he did. But he wanted to keep it between the two of them, in case he was actually insane enough to talk to the man.

Ron picked up his fork again. "No matter. Just wish we could win the House cup." He ate a sausage, and added, "Even though I doubt that's gonna be a big deal this year. You-Know-Who's probably got something huge planned for this spring."
The words made Harry lose all appetite. He only managed to force some of the juice down, knowing he would faint in the heavily incensed Divinations classroom if he didn't get something in his stomach.

After breakfast, Hermione went to the library as Harry and Ron sauntered towards Divinations. They passed some Slytherins by, not paying any attention to them before they heard peals of laughter coming from the group.

Ron glared back with an annoyed expression. He shuddered as he saw Pansy Parkinson kiss Blaise Zabini in the corridor. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

Silently, Harry agreed. He could see panic in Zabini's eyes. No wonder. Anyone willing to kiss Pansy Parkinson would have to be blind, deaf and probably quite out of their mind.

"Jealous, Weasel?" The familiar drawl was amused. Draco Malfoy walked by, smiling sweetly at Ron's disgust. "Maybe if you beg nicely, Pansy will kiss you as well." His eyes glinted malevolently. "Or maybe she has better taste than that."

Harry grabbed Ron's arm, seeing the telltale signs of an upcoming fight. "Don't. He's not worth it." He dragged his friend to the stairs, not paying any attention to Malfoy's snickers.

"One day I'm going to kick his smug arse," Ron muttered angrily, cheeks still flushed.

"Yeah, but not now. We're already late for Divinations." Keeping a steady pace, Harry lead the way to the classroom.

Draco Malfoy was glad Potter had dragged Weasley away. The two Gryffindors would have been pleased to see real hurt in his eyes. He blinked it away in a second, but knew that if they had stayed, they would have seen how much Potter's words had stung.

Not even worth a fight.

Not like their first years, when a few well placed insults had got Potter and his annoying friends into trouble every time.

Things had definitely changed, and not for the good. Draco shook his head at that. The stuff at school was just the tip of the iceberg. Pansy's recent behavior was a proof of it.

Walking slowly towards the Arithmancy class, Draco thought about that kiss he'd witnessed. A year earlier, that would never have happened. Pansy might have always been a bully, but there had been rules among the Slytherins. They were all loyal to each other. Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were to be ignored or used, Gryffindors were to be ridiculed and hated with burning hatred. But other Slytherins were all brothers or sisters.

The Head of the Slytherin House never had to discipline House members for treating other Slytherins badly. That simply didn't happen. They stood as a united front against all the rest.

But now Pansy was kissing Blaise who quite obviously didn't want to be the object of her affections. Draco remembered seeing Blaise with a Hufflepuff girl at the Yule Ball. Maybe his housemate didn't have good taste, but not bad enough to be attracted to Pansy either.

It wasn't hard to figure out what was making Pansy act like this. The same thing was happening to other Slytherins, from seventh years to first years. The Parkinsons had been at the Malfoy Mansion during the holidays, as well as other powerful families. Death Eaters most of them, bringing their progeny to be approved by the Dark Lord.
Draco suppressed a shudder. It had been the worst Christmas ever.

He could remember how his greatest aspiration in world had once been to become like his father. His dream had been to become a Death Eater, a follower of the Dark Lord. To be one of the chosen ones, to be close to the greatest power in the world.

What a twat he’d been.

He'd seen things that would make some faint, others vomit. Had seen the Dark Lord himself. It had been a terrifying moment, really, one he'd always imagined to be full of glory. How wrong he had been.

There had been things his father had forgot to mention; lots of groveling, fear so thick one could smell it in the air. Voldemort being wand happy about the smallest of excuses, punishing his own followers for any misdemeanor. He could have dealt with that, could have handled the pain and the humiliation. But he'd seen something he'd never imagined.

The Death Eaters competing for their Master's favors. Backstabbing each other at every chance.

Draco had been astonished by how strongly he'd felt about that. He'd always prided himself for being without scruples and known that one day he would be respected throughout the wizarding world, like his father. Seeing the Death Eaters gather together had been a huge disappointment.

No respect. No honor. Only a group of men and women who were all afraid of the one they had chosen to serve.

His father had been so proud presenting him to the Dark Lord. Showing him off as if he was a prize of sorts. He hadn't understood some of the comments the others had made about him until later that night, when the masked people had partied in the great hall of his home mansion.

Compared to that, Pansy Parkinson was acting like a Muggle nun.

He paused for a moment before entering the classroom, moulding his expression into its usual sneer. For the first time in his life he was confused about what to do next. There was no one to turn to. His father would be furious to hear his thoughts. The Head of his House was his father's friend. Professor Sinistra, who was also a Slytherin, was too powerless to help him. He'd be damned if he crawled to Dumbledore or the other teachers.

There was only one thing he was sure of; he didn't want to become a Death Eater. Now he just had to figure a way to escape that destiny. He didn't want to become like Pansy Parkinson, or Crabbe's father. Or like his own father. There was no glory in serving Voldemort.

He remembered the sorry figure of Peter Pettigrew, the famous traitor. The person who'd helped the Dark Lord the most, even though their plans hadn't gone that perfectly after all. He remembered Pettigrew's lost expression and the hand he tried to hide inside his robes. That was the reward of being the Dark Lord's servant. His slave.

Only when the sneer was firmly in place did he step into the classroom.

On the other side of the school, Ron was enjoying the best Divinations class ever. Professor Trelawney seemed to have lost her voice, and she was sitting on a fluffy pillow wearing heavy robes and a long scarf around her neck.

Since the professor couldn't talk, they spent the double class doing tarot readings on each other. Parvati and Lavender cast worried glances at Trelawney every five minutes, looking absolutely
forlorn. The professor walked around the room, watching them interpret the cards, nodding at the most morose ones. She seemed to perk up as Harry's reading showed Death, then glared at Ron who stated that the card also represented change, not just real death.

Harry was pretty impressed Ron actually knew that.

After class, they marched to the library to see if Hermione had come up with anything about Dark Marks. Apparently there were dozens of books about them, some in the restricted section. She'd managed to get her hands on the most rudimentary ones, most of which she'd already read during the fifth year DADA course.

Harry promised to try and get a slip from some of the teachers. He'd have to ask Dumbledore the next time the Order was meeting. He was pretty sure the Headmaster would give him one. Of course he could have simply told Madam Pince that he needed the book in order to help Fawkes, but that was for emergencies. This didn't exactly qualify.

Lunch was pure torture for Harry. Divinations had actually been hilarious, and he'd been distracted by Ron's funny readings. It had been nice to be able not to think about anything.

Now he was forced to think about the upcoming Potions class. As so often after finding himself in that dark place full of desperation, he was a bit embarrassed about his actions the previous night. He couldn't believe he'd actually gone to Snape. Couldn't believe what Snape had said to him.

Hermione looked at Harry, shaking her head at the familiar frown on his face. She glanced at Ron, who shrugged.

They'd noticed the way their friend had become withdrawn the past few months. No. It had started long before that. Ever since their fourth year, Harry had become quieter. More focused on things.

It had to be because of the upcoming war. Both Hermione and Ron were a part of Dumbledore's silent task force, proud to be members of the Order, and they knew all about what people feared would happen soon.

So of course the constant frown on Harry's face was easy to explain, but neither of his friends knew what made him disappear some evenings. His frequent absence from the common room was more worrying than anything.

Had either Hermione or Ron been a part of the Order's inner circle, they would have known about the secret meetings Harry sometimes attended to. It wouldn't have made them worry any less, though. The Headmaster knew it, using it as an excuse when he'd gathered the small group together, stating that he wanted the students to be allowed to be children for a while longer.

Harry had agreed with his decision, needing to shield his friends as well.

"So. You ready for Potions?" Pushing his plate away from him, Ron covered a slight burp with his hand. Yes, his mother had managed to teach him some manners. "Or is that like a stupid question? Can anyone be ready for that?"

Hermione's glare was instinctive. "Yes. By actually studying for it." She knew what he meant, though. Not all the studying in the world could make you prepared for Potions. Not as long as you were a Gryffindor and professor Snape was still teaching.

"I could always take Vomiting potion and spend the day with Madam Pomfrey." Ron sounded like that was an excellent idea. Then he remembered Charlie telling him that he'd actually tried that once, and then spent a week in detention. Maybe not something he should try.
Harry watched his friends bicker and smiled slightly. He could get through the day. He knew he could. "Come on. We definitely don't want to be late for this."

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**Part 4**

The dungeons were well lit during the daytime.

At least this part of them was. Seventh year Gryffindors and Slytherins were rushing towards the Potions classroom, no one wanting to be late.

Their professor had never actually hexed any one of them -- it had been close with the whole exploding frog gut incident with Neville Longbottom the previous year -- but there was a first time for everything. It wasn't as if Snape had to hex anyone, or to even threaten to do that. His glare was bad enough.

Harry followed his friends inside the dank room, keeping his gaze on his feet. He didn't feel any of the peace the dungeons had given him the previous night. Actually, he was terrified.

He now knew exactly how Neville felt every time he approached the class.

Snape wasn't in yet, so they all had good time to prepare. Notebooks and cauldrons were placed on the tables, quills and ink readied. No one wanted to look like a slacker at Potions, not even the Slytherins.

The loud slam of the door opening and hitting the wall made everyone jump. Even though that was the usual way Snape entered the classroom, no one was ever ready for that. Harry cringed as the professor walked past his table, his robes billowing. He had a bad feeling about this.

"Today, we're going to make the Stealth potion." Without preamble, Snape walked to the blackboard and started writing. "After finishing, you will write at least a foot long essay about the use of this potion, and the history of it. You may begin."

Everyone copied the notes into their notebooks, making sure they got the ingredients right. The potions Snape was teaching them were getting more difficult over the years, and messing up things would result in explosions every time. A fact Neville was painfully aware of.

Due to the complexity of the potion, Snape had all the students pair up. "Mr. Crabbe, you go with Miss. Parkinson. Mr. Goyle, Mr. Malfoy." He thought he saw a glint of relief in Malfoy's gaze, but couldn't be sure. The boy was doing excellent job hiding his emotions these days. "Miss. Granger. Let's see if you can help Mr. Weasley with this one. Potter. You are with Mr. Longbottom."

Harry didn't even register the way his name was snarled out. Realizing he was paired with Neville, he sighed. It was proof that Snape wanted him dead. After all these years of watching over him, Snape had finally had enough, and was trying to kill him. Maybe he should have let Quirrel do the job six years ago. At least they'd all have been saved from humiliation then.

"I... I think we can do this. Right?" Neville didn't sound so sure about himself, but he tried to cheer Harry up anyway. "There are lots of roots in this one. I know roots. I can chop them if you... Do the rest."

Hearing the honest worry in his friend's voice, Harry snapped out of his wallowing and nodded. "Yeah. I think we can do this. You get the roots, I'll get the feathers."

The class worked in silence. There were no slimy or disgusting ingredients in this potion. Only
different kinds of roots and herbs, some berries and a small amount of Blackforest Eagle feathers. Harry concentrated on the feathers, chopping the soft tufts into a fine shred and never once looking at his teacher.

Neville watched his partner weigh the feathers he'd cut for the fourth time and frowned. That wasn't like Harry. He looked at Hermione and noticed she was staring at Harry as well. Maybe something had happened to make him so quiet. Not wanting to add to his worries, he kept slicing the roots, hoping against hope he'd get this potion made the way it was supposed to.

"Mr. Weasley. Do not tear the feathers like that. They're more expensive than chicken feathers."

Snape's bark made Ron drop one of the blue-black feathers on the floor. In his haste to pick it up, he staggered a little, and promptly stepped on the feather.

The Slytherins tittered at that.

"Mr. Weasley." It was a suffering sigh. "There must be a brain under that hair of yours, though we have yet to be shown the proof of its existence. Ten points from Gryffindor."

The color on Ron's face matched the color of his hair. His mouth worked for a moment, but he didn't say anything out loud.

Finally finishing his weighing, Harry quietly handed the rest of his feather to Ron. There'd be enough for another potion. He caught Snape's dark gaze on him, and turned his attention back to his cauldron, hoping that Snape wouldn't say anything.

Snape kept staring at Harry for a moment longer. Then he stepped away from his desk and started walking around the classroom, checking out the simmering potions.

While he kept observing his students, his mind was working on the previous night. He wasn't sure what to make of Potter's behavior. He'd been weary, almost to the point of exhaustion, saying things he certainly wouldn't have in his right mind. It appeared that after a few hours of sleep, he'd changed his mind. At least he refused to look at him.

How pointless. Snape had seen worse in his time as a teacher. Potter had simply reached the end of his rope. It wasn't like he'd done anything that bad, hadn't tried to bribe him, for example.

Snape adjusted Dean Thomas' grip on the ladle, wondering how long it would take for that boy to understand you needed to stir the potion in a specific way to make it work. Some people simply weren't made to handle with a delicate art like potions making.

Correction. Hardly anyone was made for that. A shame, really. And a pity.

"Should I add the roots now?" Wondering if Harry had even heard him, Neville tugged at his friend's robes. "Harry? Are you all right?"

Focusing his gaze on Neville, Harry blinked. He'd been concentrating on stirring the potion, not really paying attention to anything else. "Huh? Yes, you can add the roots now." He hoped Neville had been talking about the roots.

It was probably a good thing the potion of the day was a difficult one to prepare. Harry needed something to concentrate on. The last thing he wanted was to talk to Snape. It'd be perfect if he never had to speak to him again.

Harry's hand froze after the fiftieth vigorous stir. Damn, he'd completely forgot about the detention
later on. Snape would expect him to act like a nervous wreck no doubt. Changing the direction, he started stirring again.

"Mr. Potter!" Snape's eyes gleamed as he saw the boy jump. "Are you trying to blow up your cauldron on purpose or is that simply a sign of your less than admirable intelligence?"

Realizing that he was stirring the potion too hard, Harry froze again. He glanced at Snape, feeling heat rise to his cheeks at the professor's sneer. "I..." It was like the worst kind of deja vu. "Sorry, sir." He tried to aim for meek, but the words came out laden with sarcasm.

"Ten points from Gryffindor." It was to be expected.

Harry was just happy it wasn't more than that. Snape always seemed to enjoy punishing him. He'd tried to stay out of trouble lately, refusing to get mad at the sly and sarcastic comments, but sometimes it was just too much. Then he'd simply had to reply to all those scathing remarks.

Not today, though. He was in enough trouble already.

Snape continued his tour after it was clear Potter wouldn't make any more comments. He watched his students work very hard trying to get the potion right, probably because they knew they'd all have to test it when it was ready. It was petty, but Snape enjoyed that part of the class the most.

This time, he was pretty sure it would be his own students that would cause the biggest commotion. Due to Potter's need to hide from him, even Longbottom might manage not to turn yellow or burst into flames. Parkinson and Crabbe didn't seem that lucky. She was adding too many feather pieces too fast into the potion.

Snape had a good reason to teach his students this particular potion. It was mostly to show the seventh year Slytherins that you couldn't always trust magic. The notion made Snape shiver a little, but it was true nevertheless.

He knew what fate was waiting for his students. Had been there at the Malfoy Mansion, watching Death Eaters parade their children in front of Voldemort like prize animals.

Seeing the elder Crabbe and Goyle with their children, followed by the Parkinsons and Bulstrodes had made him nauseous. It had been like a scene from the past. He and Lucius and their housemates going to join Voldemort by the dozens. Sheer stupidity.

If only there was something he could do to change that. By the end of the school year, the group of the Death Eaters would grow, and eventually, he would have to fight against children he spent years taking care of, probably even kill some of them. Each and every one of them was a threat against him and those he... Well, those he didn't utterly despise.

There was nothing he could do. Maybe if he didn't have to keep up the appearance so that he could spy for the Order, he might have been able to save some of the youngsters, but as things were, that was just a foolish dream. All he could do was to give his Slytherins things to think of, maybe even some doubts to nag in their minds. Hoping they'd use their brains -- those who had one -- and would never join Voldemort.

The stealth potion was an excellent way to raise doubts in the minds of smug young wizards. A potion looking like one could do anything after ingesting it, only to be slapped back to reality. It was cruel. Like life itself.

"All right then." Seeing that most of the class had managed to finish the potion, Snape strode to the front of the room. "The purpose of the potion is to give the one drinking it camouflage and strength.
This is the basic potion. To make it work, you'll have to add either a little grass or a small stone."

Knowing he would lose no House points by asking, Malfoy raised his hand. "Why?"

"Because you'll need different kinds of camouflage in a forest or in the city."

Hermione leaned closer to Ron, muttering, "Anyone who's watched Muggle war movies knows that."

"Excellent question, Mr. Malfoy. Ten points to Slytherin." Snape ignored the glares some of the Gryffindors cast in his direction. "Now, add the small pebbles of stone to the potion. Yes. No, Mr. Thomas. Don't toss it in. Just put it in the cauldron. Now stir three times. Enough."

Harry kept his gaze on the potion, noticing it was turning grey almost immediately. He wondered if that was the way it was supposed to go.

"Now, the potion only works on wizards, so you'll need to hold your wand in your hand as you drink it."

Pansy Parkinson looked at the murky brown liquid in the cauldron in front of her, and coughed, "Um, sir. I left my wand in my room." She hoped the professor wouldn't ask to see her bag. It was a lie of necessity. No way was she going to drink that.

Crabbe on the other hand didn't see anything amiss with their potion.

"It's all right, Miss. Parkinson." Snape dismissed the girl. He wouldn't have drunk that mud either. "Now, hold your wand and then take a long gulp of the potion."

Hermione was the only one to drink without hesitations. She was certain they'd got it right. Ron followed suit a second later. It seemed most of the class had after all succeeded with the potion. The feathers sprouting out of Crabbe's ears were the only indicator of a potion gone wrong.

After swallowing the potion, Harry kept his gaze on Neville, looking for any signs of feathers. There was none. Instead, the other boy was slowly turning grey. Glad that they'd managed to make it work, he shoved his wand back inside his robes.

"If your potion is working correctly, your skin tone will be changing to camouflage you. You'll also feel stronger." His voice quiet, Snape watched the way the students were changing color.

Malfy turned to Goyle and lifted him up in the air without problems. "Look! It's working."

All around the classroom, there were similar outbursts as the potions worked.

Snape waited patiently. The side effects should be kicking in about...

"Aaagh! Make it stop! This hurts!" Panicking, Ron waved his hand in the air. His lungs were burning, and he couldn't breathe. Next to him, Hermione was trying to gasp for air as well.

A moment later, everyone except for Vincent and Pansy was rolling around on the floor in agony.

"There is a rather nasty side effect to the potion." Snape stated coolly. "It will work only with wizards holding their wands, but doesn't work well with magic. Everyone, drop your wand."

Harry squirmed, trying to grab his wand as fast as possible. When his fingers touched the smooth wood, he felt a jolt of even greater pain that disappeared the moment he managed to drop the wand on the floor.
"But... Sir! How can we do magic without our wands?" It was Zabini instead of Malfoy. Mostly because the blond wizard was still trying to let go of his hold on his wand.

Snape waited until everyone had managed to drop their wand. Then he said, "You can't. That's the point. The potion's effects last for half an hour, and during that time, you can not touch your wands. If you try to actually cast a spell, the pain will quite probably kill you."

There were shocked exclamations at that.

Harry stared at his wand. So close, but unreachable. He'd got used to holding the wand, to depending on it. Realizing that he and everyone else in the class were completely helpless, he glanced at Snape.

The others seemed to reach a similar conclusion, for the babble ended, replaced by icy fear.

After letting the silence stretch for an almost uncomfortably long time, Snape raised his own wand. He could see fear on most faces, the calm look on Potter's more than slightly annoying. With an almost negligent flick of his wrist, he looked at Crabbe and said, "Demo Penna."

The feathers disappeared from the both sides of the boy's head.

Snape looked around the room. "I assume you all got the point?" He saw everyone nod, even though it was doubtful Crabbe and Goyle had really understood the lesson. "Good. You may begin your essays now."

It was amazing how quickly everyone grabbed their parchments and quills.

There were no questions asked, or comments made. Everyone kept glancing at their wands every five minutes, probably feeling as naked without them as Harry did. It was the longest thirty minutes of most of their lives.

Finally Snape looked up from the book he'd been reading while his students scribbled down their essays, and said, "It's time. Bring me the parchments and then get your wands."

Hermione was the first one to comply, grimacing a little as she bent down to retrieve her wand. When she didn't start screaming or drop the wand immediately, others followed suit. For once, even the Slytherins seemed to escape the classroom.

"Mr. Potter." Cold voice reminded Harry that it wasn't over yet. "You may collect the cauldrons."

Harry shrugged and cast a longing look after Ron and Hermione. Detention was always bad, but after last night and today's class it would be pure torture.

As the door banged shut after the last Slytherin fleeing the Potions class, Harry went to get all the cauldrons. He knew from experience that they couldn't be cleaned by using magic. Snape had lectured about it long ago, going on and on about how using magic disturbed the next potion that would be brewed in the cauldron.

Personally, Harry believed Snape simply enjoyed watching him scrub the cauldrons until his hands hurt.

Snape didn't move from his place behind the desk. He'd been watching Potter and was well aware of the boy's mood. It was clear he was regretting his bout of self-pity the night before.

He'd been expecting something like that to happen. Potter had been so desperate when he'd asked for
his help; he'd seen no other choice but to agree. No matter what, he knew the Order needed the boy relatively sane. Of course he wasn't about to actually offer his help. It wasn't like he was yearning for the chance to be Harry Potter's personal father confessor.

The mere idea made him want to laugh. Instead he started grading the essays, glancing at Potter from time to time.

Rinsing one cauldron before grabbing the next, Harry kept wondering why Snape was so damn quiet. Any other teacher would have asked him what was wrong by now. Offered him tea or a Sherbet Lemon, showed that they cared.

It was annoying in a way, but also a relief. He didn't want to explain his change of heart to Snape. In the bright daylight, his good idea of baring his soul to the Potions master sounded idiotic, and he wasn't sure he could actually say anything to Snape.

Besides, he felt better. Maybe it was the thought of having the opportunity to talk to the man that was making him all right. He didn't have to deal with everything alone; now he had a choice.

Harry scrubbed the cauldrons. Concentrated on removing every last trace of the potion from them. Scrubbing, and scrubbing, and trying not to think about anything.

"You can go now."

The words startled Harry. He dropped the cauldron he'd been scrubbing, wincing at the loud clatter. Picking it up again, he glanced at Snape. "Huh?" The inquiring sound escaped him before he could stop, and he closed his eyes. Snape probably thought he was a complete idiot.

"You've spent two hours cleaning the classroom. I do think the cauldrons are clean enough." Snape's drawl was as sarcastic as ever. "You're done. You may leave." His tone indicated that it wasn't exactly a request.

Harry stared at the professor for a moment. Then he hurried to get his things. Without words, he walked out of the classroom.

Raising an eyebrow, Snape watched his most annoying student leave. Knowing he wouldn't be back, he turned his attention to the inane ramblings his students called essays.

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Part 5

It was funny how anxious everyone was to see the Hogsmeade weekend approach.

Most of the students had spent the holidays feasting on all the traditional wizarding treats. Those with Muggle blood had also stuffed themselves with Muggle delicacies. There had been presents, from all the sensible things adults loved to give to the completely pointless ones. All reason suggested no one in Hogwarts was at all interested in anything one could buy at Honeydukes or at Zonko's.

Then again, when did reason have anything to do with the wizarding world?

Since there had been no sign of Voldemort planning an attack on Hogwarts, the teachers had decided to continue the tradition. Hogsmeade weekends were returned to the schedule. Third years were thrilled, being finally able to go and waste all their allowance in the famous shops.

Older students were just as enthusiastic. Hogsmeade offered a change of scenery, a new form of freedom. They would enjoy roaming the streets.
Harry had his slip, Sirius' name freshly written on it. They'd had quite an argument after the last secret Order meeting about him going to Hogsmeade. His opinion being he should go anywhere he pleased. Sirius' being that he should stay somewhere safe.

Sirius should have known from the beginning that he'd lose that argument. During his own time at Hogwarts, there had been only one boy to match his stubbornness with pig headedness bordering on lunacy. It was only natural Harry would have inherited that trait from his father.

It would be wonderful to be able to get away from school for one afternoon. There had been more secret meetings and advanced DADA training after the holidays. Even Quidditch practice didn't make Harry feel much better anymore. Maybe spending the day with Ron and Hermione and then getting a serious sugar high would.

At least that was what he hoped.

Earlier that Saturday, Madam Hooch and professor McGonagall had gone to Hogsmeade to make certain there wouldn't be any Death Eaters lurking around. They were late; returning to school an hour after lunchtime had ended, and were greeted by a crowd of anxious teenagers.

Harry, Ron and Hermione stood near the door, knowing what would happen if they let the third years to barge into Hogsmeade before them. It had happened before; streets full of children on a sugar high, witches and wizards at Honeydukes working overtime trying to replenish the shelves with all sorts of small gadgets from Zonko’s going off around them. A few large canaries running around in panic.

Not to say it wasn't fun to watch. It was simply much more fun to actually buy stuff first, then watch the third years. After that, they could go to the Three Broomsticks for dinner.

"Let's go!" As soon as professor McGonagall announced it was safe to go, Ron rushed to the door, dragging the others with him. "Quickly! Before the third years stampede over us."

Draco Malfoy, followed by Crabbe and Goyle as always, sneered at the other trio. "So anxious to go and spend your two Knuts, Weasley? Be careful! You might have the desire to spend three, and bankrupt your whole family!"

It wasn't all that original -- considering it was about the same thing he'd said every year -- but Crabbe and Goyle still laughed.

Ron ignored Malfoy. His face was reddening, but he chose to shut his ears and plough forward. Hitting Malfoy would only lead to a very angry McGonagall and she would undoubtedly deny him access to Hogsmeade.

He was quite proud of his self control.

Harry was enjoying the brisk walk. It was chilly outside, but as soon as they reached the small village, they all seemed to forget the weather. Zonko's was having a sale -- probably because of the fierce competition provided by the new shop down the lane -- but Ron ignored the signs and dragged Harry and Hermione to Honeydukes first.

It was the same every time; Ron running around, trying to grab everything he saw. After last year's catastrophe with Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, he stayed away from those, but that was about the only shelf he left untouched. Harry sighed as he saw him grab a bag of Droobles Best Blowing Gum. There'd be bubbles in their dormitory for days.

He didn't really mind. It was fun to watch his friend's enthusiasm. Ron had been saving for this trip,
and was now ecstatic over all the things he could buy.

Shopping seemed to fulfill some deep need in his friend. Remembering how it had felt to shop at Diagon Alley for the first time with Hagrid, Harry smiled. It had felt wonderful to be able to buy something for himself, with his own money.

After they’d finished with buying sweets, Hermione dragged them to Dervish and Banges to buy new quills and the few books she needed.

Harry watched as Hermione showed similar joy browsing through books as Ron had in the candy store. He wasn't really interested in buying anything. He just followed his friends.

When the others had completely exhausted their need to buy stuff, they walked slowly towards the Three Broomsticks.

"I do wish they'd warn third years at the stores." Hermione glared at the two giant canaries crossing the street before them. It was clear some of the kids hadn't heard of Canary Custard before. "Every year! This is ridiculous!"

Ron didn't even try to hide his laughter. "Hey, at least they don't have to buy quills." An evil glint appeared in his eyes. "I wonder if we should give Snape's defeathering charm a try."

Imagining the canaries running around with no feathers made Harry laugh as well. Hermione tried to look disapproving, but even she had to smile at that.

There were a few people sitting around the tables already as they walked into the Three Broomsticks. Madam Rosmerta smiled at them as they pulled up chairs. "Welcome back dears. It hasn't been the same without you children here."

"Thank you." For the obvious reason Ron could never be annoyed at people who were trying to mother him, even though he did resent being called a child. "Three Butterbeers, please."

Harry looked around. It was nice in here. Nice and quiet. He didn't really like crowds. They gave him an uncomfortable feeling between his shoulder blades. It was different at Hogwarts. There he was relatively safe from anyone who’d actually stab him in the back.

He’d been amazed that morning to be anxious to go to Hogsmeade. Ever since that dismal night a few weeks back, he'd been feeling a bit better, but nothing had really interested him much. Like life was almost on a hold. Classes followed other classes; evenings were full of studying for classes or for the Order. Meetings. Quidditch practices. Nothing changed. Sometimes Harry felt he was watching someone else's life. Some poor bugger's extremely boring life.

A little boredom was a good thing. Excitement usually led to disaster. It meant Voldemort and his Death Eaters. People dying.

This was definitely better.

"Here you are." Madam Rosmerta placed three tankards of Butterbeer on the table. As Harry reached into his pocket for money, she waved her hand, "No, it's all right. They're already paid for." She gestured to the table at the back.

Feeling suspicious, Harry turned to see who had bought them the drinks as Hermione took out her wand and cast a small charm on the tankards, checking them out to see if they were safe to drink. It was instinctual now.
Two middle-aged witches smiled at Harry, waving as he met their eyes.

"Not reporters. More of the fan club, I guess." It was a resigned sigh. Harry forced himself to smile back, and then drink, even though he didn't feel thirsty anymore.

Ron nodded. "Yeah. But you know, it's perfectly natural." He'd got over his rather dark feelings about people being all so damn impressed with Harry. "They're all wondering when Vo... You-Know-Who will strike again." It was amazing how the Order's way of using the dark wizard's real name had rubbed off.

"I say it's ridiculous." After the things Rita Skeeter had written about her, Hermione had grown annoyed with all the attention. "Sounds like Muggle movies. You-Know-Who strikes back. Everyone's waiting for it to just end, but all the fawning doesn't change a thing."

Harry had to swallow hard, as the Butterbeer tried to come up. He didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to speculate about Voldemort right now. He was here to have fun. This was the first time in ages he'd had a whole day off to spend his time with his friends, and he was going to enjoy it even if it killed him!

Considering his attitude, it was no wonder he had a huge headache that night.

He'd done his best to smile at Ron's jokes, had listened to Hermione's rather snarky comments. Waved at all the people who recognized him and called out his name. Stuffed himself first at the Three Broomsticks and later back at the Gryffindor common room. Didn't think about this being his last year at Hogwarts or Voldemort or the Order.

So why was he covered in cold sweat when the lights went out? Once again, he lay in his bed, listening to Ron snore and Neville talk in his sleep, feeling like the walls were closing in on him. He kept his eyes closed, hoping it was just a figment of his imagination. It had been a good day. No need to ruin it now by freaking out.

The thought only made him feel worse. He was not supposed to do this. He was supposed to be the strong savior of the wizarding world. He was supposed to be lots of things, all of which were making him want to throw up.

Harry ground his teeth together, wrapping his blanket tighter around him. He wished he could just lie here and hide for the rest of his life. To become one with the bed and get cosy with the dust mites. It would be so wonderful. Sleep, or just lie here. With no worries.

He swallowed hard at the thought. It was sounding a bit too much like he was thinking about death here.

Needing to get out of bed immediately, he struggled with the beddings. He couldn't stay here. Too many heavy thoughts and too much silence. Ron's snoring didn't really help, the silence was still suffocating him.

He got up and padded out of the room. The invisibility cloak remained in the trunk. He didn't really want to go walking around the castle again. There was no place he could hide from his own thoughts. That night a couple of weeks ago had shown him that.

No place he could go to.

There was a fire burning in the fireplace in the common room. Harry walked to one of the armchairs, staring at the wizard's chess on the table. The pieces were snoring softly.
It was strange how everything seemed to be mocking him these days, reminding him of things he couldn't do anymore. Couldn't rely on Hermione being there to help him with her razor sharp mind, simply because there were things he had to do and places he had to go where she couldn't follow. Couldn't tell Ron all his worries while playing chess.

More thoughts he didn't want to entertain right now. It was as if his mind was trying to gather every painful idea and then shove them right there for him to process at once. He didn't want to think about anything. Didn't want to feel anything.

The emptiness inside him was just as bad; when he really couldn't feel anything. It was a paradox, to desire the one thing that hurt more than anything. It wasn't fair, he wanted to shout. None of this was fair. The desire to scream out and maybe punch something was almost overwhelming, but he couldn't do that. Couldn't let anyone see him like this or screaming and shouting. Because he had to stay cool. That was his job; he was Harry Potter, and all the things surrounding his fame were his burden to bear alone.

He stared at the chess pieces, envying them of their peaceful sleep.

It was getting worse, somehow. The large room wasn't suddenly big enough for him and his thoughts. The need was burning inside of him again, as brightly as the fire in the fireplace.

Harry flinched. It was the one thing he hadn't thought of. He did have a way to stop this feeling. At least the last time he'd felt like this, one thing had helped. He took a deep breath and imagined going to talk to someone. There was someone he could talk to if he wanted to. That ought to make him feel better.

It didn't. The need was making his chest ache. Knowing he could go wasn't enough anymore. He had to act.

Hands sweating slightly, he stood up and walked to the fireplace. There was a small jar of floo powder on the mantle. He was pretty sure it had never been used to do what he was planning. No Gryffindor alive would be calling to the Slytherin dungeons. No student would dare to interrupt the dreaded Potions master during this hour. Or any hour. At least if they were sane.

Harry wasn't certain he was anymore. He knew he was tired and stressed, and more than just suspected he was going out of his mind. Snape had said he could go to him if he needed help. It hadn't been a gracious invitation, but an invitation nevertheless.

He'd do anything to make this feeling go away. He'd scrub cauldrons until blood poured from beneath his fingernails, would stay in detention every single evening. Would probably sing and dance in the Slytherin common room if it just made the emptiness go away.

"Um..." Snatching a handful of the glittering powder, Harry stared into the flames. His hand didn't seem to shake anymore. He didn't know why. Maybe he'd calmed down, or maybe he was shaking all over now. Tossing the handful to the flames, he muttered, "Professor Snape." Then he stood there, waiting.

What if Snape was sleeping? He didn't seem like the kind of man to be very happy about being woken up in the middle of the night. Or maybe he wasn't home. That thought chilled Harry. He'd probably try to find him in that case. Tear through the castle if necessary.

During the long seconds he stood there, another thought popped up in his mind. What if Snape had changed his mind? What if he had realized -- as Harry had -- that the whole thing had been insane? Why would the professor want to spend his time listening to him blather about his feelings?
He was so lost inside his own misery, he didn't even notice when the flames changed, Snape's face appearing in them. "Mr. Potter. Is there a reason you have to do this in the middle of the night?" He didn't sound crankier than usual, which was not telling anything about his mood.

"I'm sorry, sir. I..." Harry struggled to get the apology out. He knew he'd hate himself in the morning if he felt any better. The memory of stuttering in front of Snape would probably make him gag. But the point was to get to where he could be embarrassed about all this. He wasn't there yet.

Snape cut his apology short. "I don't need your apologies, Mr. Potter. Floo in if you wish to talk to me." He sounded like he didn't really care whether he wanted to talk or not.

It was almost pitiful how relieved Harry felt by that. No pressure. No expectations. No way for him to disappoint or shock anyone. "Thank you, sir." Ironic. Snape had saved his life more than once, but this was the first time he had ever openly thanked him. And meant it as well.

"Stop babbling and come on over. It's late already." With that, Snape's face disappeared from the flames.

Harry shuddered. At least he hadn't lost any points from Gryffindor. For some reason, he had the feeling he probably would before the night was over.

Part 6

Severus Snape was a patient man.

Not by nature, no. It had taken him years to learn patience. Years and years of brewing difficult potions and concentrating on the volatile ingredients that would kill anyone who was in a hurry.

Being patient with things didn't mean he was patient with people. He didn't suffer idiots who needed things to be explained over and over again. Considering that, it was surprising he had chosen to become a teacher. Children were an annoying lot of brainless fools after all.

He was very good at waiting, though. Could spend countless hours waiting for a potion to simmer, or weeks for that special ingredient to arrive to him by an owl.

Potions weren't the only things that taught him patience. His need to prove himself to Dumbledore. His work for the Order. All these had strengthened the lessons brewing potions had taught. Then, a few years ago, he'd got himself another duty; protecting Harry Potter. It had been rather ridiculous; he hated the boy's name and his fame. The way people fawned over him disgusted him, and he'd thought Albus was mad when he'd asked him to keep an eye on the boy.

There weren't all that many things Dumbledore asked, so when he did, he obeyed. Without hesitations.

He'd watched Potter patiently, had seen some of the dangers surrounding him. Both the ones coming from his old Master and friends, and those created by the overly eager and grateful inhabitants of the wizarding world. He'd done everything in his power to keep the annoying child alive.

Protecting Potter wasn't as easy as he'd thought. Voldemort had been rather persistent, trying to slay the boy almost every year since he arrived at Hogwarts. It had been a nightmare to try to keep him alive while protecting his cover as a spy who was a spy who was a spy.

Snape had got used to watching over Potter, like he'd got used to all the unpleasant things in his life.
It wasn't as simple now as it had been earlier. This past year, he'd started to notice a change in Potter. A subtle one, but a change nevertheless. Albus had said it was simply a part of growing up. Snape hadn't been so sure about that. He'd seen that look in other people's eyes, and knew Potter was going towards a place no one wanted to see.

The night he'd found the sleeping boy outside his chambers had been full of surprises. Potter had managed to actually impress him. When he'd been in that dark place years ago, he'd tried every possible way to hide and dull the terrible ache. Potter had come looking for help. That said something about his strength. Probably stubbornness, but that was something too. Snape had also been stunned by the way he'd agreed to see Potter if necessary.

Maybe he'd got soft in his old age. Then again, probably not.

Potter needed help now more than ever. Snape didn't especially want to be the one giving it, but if the boy chose him, he couldn't say no. Didn't mean he would join the already enormous choir praising for Potter's skills and intelligence. He'd rather hex himself with an Unforgivable. Probably all of them.

So he'd agreed to be the rock Potter had better not lean on, the shoulder he definitely didn't want anyone to cry on. If Potter wanted him to listen, he would. It wouldn't take long for him to realize he'd chosen badly and run to be coddled by the Headmaster.

When Potter had chickened out, Snape had been relieved, wondering what would happen next. It hadn't taken long to figure that out, and then he'd simply settled into waiting again. Earlier today he'd known the waiting was over. Potter's expression as he'd come back from Hogsmeade had told him he was close to the breaking point again.

Instead of going to bed, he'd stayed up late, waiting for a call.

Now he was waiting for the boy himself. He'd called a few minutes ago. It wasn't all that clear why he wasn't here yet, but Snape wasn't worried. The fool probably didn't know how to floo in from the Gryffindor tower.

All powerful and knowing Harry Potter, the shining beacon in the endless night. Right. A stuttering fool who had come to his class completely unprepared. Even Granger, who was as far from a pureblood as one could get, had known all the answers to his questions that first day.

Up until his fourth year, Potter had survived through every threat on his life by sheer dumb luck. That, and the help from others, him included. After that, he'd been on his own from time to time, showing some promise.

Still, Snape wasn't convinced.

Seeing Harry Potter stumble out of his fireplace a moment later, coughing and spitting soot all over his rug didn't really help. Snape raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

"Sorry about that." Still coughing, Harry looked at the mess he'd made on the floor. He wondered if he should grab his wand and tried to think of a way to clean up both the floor and himself. Nothing came to mind. He could only think that this was one more thing he was failing, and that he really, really hated flooing.

Snape watched the boy stand there looking utterly lost. He waited for a moment, but when it seemed he was just going to continue standing there, he sighed, and then muttered the most rudimentary cleaning charm, making the soot disappear.
Looking relieved, Harry brushed his hand against his now clean shirt. He was glad Snape had taken care of the mess, because quite frankly, he didn't think he could really do anything as complicated as tie his own shoelaces right now, never mind remembering any charms.

It had been difficult enough to get himself floo here. When he'd managed to contact Snape, and the man had actually agreed to see him, everything had gone a bit blurry. Worse than ever, he needed to share things with someone, needed to talk about what was really going on with him.

Now that he was here, he had no idea what to do.

He'd never had an opportunity like this. Talking to any of the Dursleys would have been suicidal. They'd have probably locked him inside the cupboard and left him there. No one in the wizarding world would really want him to talk about his dark feelings. They all needed to see him the way everyone here did; a hero. Not as he really was.

"Sit down, Potter. You still look like a complete idiot standing there." Taking in the rather weird attire Potter was wearing -- his pajama bottoms and a dark burgundy sweater -- Snape gestured at a chair across from the one he was sitting on.

Harry sat down, but even that position didn't really make him feel less of an idiot. He was used to Snape's scathing words, though, and they didn't hurt him. His own thoughts did.

There was a silence. A long, uncomfortable, ugly silence surrounding them both. Snape was familiar with silence. The only sound inside his quarters was usually the rustling of pages being turned or the bubbling of a potion being brewed on the fire. He enjoyed the silence, revelled in it. It was different with Harry. Silence could be a good thing, but this reminded him of all the things from the past. The place he'd never learned to call home no matter how many years he'd lived there. School, where everyone had known just what price they'd pay for befriending Dudley's cousin.

Fidgeting uncomfortably in the surprisingly comfortable chair, he finally blurted out, "Are you ever scared, sir?"

Snape wondered if Potter really expected him to answer. He was here to listen, not to answer questions. Seeing the way the boy squirmed in the chair, he rolled his eyes. Why on earth couldn't he show some of his Gryffindor courage now without idiotic small talk? He glowered at the boy, but tilted his head ever so slightly. No explanations.

"Then you know." Sounding relieved, Harry stopped the fidgeting. He could do this. "I... I don't want to be, but I am. Of everything."

His chest hurt. After all this time of keeping his mouth shut and hiding all the fear and pain and doubts, he was feeling almost light headed. "It used to be so damn simple. Winning in Quidditch, winning the House Cup. Defeating Voldemort's latest scheme. I never saw it as it really was; it was just my life. Being a hero. The great Seeker. The great Harry Potter."

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched as if wanting to curl up. He didn't smile, even though hearing the boy say that was definitely hilarious. It had come out with exactly the same tone he always used when saying it; loaded with sarcasm and disgust.

Snape realized the tone was even more familiar than he'd thought as Potter continued listing all the things people usually said about him. He didn't really need to listen to this; it was all nauseatingly familiar to him. He concentrated on Potter's voice. The tired, brutal tone of it.

It reminded him of the time he'd crawled back to Hogwarts, his pride as shredded as his robes. There
had been blood on his hands, on his clothes, everywhere. The cries of the dying Muggles had finally broken his resolve to walk his chosen path till the end.

He'd never expected Dumbledore to let him in, but there he'd been, standing in the opulent rooms of the Headmaster, shivering with shame and fear. Dumbledore had offered him food and drink, which he'd refused, and then asked him to tell him what was wrong.

Would have been easier to tell him what wasn't, because everything had been so wrong. Snape had told him that and more, talking until his throat had felt like parchment, with words still bubbling out. He had been rather horrified by the way he couldn't stop saying things he hadn't really even admitted to himself before that.

Now it seemed Harry Potter had reached that state.

Harry finished with his list, the words stumbling out. He sat there, shivering. Remembering how pleased those two witches at the Three Broomsticks had been to be able to buy him drinks. As if he'd ever done anything worthy of such worship.

"I'm not." He looked into Snape's eyes for the first time since he'd sat down, seeing no emotion in the black depths. He was rather surprised there was no glee in there. That was what he'd been expecting. "I'm just... Me. And I'm scared."

"Of failing?" Seeing the lost expression on Potter, Snape couldn't keep that unsaid. He knew what a silence would bring now. Shame and confusion he could deal with. Tears and hysteria were another thing.

Harry nodded, looking unsure of himself. "That too. Of showing them all I'm nothing but a 'child with not enough brain or talent to be deserving of such praise'."

The amusement tried to gain an upper hand over Snape's control again. He could recognize the obvious quote as one of his own.

"But that's not the big issue. I'm not *that* self centered. If I fail, it means all the people I love die. We'll all die, probably right here, trying to protect Hogwarts. All my friends, my housemates, the teachers." Harry's expression was stony now. "It'll mean that everything will go to hell. Everyone will die. Because of me." Seeing Snape open his mouth, he shook his head. "Don't. That's what it will be, because Voldemort is fixated on me and we both know if he wins, it's because I wasn't strong enough."

Snape didn't really agree with that, but he nodded anyway. Yes, The Dark Lord did have a fixation on the boy, but Harry was wrong about not being strong enough. Before this night Snape would have agreed without a second thought. Now he wasn't so sure anymore.

Not waiting for any answer, Harry went on, "I've known he'll try to kill me all this time, but... Everyone's talking about this being the big year. My last year here. And everyone thinks he'll attack Hogwarts in a couple of months. But what if he doesn't? What if he waits till I'm not here anymore? If I'm somewhere alone. I've never wanted to become an Auror, but... The Ministry is probably the safest place after Hogwarts. Can't play professional Quidditch, 'cause that would be like placing myself on a plate. Can't really travel or have a life. Can't do anything."

He didn't even know what he wanted to do. Couldn't really stay at Hogwarts for years and years, even if it was probably closest to what he might want to.

It was ridiculous, really. With his name, he could do anything he wanted. All doors would open
before him, whether he deserved it or not. If he wanted, he could probably get any position in the
Ministry, or even become the first ever human member of Gringotts board of directors.

All the others were worried about passing the N.E.W.T.s with good grades. His only reason to study
for them was to see the bright look in Sirius' eyes. That was it.

Snape understood the boy well. His was the other side of the coin. Hogwarts was the only place he
was accepted. Thinking about the rest of the wizarding world usually brought a cynical chuckle out
of him. If he weren't a professor here, he would barely be tolerated. He didn't say it wasn't by his
own doing. After all, he'd chosen to follow Voldemort of his own free, however juvenile, will.

With Potter, the scorn and suspicious looks would be worship and praise. He wasn't sure if those
were any easier to bear.

"Have you thought about the possibility that you might win against the Dark Lord?" Snape had to
ask.

He was answered by a broken laughter. Harry muffled the sound, not wanting to let go of the last
thread of control he had over the hysteria. "Yeah. I have. It'll be even worse if I'm the one killing
Voldemort. I hope it'll be someone else. Anyone else." He was quiet. Then the sadness was back.
"But I don't think so. Professor Trelawney's always babbling about destinies written in the cards and
other crap, but... It's like everything's pointing at me. That killing Voldemort really is my destiny."

Once again, Snape nodded. This time Potter was absolutely correct. Mostly because now that he was
old enough, no one else would even think about going against the Dark Lord. Even those fighting
for the Order seemed to think of Potter that way.

Fawkes with his golden red feathers was the banner under which they worked and fought.
Dumbledore their true leader. But Potter was the symbol, the figurehead. It would have to be him
taking the lead when time came, and then the whole wizarding world would follow.

Harry looked at Snape again, his face contorted in disgust. "Can you imagine how it will be then? If
I prove everyone's expectations were right? That I'm a perfect person, who triumphs over everything.
People will never leave me alone. Will never let me be me."

The pain in his voice surprised even Harry himself. He kept staring at Snape, wondering if he
understood any of the things he was saying. Realizing he probably did. "Why is everything so simple
for them?"

Shrugging, Snape remained silent.

"They see you, and all they see is the Dark Mark." Ignoring the slight wince ghosting over the man's
features as well as the burning rage in his eyes that followed, Harry went on. He raised his hand on
his forehead, fingers brushing against the lightning bolt shaped scar. "And they see this when they
look at me. Sometimes... Sometimes I almost wish I hadn't survived at all. Or that when the final
fight comes, he'll just kill me."

Snape couldn't keep the shock out of his face. Truth to be told, he didn't even try. He looked at the
stunned expression on Potter and realized it was probably the first time the boy had allowed those
words out.

It was clear to him now, why he'd never spoken of these things to anyone. Potter had said no one
else would understand, but up until now, Snape had rather doubted it. Now he had to agree with
him. Even Dumbledore wouldn't. Not really. He would listen, and he would feel awful for the boy.
Then he'd try to help somehow.

That was the thing.

No one could help. No one could take the pain or the doubts or the fear away. No coddling or praise or a box full of Sherbet Lemons could make Harry Potter feel any better.

Harry had clamped his mouth shut, holding his hands over it as to make sure no other words escaped. His eyes were dilated, his expression shocked.

Then he convulsed, bending almost in two. A harsh sound left him. Then another. Moving his arms to hug himself, he sat there and laughed. It was a hysterical laughter, one that had been brewing inside of him for a long time. His chest heaved with every sound struggling to get out, eyes tearing up. He simply couldn't stop.

Snape watched him laugh. He knew this was just the beginning. At least it had been like that long ago, when he'd finally let go.

There was no real joy in Harry's laughter. He had no idea what was making him laugh. It wasn't Snape. The man hadn't said anything or done anything. Even now, he was sitting there like a statue.

It couldn't be his words either, because they'd been horrible. Like a betrayal of everything; his father, who'd tried to keep his family safe from Voldemort, his mother who had died for him. All the people who just wanted to be happy and alive and kept him in a prison worse than Azkaban with their praise. There was nothing to laugh about in his stupid words.

Because he didn't really want to die. He just wanted all the confusion to end. Wanted not to hurt anymore. And the laughter sounded so strange in his ears, almost like crying.

He didn't even realize he was sobbing now.

It was the moment Snape had been dreading; the complete meltdown. He'd known it would come, but didn't want to be the one dealing with a crying Potter. He didn't want to go there and do anything. Didn't want to hold the boy, didn't know what good that would do. Probably nothing. Potter wouldn't want his consolations even if he knew how to show something like that with a touch.

Snape raised his wand and with a flick of his wrist and a softly spoken word a box of tissues appeared on Potter's lap. That was the best he could think of.

Hot tears were running down Harry's face, and the movement to wipe them off was purely instinctual. Glad for the tissues, he mopped his face dry only to repeat it a moment later, placing his glasses on the near by table. It seemed his insides had turned into liquid, because he just couldn't stop crying.

He didn't know why he was crying. Couldn't find any reason for the overwhelming sadness in him. There were too many reasons, too many memories he could pick, and they were all causing this. Harry didn't even feel the emptiness anymore. All he could feel was weariness.

A yawn broke through the tears. He was so damn tired of everything. If only he could just fall asleep and forget everything for even a short while. He curled on the chair, wondering if he could simply close his eyes and not think of anything.

"Sleep." It was as if Snape could read his mind. "You can stay here for the night."

Harry smiled a little, his lower lip wobbling. Sleeping sounded so good. He wiped his face one more
time, not even realizing the tears had finally ended. Snuggling against the armrest, he dropped the box and the used tissues on the floor. He couldn't really care about them now. All he could think of was to sleep. Hopefully there would be no dreams.

A suffering sigh echoed in the room. Snape cleaned up the mess again, and then muttered softly, "Engorgio!" He sneered a little as the simple chair enlarged. It would be extremely annoying if Potter fell from his rather idiotic choice of resting place in the middle of the night and woke him up.

Snape watched Potter curl into a small ball and knew he'd sleep through the night. Probably through the next day as well if he had been suffering from insomnia. He had no idea whether he was still spending his nights walking around the castle; didn't really know about Potter's personal life, and was quite sure he didn't want to.

Unless he caught him breaking the rules again.

Shaking his head a little, he got up. It was time for him to get some sleep as well. Before walking to the door, he stopped by his houseguest and laid a blanket on top of him. No one could say he was a poor host, at least.

"Nox." Extinguishing the lights, he padded to his bedroom, casting a ward on the doorway just in case Potter woke up in the middle of the night and decided to snoop.

He still left the door slightly ajar.

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Part 7

Even though there were no windows in the dungeon, Snape knew exactly what time it was when he finally woke up after a night of fitful sleep.

Probably because he always woke up at the same time. Unless, of course he'd spent the whole night brewing a potion. Then his daily rhythm went to hell in a handbasket, making him really annoyed.

Not that anyone would notice the difference.

Snape lay in bed, his eyes closed, enjoying the one perfectly calm moment of the day. Soon he'd have to get up and start doing something. It might be Sunday, but his work never ended. He had Slytherins to look after, Order business to take care of. Potions to brew, both for the Order and for Poppy, who still needed potions for idiots who managed to get the cold.

At least it was over a week till the next full moon. He didn't have to worry about the Wolfsbane potion. That was something.

Lying in complete silence, Snape suddenly remembered he was not alone. The thought made him jolt up. He sat there, trying to listen for any sounds coming from his living room showing that Potter was awake. If the boy was, he was probably scared as hell by now.

Snape had agreed to let him floo into his room, but he had replaced the ward on his floo after Potter's last visit. There was no way out of his rooms without his permission.

He sighed. It would be so easy to let Potter run again, both for him and the boy. He didn't really want to talk to him or hear any embarrassed apologies.

There was really no choice for Snape. He'd taken this responsibility willingly -- even though not gladly -- so he'd have to make sure Potter didn't leave until he was all right. Or at least not worse.
That meant talking. Minimal sarcasm.

Some days, Severus Snape simply hated his life.

Moving quietly, he went through his morning routines. He was glad there was no evidence of movement from the other room. He needed this time to prepare for what was going to happen next.

His sense of responsibility had forced him to listen to Potter. That and the memory of a foolish young Death Eater who had almost destroyed his life all those years ago. There had been someone who'd listened to him then. This was simply another way to pay back, even if deep inside he knew nothing he did could ever repay Albus' kindness.

Snape wished Potter had been sensible enough to go to the Headmaster. That way he wouldn't be in this situation. Wouldn't have to think about his own past and all the emotions that had almost drowned him. Wouldn't have to see Potter like this.

He didn't want to get involved with his student's personal problems, not if he didn't have to. He'd do anything for his Slytherins, but Potter wasn't even one of those; he was a darn Gryffindor. He should have gone to Minerva, and then Minerva would be the one seeing all this. Seeing Harry Potter as a person, as a human being.

A thing Snape definitely didn't need to see.

Finishing dressing, Snape walked quietly to his living room, lighting just enough candles to see where he was going. He didn't want to wake Potter up in case he was still sleeping.

The loud snoring revealed that was indeed the case. He went to check on the sleeping boy, watching him for a moment. It was a sight he'd never thought to see. It was over sixteen years since the war, but he could still remember it well. He'd known that on the last days of this war, the Order would have to work hard, sending operatives on missions together.

He'd even been prepared to work with Potter. It would have been the most intelligent thing Albus could order. The hope of the wizarding world, and the one most prepared to counter Dark Magic. They would have undoubtedly seen different sides of each other then.

Not like this, though.

Shaking his head at the whole situation, Snape went to the fireplace. He needed to talk to Dumbledore.

He used a simple *incendio* charm to light the fire in the fireplace and then called out for the Headmaster, waiting patiently till Dumbledore's face appeared. "Albus. I need to talk to you."

"Yes. I rather thought you might." The Headmaster didn't seem surprised. It always seemed like he knew exactly what he was thinking. "How is Harry doing?"

Snape smiled cynically. "As well as can be expected. He's tired, Albus. Like I was when I first came back to Hogwarts." He could tell by the saddened expression that Dumbledore knew exactly what he was talking about. "I think it's best if he stays here for a while."

"Of course. Are you all right with that, Severus?" Dumbledore was too smart to let it just be.

"Yes." It was strange, but it was the truth. Snape figured it could be worse. It could be Neville Longbottom snivelling in his room. "I don't really mind."
He was quite surprised when it wasn't a lie. He didn't mind. Potter might be annoying, but he hadn't been as intolerable as he'd thought he would be. The boy even had intelligence he had never showed in Potions class or during his idiotic wandering around the school. That alone had been quite astonishing, but it had stunned Snape to realize Potter hated the way people saw him. He'd always been so sure Potter loved all the praise and attention. How curious to find himself to be so wrong about that.

"Would you inform his friends he's all right?" He didn't want to do it himself. Albus would be able to think of an excuse the Gryffindors would swallow.

Dumbledore nodded. "I'll do it right away." His eyes twinkled. "Take good care of him, Severus."

Snape just snorted at that. Of course he would.

When Dumbledore's face disappeared, he stood there for a moment. He still had no idea what to say to Potter when he woke up. Didn't know any kind words or excuses, knew only the truth. The blunt, naked truth.

He turned around, and then froze, meeting a clear green gaze. Harry Potter was awake. He didn't seem to know what to say either. That would probably be the recurring theme of this morning, for both of them.

"Morning, sir." His voice a bit rough, Harry managed to get the words out as he sat up. He felt like a dwarf in the chair. It was obviously because the chair had grown during the night, since everything else seemed to be the right size. He felt a little fuzzy, last night's memories all jumbled up inside his mind. He could remember coming here and babbling like a loon, but after that, everything was hazy.

Snape nodded. "Good morning, Potter. I suggest you go and clean up while I get us some breakfast."

Anything to buy some time.

"Sounds like a good idea, sir." Harry struggled with the blanket he didn't remember ever seeing before, and got up. Realizing he was still wearing his pajama bottoms and a shirt, he added, "Could I..." No. There was no way he could ask Snape for clothes he could borrow. "I think I should go and get some clothes." That was better.

"I'll get you a robe you can wear." Snape was definitely not going to let Potter off that easily. He knew if he allowed him to leave, he'd never come down here again. That wouldn't exactly be a bad thing under other circumstances, but then again this was far from over.

Harry decided it was wiser not to say anything to that. He simply went to take a shower.

The face that greeted him in the mirror looked like it belonged to a scarecrow. A very efficient one at that, guaranteed to keep anyone away from him. His reflection stayed still, not making any comments on his appearance. Either it was charmed not to move, or it was too scared to actually say anything. After all, Harry didn't think Snape would take comments about his looks kindly.

His eyes were still red, his face paler than usual. It was quite obvious he'd been crying. The memory hit him, making him wince. Yes, he'd been acting like a real idiot last night. He could handle the babbling, but to think that he'd cried in front of Snape... The man must think he's a git right now.

Harry shrugged at that, turning away from his reflection. Snape had always thought he was a git, so no change there. That was the whole point coming to him. After six and a half years listening to that man hand out insults there was nothing Snape could say to hurt him.

Feeling quite disgusted in his clothes, Harry stripped, and then stepped into the small shower stall.
He turned the water as hot as his skin could bear, and let it wash away his stiffness. Even a magically enlarged chair was still a chair. He stood there for a long time, just enjoying the water, thinking nothing. Eventually he had to come back to reality, and he wiped the water from his face, reaching out for the bottles on the ledge.

It hit him that he was in professor Snape's shower as he grabbed one of the bottles. Using his soap. It was almost surreal.

He let out a laugh, relieved when it sounded like normal mirth and not hysterical. Still chuckling, he rubbed the soap on his skin, squinting his eyes after that to read the labels on the other bottles.

First some shampoo, then the conditioner. The latter bottle made him raise an eyebrow. He wished he could show it to Ron. His friend was certain Snape had never even heard of such a thing.

A brief flash of guilt went through him. After all, Snape had let him stay, had listened to his insane rambling. Hadn't chopped him into small slices and made a potion out of him. It wasn't really fair of him to be laughing at someone who'd shown him hospitality, even if he was a greasy Potions master.

There was a slight smile on his face as he rinsed the suds off.

As he stepped out of the stall, he noticed there was a folded black robe waiting for him on the lid of the toilet seat. Snape must have transported it there somehow, because he was certain he would have heard if the door had been opened while he was in the shower. There were also a pair of sweatpants there, a fact he was grateful for.

He'd been living with Muggles too long to be completely comfortable wearing just a robe. Especially now.

Harry didn't hurry getting dressed. He was sure Snape wasn't exactly holding his breath waiting for him either. Looking into the mirror, he was glad to see he looked better. Sure, his hair hung wet and limp around his face, but at least he didn't look all that pale and miserable anymore.

It was still difficult to leave the bathroom.

He glanced around as he stepped back into Snape's living room. It was as if he was seeing it for the first time. The two times he'd been in here had left him with no clear memory of the place. He was surprised by the way the room looked normal. No damp dark walls and jars of weird stuff anywhere. The professor probably kept all his ingredients either in his office or in the large cupboard next to the door.

Another illusion shattered. Snape's place looked warm, even inviting. Bookshelves covering two of the walls. Calm, earthy colors. Mostly green. No surprise there.

Snape had been busy while he'd been taking the shower, shrinking the chair back to its normal size and ordering them breakfast. Realizing he was actually hungry, Harry sat on the chair and looked at his host. He didn't want to seem overly rude by attacking the tray on the table.

"Eat." A sharp command. "You must be starving." Snape had been watching the boy, and noticed he wasn't eating well lately. He was quite certain Potter had been stuffing himself with various products from Honeydukes yesterday and had forgone a proper meal.

Not bothering to even act like he wasn't hungry, Harry grabbed a plate with sausages. There seemed to be a lot of food there, enough to feed the Weasleys. The house elves must have been ecstatic to be able to prepare the meal.
Snape sipped his tea, nibbling his sandwich while Potter wolfed down an enormous amount of food. He had to keep a straight face at that. It was strange to be on this side, remembering similar incidents of his youth. Never a glutton, he'd actually been ravenous whenever he'd spent the previous night fighting his demons in Dumbledore's rooms.

He was relying on those memories now, to make him understand what the boy was going through. Wizard psychology had never been his strong point. Psychotic episodes were a different thing completely.

Pouring himself another cup of tea, he realized Harry had stopped eating. The boy was holding his glass, but instead of drinking his pumpkin juice, he was staring into the dark liquid.

It was time to stop hiding and start talking.

"Do you remember what happened last night?" Probably the best way to begin; mostly because it was quite probable there were gaps in Potter's memory. There had been pain and sadness, but also a hint of rage in him. That combination usually didn't leave coherent memories.

Harry startled at the quiet voice, almost spilling his juice. He looked up at Snape and nodded. "Yeah, I do." When it seemed like he was expected to embellish, he added, "I flooed in and then... Talked. About stuff. About me being scared."

"Yes. You remember what happened after that?" Seeing the uncomfortable look and the nod on Potter, Snape hastened to say, "Good. Then we don't have to recount the whole thing."

That had been the most painful thing with Dumbledore. To go over what he'd said, word for word, because he couldn't remember any of it. That kind of helplessness could break a man. It had almost broken him.

"No!" Harry could handle living without that, thank you very much.

Snape sat quietly for a moment. He knew exactly what he wanted to say next; he just wasn't certain how to phrase it. "You do know I can't give you any answers to your problems. Can't say anything to make it feel better."

This time Harry did spill some of the juice. Fortunately it landed on his hand. Putting the glass on the table, he licked his hand clean, and then fixed his gaze firmly on the floor. "Yes, sir."

"However, I can listen if you need to talk, and maybe even give some advice. But that's the extent of it." Snape knew everyone had to make their own decisions, but it still annoyed him. He was used to making potions, where one needed exact amounts of ingredients. It was precise, unlike this.

Harry kept his gaze on the floor. "I appreciate it, sir. I really do." No matter how stupid it made him feel. At least it didn't make him feel all unworthy and suicidal, so it was a good thing.

"There is one thing I can tell you. You said you don't want to live with all the expectations of our world, and that whatever will happen with Vol... He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named will doom you." It was weird, but even now, Snape couldn't utter his former Master's name.

Not paying any attention to the slip, Harry nodded. "Yes." He was rather surprised Snape had actually got any of the things he'd said. To him, the words were a confusing mess. "That's the way it feels."

"I see. It must be so difficult and unfair to be expected to be some kind of a messiah." The very familiar sneer was as cruel as ever. "That is life, Potter. No one ever promised it was fair, no
exceptions, not even for the Boy Who Lived. It's up to you to decide what you will do with it. As I see, you can either play a given role, live your own life or simply leave our world."

That was definitely not what Harry had expected. He looked at Snape, his mouth slightly open. "What?"

Snape didn't even bother to hide his amusement. "You heard me. You have to decide what's most important to you; fame, your life, or running away. Your choice. No one else can choose for you."

It had been his choice once. He'd been stunned by Dumbledore's blunt words back then, but they had made him think. In the end he'd chosen to live instead of hiding or drowning in darkness that held no real glory.

Harry nodded slightly, seeing Snape's point. It wasn't hard to make a decision if those three were his options. Keeping that decision would be hell.

There was nothing else Snape had to say to him, no other advice. Potter would have to try to use his head for once and choose. How terrifying that the fate of the wizarding world should hang on such a thing, because there was no way of telling which way he'd go. If he truly was the way Snape had feared, he'd continue being a hero, continue riding on his fame. Albus seemed to be betting on Potter being true to himself. But there was always the third option. Choosing a life away from all that could hurt or even kill him.

A coward's choice, Snape would say, except he had contemplated the same thing before joining Dumbledore's fight.

Feeling the silence stretch enough to become rather awkward, Harry squirmed. "Thank you. For listening. And the advice." It had been the first time anyone had said it out loud, and he couldn't resent Snape even for the barely veiled insults he'd included there.

He didn't want to talk about it anymore, needing to get out of here now. It was too real and too raw and he had to go to his friends and not think about this for a moment. Maybe even fly a little; soaring high in the sky on his Firebolt was the most soothing thing he knew.

Snape could read the need to escape between the lines and nodded. "You're welcome, Potter. I believe you can manage to find your way back to the Gryffindor tower. Even you can't get lost in here anymore, I assume." The sarcasm was accompanied by an eyebrow that climbed even higher as Snape saw Harry's scowl.

Amazingly, though, he didn't reduce House points for Potter being insolent with expressions.

Standing up, Harry gathered his things with him. He was a bit surprised to find out he'd left his wand back in the dormitory. It made him realize just how messed up he'd been last night. First rule of the Order; never lose your wand. This was the second time he managed that inside a month.

Dumbledore would be so disappointed in him.

The thought made him grimace. No matter how he tried, there was always a small voice reminding him of that. It would be extremely difficult for him to get his head straight.

"Potter." Snape had seen the strange expression. He knew things were far from clear, and decided to do something to make sure there would be no more nightly visits. "You have double Potions on Tuesday."

Harry nodded. He didn't know what brought that up. "Yes, after lunch." The dreaded Potions class
that usually took away Neville's appetite. "Why?"

"I think you'd better come here afterwards." Snape's voice was unreadable. "Do your homework in peace. Spend some time alone. Think about things."

"You mean talk about stuff that's making me nuts." If Snape wanted blunt, he'd get blunt. Harry knew what he meant. "I think..." He had to actually think about that. Did he want to come back to talk to Snape? Actually, yes. The previous night had scared him, the depth of his own misery frightening. He didn't want to end up like that again. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Snape had waited patiently; rather pleased Potter would actually think it through before agreeing or declining. How unlike a proper Gryffindor. "Good. You will remain after the class then." He watched the boy nod and walk to the door.

Before opening the door, Harry stopped and turned back to Snape. He needed to know one thing. "Are you going to make me scrub more cauldrons as well?" He could have sworn there was a flicker of amusement in Snape's eyes as he shook his head minutely. "Oh. Then why? Why are you doing this?" Why was the man being so... Not exactly nice, but not acting like a total bastard either.

"Because, Mr. Potter, when I was in the same situation as you are, I wasn't smart enough to ask for help before it was almost too late." Snape's words came out coldly, almost on their own volition. "When I did, someone listened."

It was quite clear to Harry who that someone had been. He thought of a younger Snape talking to the Headmaster and wondered how difficult it must have been on both of them. But at least Dumbledore hadn't had any great expectations of Snape, like everyone seemed to have of him. "I understand, sir. Well... Bye." With that, he hurried out of the room.

Even though he knew the boy wouldn't hear him, Snape said, "Good bye, Mr. Potter."

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Part 8

Ron was getting more worried with every minute that passed by.

He'd woken up early, feeling wonderful. It was still Hogsmeade weekend, and now that most of the third years were probably sick with all the sweets they'd eaten, there'd be peace and quiet in the small village. At least until the youngsters realized they could go to Madam Pomfrey for some potion guaranteed to cure even the worst stomachache.

The joy had faded a bit when he'd seen that Harry's bed was empty. It looked like it had been slept in, so maybe Harry was downstairs, sitting in the common room chatting with someone. Probably Neville. He was always up early on Hogsmeade weekends.

He hadn't been able to find Harry anywhere in the entire tower. He'd made sure by banging on doors, waking everybody up. Hermione -- who had fortunately been already up -- had come up with the idea of checking Harry's belongings. The absence of the invisibility cloak would suggest he was once again walking through the corridors looking for something.

The cloak had been in its place in the trunk. There had been something else, too. Ron's eyes had widened as he'd realized Harry had left his wand behind. Something his friend would never do.

Almost frantic with fear, he'd grabbed Hermione's arm and rushed towards the Headmaster's office dragging her with him. They needed to alert Dumbledore immediately. Harry was probably kidnapped, by Death Eaters, or worse.
Even after all the meetings up in the Headmaster's quarters, Ron was still feeling a bit strange being able to bark out the password and just walk up the stairs. This time he didn't hesitate at all. Harry was in trouble.

"Mr. Weasley. Miss. Granger." Dumbledore looked up at them as they stumbled into the airy offices. "We've been expecting you." He made a gesture towards the small pot. "Tea?"

It was definitely not the time to sit down and share pleasantries. Ron shook his head.

Hermione stared at the Headmaster and professor McGonagall, who were both sitting calmly at a table, drinking tea. "So you know Harry's missing? How? Where is he? Is he all right?"

Since Hermione had already asked the most important questions, Ron settled into simply nodding.

Strange, how this room always seemed to help him calm down. It was probably the atmosphere with the previous Headmasters dozing off in the portraits on the walls, most of them not paying any attention to what was going on. They'd got used to such meetings by now.

"Yes. Yes, he's fine." Pouring himself more tea, Dumbledore smiled calmly. "He will probably stay away for a couple of hours more and then join you all for lunch. Nothing to worry about. Harry is quite safe." His voice was hushed, the way it always seemed to be these days.

Ron smiled, relieved. If Dumbledore said everything was all right, then it had to be. Then he remembered something and his face fell. "Sir! We found his wand near his bed. If he's gone somewhere he could be in danger!" He was still stunned by the way Harry had just left his wand behind. It was the first thing they'd been taught in DADA.

"I see." His voice a bit firmer, Dumbledore shared a knowing look with McGonagall, who was looking worried now as well. "Well, I'm certain there's a good explanation for it," he mused out loud before sipping his tea again.

"But sir..."

Hermione nudged Ron, silencing him efficiently. "Come on, Ron. We should be going." She was pretty sure the Headmaster wouldn't tell them anything more. "We should go back to the common room and wait for Harry."

Wanting to protest, Ron glared at her, but then realized she was right. There was nothing for them to do here. Dumbledore was obviously not worried, so they shouldn't be either. Didn't mean he was feeling calm, but he could try.

He nodded at the Headmaster and then walked to the door, Hermione in tow. It wasn't like Harry to disappear like this. Even when he went out for a walk, he took his cloak and definitely his wand with him. When Harry came back, Ron was going to have a few words with him. Then it'd probably turn into a shouting match.

Minerva McGonagall watched the children walk out. When the door slammed shut behind them, she turned to the Headmaster. "Really, Albus. Are you sure he really is safe with Severus? If you are correct, he's in a very fragile state of mind right now, and Severus isn't exactly one to handle him carefully."

"I know." Dumbledore was wondering about that himself. "But he has chosen Severus. I should imagine that after all these years, Harry knows exactly what kind of a man Severus is. We must trust his judgement, Minerva."
"Very well." Her words were agreeing, but her tone most certainly wasn't. She'd have to keep an eye on Harry. After all, it was her responsibility to see that the boy was all right.

He smiled at that, as if reading her thoughts. "More tea?"

Ron wanted to kick the gargoyle as it rolled back to cover the staircase. "I'm gonna kick his miserable butt. Going out without his wand! Wait until I tell my mum. She'll send him a howler."

The harsh words hid a world of fear. No matter what Dumbledore said, he was still worried sick for his friend.

Didn't Harry know it was about time? Everyone was talking about their seventh year being probably the one when Voldemort would attack Hogwarts. They all needed to be ready, not gallivanting around the place wandless.

"At least we know he's still inside the school." Rolling her eyes at Ron's sceptic look, Hermione explained, "The school will protect him even when he doesn't have his wand with him. Dumbledore will know where he is, as long as he's inside these walls." Seeing the blank look on her friend, she huffed. "Honestly!"

She wondered why it was such a surprise to her. It had become clear years ago that both Harry and Ron preferred asking her to actually reading a book. Especially the one telling them all about Hogwarts and its history.

Ron didn't say anything to that. He just started walking back towards the Gryffindor tower, muttering to himself. He hoped Harry was indeed safe.

Walking through the corridors, they passed by the Great Hall. Neither Hermione nor Ron had eaten anything yet. They'd been too worried to eat, heading towards Dumbledore's office without a thought at breakfast.

"You think we could get something to eat?" Remembering it was Sunday, Hermione realized there would still be breakfast served at this hour.

"Sure." Ron was not sure if he could eat, but he knew he should at least try.

The Great Hall was surprisingly full. Most of the third years looked a little green, but they were still stuffing themselves with toast and sausages. Some of the teachers were sitting at the Head Table, talking quietly amongst themselves. Ron noticed their DADA teacher was not there. Neither was Snape.

"Hermione?" Buttering a roll, Ron kept casting suspicious glances at the teachers' table. He looked over his shoulder once, to see if Malfoy and his goons were there. For once, seeing the blond boy and his idiotic shadows made him feel good. At least they didn't have anything to do with Harry's disappearance. Then he turned his attention back to the teachers. "Did you notice professor Pahicna isn't here? What if Harry's with her?"

"Why would he be with the DADA teacher without his wand?" It didn't really make any sense.

Ron nodded absentmindedly at that. Hermione was right. If Harry'd gone to some kind of a private lesson, he would have taken his wand with him. Still, something was nagging at him. He already knew where Dumbledore and McGonagall were. Snape never ate breakfast on weekends anyway. He was probably partly a vampire, working on his damn potions all night through. But the absence of the DADA professor was highly suspicious.

Not because she was especially malicious or anything. Her being a sane, proper teacher would just
go against all odds.

Munching his roll, Ron tried very hard to think why he was feeling so odd. When a loud burst of laughter made him glance at the Slytherin table again, he realized Malfoy was staring at him with a grin on his face.

He glowered, expecting a sharp yet not all that witty comment shouted at him a moment later. To his utter amazement -- and delight -- Malfoy just turned his attention elsewhere. Good. Maybe now he could finish his breakfast in peace.

Draco lowered his gaze back to his plate as Weasley turned to stare at him. He didn't really want to fight right now. Everything was good for once; there had been no letters from his father, and it was peaceful to just eat with Pansy still in the girls' dormitory, sleeping off last night's partying. A fact Blaise was probably grateful for.

He'd been sitting here, eating breakfast. Enjoying the peace and quiet, thinking about stuff. Not the things he couldn't really work on, no, the big issues were best to be left alone. He was thinking about little things that had caught his fancy. Wondering if Crabbe and Goyle would ever be able to leave Hogwarts, even with the extra tutoring Snape provided them every Friday. He was quite certain the answer was no.

Those two would probably still be at Hogwarts when the next generation of Weasleys started their first year. If there still was a Hogwarts. And if any of the Weasleys still lived.

A bad thought. A part of those big things he refused to think about. Instead of contemplating the future, he turned his attention to Ron Weasley. One of the people he really didn't understand.

The Weasleys were pureblood, just like the Malfoys. There weren't all that many families of purebloods left in Britain. Almost none outside Slytherin. To Draco's memory, the Weasleys were even more magical than most of the families, not producing more than one Squib every few generation.

Why, then, were they not in Slytherin? Their poverty couldn't be the explanation. There were other people from poor families in Slytherin. Blaise Zabini was the best example. His family was so insignificant, even the Death Eaters weren't interested in him at this point. Anyone with a brain and ambition could rise to be a very respected member of any wizarding community.

Another line of thought he wasn't keen on following. Pulling his mind away from things like power and Slytherins, he continued thinking about the Weasleys.

They weren't exactly idiots. At least not all of them, though Ron did seem to be rather hotheaded. That made Draco smirk, the first really genuine expression of mirth in some time. Of course the Weasel was hotheaded. It was genetics, apparently. But some of his brothers were doing well in life.

He'd been startled to see Weasley turn and glare him at that moment. Instead of tossing him a nasty comment, Draco had decided not to bother. He didn't want to ruin the morning fighting with Ron Weasley, no matter how fun it usually was.

"Are you coming to Hogsmeade with us this afternoon?"

Draco looked at Goyle, glad that this time he had actually swallowed before speaking. Maybe genetics weren't everything. At least this pureblood seemed to be slipping back in evolution. "I don't know yet." It had been fun to go shopping yesterday, but he just wasn't in the mood right now.

"Come on, Draco. Vince and I want to shop more at Honeydukes'." Goyle's voice was whining
now. "I already ate most of the stuff we bought yesterday, and I think Pansy stole the rest."

That didn't really surprise anyone. "Can't you two go alone?" Draco saw the expected horrified expression and sighed. Sometimes he wondered if his friends really saw the three of them as one unit. One part brains, two parts muscle. "I'll have to think about it."

Goyle seemed to be happy with that. If Draco said no, he'd just whine some more.

Realizing he wouldn't probably be able to lock himself in the dormitory and spend some quality time alone, Draco sighed and then finished his breakfast.

On the other side of the Great Hall, Ron and Hermione were also ready to go. Ron hadn't thought he had any appetite, but once he'd sat down to eat, he'd cleaned his plate in record time. It was a good thing, really. Somehow it was easier to think with a full stomach.

"I think I'll stop by at the library. I couldn't find that book yesterday before Hogsmeade, and I really need to read it before the next Potions class." Hermione sounded a bit worried. She knew that with all her other duties -- mainly working for the Order and being the Head Girl -- she simply didn't have enough time to study anymore. It was only a couple of months till they would be taking their N.E.W.T.s and she had hardly started studying for them.

Ron nodded. He didn't even bother making comments about her being the only person at Hogwarts - with the possible exception of Madam Pince -- who was actually overjoyed by the fact that the library was open seven days a week. "I'll go to see if Harry's back yet."

"I'll be there in a moment." Knowing the trip to the library wouldn't take long, Hermione waved her hand at him and then scurried across the hallway.

The Gryffindor common room was empty when Ron arrived there. He took the stairs three at the time as he rushed to see if Harry was back yet. There was nobody in the dormitory either. Harry's wand was still on top of his trunk.

Ron swore a few chosen oaths at that. He hated this. Hated waiting, not knowing if he was waiting for nothing. He knew Hermione would be calmed by the visit to the library as always, but he didn't want to calm down. He wanted to tear out his hair. Probably even Harry's when he saw him too.

Grabbing a Quidditch magazine, he stomped back downstairs and settled on the couch for his wait.

Some people calm down as they have time to think things through. Some people, but not Ron Weasley. He realized he couldn't even be interested in the Cannons' newest games. He was simply too mad at Harry for pulling a stunt like this, but also at himself for letting his best friend slip away. Again.

He slammed the magazine on the table. It had been quite some time since he'd been this angry. Years since he'd felt like this towards Harry.

When the door finally opened, he looked up casually, thinking it was probably Hermione. Instead of her, he saw Harry stand there in the doorway.

"Hi." Harry stepped inside the room. He'd expected to see Ron waiting for him. Not exactly what he wanted to face right now, but he knew he couldn't hide from his friend.

Ron didn't even realize he'd squeezed his hands into fists. "Hi?" Harry had given him the scare of his life, and all he could say was a bloody 'hi'? "You left your wand upstairs. When you left."
It was worse than anger, because when Ron was angry, he shouted and waved his hands in the air and threatened to punch something or someone. If the issue was Malfoy, he didn't stop at threatening.

This was silent rage.

"I know, I'm sorry." It sounded rather lame in Harry's ears. He didn't know how to explain it to Ron. He'd had to go. Couldn't tell anyone about it for the same reason he hadn't had much choice in to whom he could talk to. Ron wouldn't understand the need any more than he would understand his fears.

Ron forced himself to relax. There was something wrong with the way Harry sounded. It was weird, since just yesterday, he'd been fine. Now he sounded tired. It wasn't like him.

Suddenly he felt most of the anger slip away, replaced by even more worry. "Can you tell me about it?" He didn't want to think about the possible reasons for Harry's disappearance, but various scenarios were already racing through his mind. "Did something bad happen?"

"No. I mean... No, I can't talk about it." The most difficult fact was that it wasn't even a lie. Harry shook his head slightly. "And no, nothing bad happened. I just needed... To see someone."

"For Merlin's sake! Just tell me you didn't sneak out of our rooms in the middle of the night without your wand to see some girl!"

It sounded so like Ron, Harry had to smile at that. "No. Definitely didn't go to see some girl. I swear." His smile got even wider as he imagined Snape's expression if he knew what he was thinking right now, even though if Snape ever found out he was making private jokes about him being a girl, he wouldn't want to be there to see his face.

"Good." At least his best friend wasn't a complete twit. Ron got to his feet. "Just don't do it again. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

Harry felt a twinge of guilt. He hadn't really thought anyone would notice he'd been gone. "Okay."

Rather surprised how the rest of the anger had left him after just a few words, Ron smiled a little. "You know you can always talk to me, right? And to Hermione."

"I know." Harry nodded, knowing it was a lie. But a necessary one. He'd just have to make sure the others wouldn't have to go looking for him again.

"You want to go to Hogsmeade?" When Ron saw the shake of head, he shrugged. It didn't matter. He'd already spent all the money he had, and didn't really want to go walking around shops when he couldn't buy anything. Didn't want to give Malfoy any fodder for new insults. "You wanna play some chess?" Always a safe option.

"So you really want to punish me." Harry faked a resigned expression before grinning. "Sure. I'll just go and get my wand."

Without further words, he headed towards the dormitory for his wand. If he was quick enough, he could even change his clothes. Ron was too focused on his safe return to ask anything, but Hermione noticed everything.

He definitely didn't want to have to explain where he'd got the robe.
The rest of the weekend passed rather quickly. Harry spent all his time with Ron and Hermione, trying to make them stop worrying about him. It was rather nerve wracking. He couldn't just tell them to stop, because then he'd have to acknowledge the fact that maybe there was something to worry about.

He was actually relieved to see another week begin. Sure, it meant facing yet another Monday with Divinations and Care of Magical Creatures and even the exhausting History of Magic class. It also meant that he was forced to think about something other than his problems.

How disturbing to find that he actually wanted to go to classes. That he needed the distraction.

Even professor Trelawney's predictions didn't annoy him as much as usual. She spent most of the class on Monday and the double Divinations on Tuesday predicting horrible deaths for her students. It appeared that ever since her rather persistent cold earlier that year, Trelawney had become even more morbid than before.

Harry was still relieved when the class ended. He'd never really got used to the overpowering stench of incense in the Divinations class. It always made his head hurt. He was feeling slightly nauseous when they marched into the Great Hall; he definitely didn't have any appetite now.

"At least we won't have to listen to Lavender and Parvati giggle for another two hours." Stabbing his meatloaf with his fork as if trying to kill it, Ron glared at the other end of the table where the two girls were whispering to each other, laughing quietly. "I think professor Trelawney has finally gone mad." Predicting ways Harry was going to die and then spending the rest of the class telling the girls how to read tea leaves for future spouses.

The woman was demented.

"I know. She's barmy." Harry was glad she had kept to the good old 'death by mutilation' theme with him. Listening to her babble about love and romance was really not something he wanted to do. "But it's the season, you know. Valentine's Day will be here sooner than you think."

Mentioning the dreaded day made Ron grimace. "I'd completely forgot all about that." It meant things would just get worse during Divinations. He even preferred Potions to that. "Damn!"

Harry couldn't agree more. It had been so much easier when he'd been younger, and all the other students hadn't seemed quite that eager to celebrate the holiday. The older he got, the more enthusiastic the people around him got, sending him incredible amounts of heart shaped cards and chocolate. There would be pictures of him on the cover of the Daily Prophet. Articles speculating about his love life.

Sometimes he just hated his life. Recently, 'sometimes' was more like 'all the time'.

He felt a painful twinge deep inside, where thinking about stuff like sugary letters and holidays shouldn't hurt. He closed his eyes for a moment, hoping Ron wouldn't notice him acting strangely again.

It was hard to explain why thoughts like that made him depressed, but the main point was simple. It was once again proving to him that most of the wizarding world saw him through rose colored glasses. They saw whatever great hero they wanted to. Not him; the rather boring skinny young man who just wanted to be with his friends and maybe play some Quidditch.

Knowing he couldn't go to Potions class faint with hunger, Harry forced himself to eat his sandwich. He didn't have any illusions about Snape. The man was a mean bastard, and wouldn't suddenly turn
into a kind person simply because he'd been willing to hear his insane ramblings. Ron was babbling to Hermione, not really paying much attention to Harry. He was glad about it. He wasn't in the mood for a conversation right now.

Because of the class right after lunch, none of the seventh years lingered in the Great Hall. It would have been extremely stupid to give Snape an excuse to reduce House points. Even the Slytherins didn't want to be late. Crabbe and Goyle might be total morons, but they weren't suicidal.

After the last few weeks of classes, everyone was feeling a bit nervous. Snape's grand entry made even Malfoy look hesitant. It was clear that the professor knew exactly what they were all thinking.

Amazingly, the class was quite ordinary. Snape lectured them about the various truth serums and their opposites, the ones that made you lie about everything. Then he made everyone brew a simple latereserum.

Harry concentrated on the potion, trying not to wince as Neville managed to blow up his cauldron once again. He was determined not to lose Gryffindor any points on this class. Apparently his housemates could manage to do that without him.

Since the potion was relatively simple, everyone was eventually able to finish it, even Neville, who looked shocked as they tested the potion. When Ron asked him who was his favorite teacher, he promptly said, "Snape."

It made most of the class titter with laughter. To everyone's surprise, Snape raised an eyebrow, and muttered, "I'm touched."

The fact that Gryffindor lost ten more points because Neville had actually managed to make the potion right didn't surprise anyone.

When the class was finally over, Snape went to wipe the blackboard clean. His back turned to the students, he said, "Potter. Stay. I want to talk to you." He'd hoped the boy would be intelligent enough to cause trouble and earn detention. That way there would have been no explaining and excuses.

Harry was thinking about the same thing now as Ron looked at him with a question in his eyes. There was nothing he could really tell his friend. Snape's part in the fight wasn't common knowledge, not even inside the Order.

So he just shrugged. Waited until the classroom was empty before relaxing again. He couldn't really let anyone see he was actually relieved to be in Snape's company. They'd think he was insane. Hell, he thought he was insane himself. But crazy or not, he couldn't deny that he was feeling a lot better now, after talking to Snape. And now here. Because he could just be. Be himself.

"I need to make some preparations for tomorrow's class." Still busying himself with the blackboard, Snape didn't turn around. "You might want to do your homework while waiting. Unless you've changed your mind." He sounded like he didn't care one way or the other.

They boy didn't need to know that he'd spent quite some time thinking about him. About the fact that no matter how ridiculous it was, the wizarding world really did need Harry Potter, and because of that, he would try to help keep him sane. About the irony of him being the one the boy had turned to.

"Sure." Glad he hadn't put his books away yet, Harry grabbed his parchment and quill. This way he could work in peace.

It was strange, really, to spend time alone with Snape in the classroom, knowing he could leave any
time he wanted. It wasn't detention. No points would be taken from Gryffindor if he decided not to stay after all. Harry had to force himself to concentrate on his homework; otherwise he would have just sat there and stared at Snape.

A little while ago, he would have sworn he hated the man and hadn't trusted him one bit. That had changed somewhere along the line. Perhaps because thinking about the ongoing -- no matter how subtle -- war had made him think about those who'd survived the last one.

Finishing with his homework, Harry let his gaze wander back to Snape. Strange. He'd never thought about Snape as anything but his teacher before, even when he'd heard the man had attended school with his parents. He was more than just a Potions professor, though. He was a survivor.

All the survivors of the first Voldemort reign of terror were somehow broken. Harry could see that. Snape was scarred, not only with the symbol etched on his arm. The suspicion, sarcasm and obvious need for solitude were probably a reminder of that era. His godfather suffered from nightmares and irrational anxieties because of the time he'd spent in Azkaban. Sirius' sanity was most probably thanks to Remus. Without him, he'd still probably be living in Hogsmeade in his Animagus form, eating scraps in the back alleys.

Even the Weasleys showed some signs of old scars that only covered painful wounds. Mrs. Weasley never showed her pain when she thought someone was watching, but Harry had seen it in her eyes.

Sometimes, Harry wondered what Dumbledore had been like before Voldemort. Before Grindelwald. There was a steel hard interior beneath the Headmaster's sometimes rather flimsy appearance. Had it been there from the beginning?

Of all these people, he'd chosen Snape to open up to.

After finishing with his preparations, Snape led Harry to his own rooms. He didn't feel comfortable talking with the boy in the classroom. It belonged to a different world; where he was a teacher and Potter was a student. They had certain roles they had to play there. Potter's problems weren't about schoolwork, even though he would be the first to note that to be a half-truth.

Privacy was important to Snape; some things were his, and his alone, and he guarded that privacy with fervor. Inviting Potter to his rooms was difficult, but he didn't know a better place for these discussions. Trusting anyone else's wards was not even an idle thought, so the only possible choice were his private lodgings in the dungeons.

"Sit down and don't touch anything." He gestured towards the familiar chair.

Harry complied, smiling a little. He was feeling rather peaceful despite Snape's curt commands. Being allowed inside these rooms was actually more than he'd ever imagined. He was glad that Snape had chosen them to talk here. The Potions classroom wasn't something he wanted to associate with this feeling.

Sitting on the same chair he'd slept in, he watched Snape put away some books and then sit down. They sat in silence for a moment. Not exactly an uncomfortable silence, like one might have imagined. Not companionable either. Both were wondering what to say.

"Are you hungry?" That at least was a safe thing to ask. Potter wasn't all that tall, but he was still a growing adolescent. Snape could faintly remember how teenage boys always seemed to be hungry. It was proven by a small nod. "I'll order us some food then."

The house elves seemed to be ecstatic to be able to send a tray to Snape's quarters again. Dinner in
the great hall was usually almost like a feast, but this went beyond that. Snape didn't really mind, even though he wasn't one to indulge in gluttony. Sipping from his mug, he watched Harry eat, and then said, "I believe we have some things to discuss."

Fork on his lips, Harry froze. He managed to swallow before agreeing, "Yes. We do." He hoped the icy tone didn't mean Snape had changed his mind.

Snape nodded. "Now..." He didn't really want to say what he'd been thinking about. It was too personal in a way. Seeing Potter look expectant, he moulded his words to be as impersonal as possible. "You may feel better now. Like maybe you won't need my..." What? Help? "... assistance anymore. However, it's probable that you may want to talk about things again. If so, you should come and see me," It sounded more like a command than an invitation.

He sat quietly and waited for Potter's comments. When it was evident the boy wasn't going to say anything, he sighed, "Say something, Mr. Potter. You were quite loquacious earlier."

Harry could remember. He was still in awe of how chaotic his own thoughts had been when he'd come to see Snape. "I think... It might be a good thing if I could drop in from time to time." That way the choking feeling might not appear again. Then he could sleep at night instead of feeling like he was getting lost inside his own mind.

"In that case, we need to set some basic rules to these conversations." Snape could never understand how some people could be so sloppy with details. He put his mug back on the table. "The Headmaster already knows you've been coming here, and he does not disapprove your visits."

That almost made Harry laugh. No one would think there was anything inappropriate going on between him and the Potions master. Except Ron might think he was trying to corrupt Harry to the Death Eater ways.

It was probably best if he never told his friends about this.

"Like I said, I don't want you wandering around the school in the middle of the night. You may floo in if you think it's absolutely necessary during the night time."

Relieved, Harry nodded. The sinking feeling usually came at night, when everyone else was asleep and he felt like he was all alone in the world.

Snape raised up a hand. "However, you will not simply appear here whenever it's convenient to you. You'll call in first." He would want to robe himself before seeing the boy.

"Of course, sir." Harry would definitely call in first. He couldn't even imagine flooing in and then going to wake Snape up. The whole thought boggled the mind.

"You can also stay behind class and then come over. We'll keep this and the schoolwork separate. This is Order business, so it has no place in the classroom."

Snape needed it to be clear. He didn't especially like people, and Potter was one of the most annoying people he knew. The myth built around him was nauseating. He was willing to do this, as both favor to Dumbledore -- even though the man hadn't actually asked him to -- and as it was his duty as a member of the Order to see that Potter would be alive and relatively sane to face Voldemort.

He didn't want this to have any effects on his teacher-student relationship with the boy. Didn't want him to start acting like he was somehow privileged in the class.
Harry agreed with that. "Sounds good, sir." He looked down at his plate but then lifted his gaze again, determination shining in his eyes. "And these conversations will stay private."

Not exactly a question, but Snape nodded anyway. It worked both ways; he wouldn't use whatever Potter told him as a weapon and Potter never let anyone know he would actually assist the hero of their world like this.

There was a short silence Harry masked by finishing his dinner. He knew he wasn't expected to talk with his mouth full, and used that to keep the silence from becoming awkward.

Watching the rather unoriginal stalling technique, Snape wondered what he should do now. Send Potter away and let him come back when he needed? Or maybe prod a bit.

He decided on the latter, simply because he had the time to listen right now. There would be things to do later, more cold remedies for Poppy, some truth serums for the Order to use. A couple of antidotes to the badly brewed love potions that would undoubtedly circulate amongst the students around the middle of February. If Potter had a chance to talk now, he might not disturb him so often in the future.

"Tell me about the present." Black gaze burning, Snape stared at Potter. "What keeps you busy? What are you thinking right now?"

Harry thought about that for a moment. "Um... I'm thinking this is really weird." That earned him a huff, but surprisingly nothing more. He wasn't sure if Snape would take off House points for his unsatisfying answers. Probably. "Wondering when Madam Hooch will set the next Quidditch match. The war, of course. I think about that a lot. That and Voldemort."

The name made Snape shiver inside again, but he didn't let any emotion show on his face.

"Then there are other Order things. I think about my godfather a lot." Harry didn't use Sirius' name, but he could see a slight sneer spread on Snape's face anyway. "I know you hate him, but he's important to me. He's the only person outside Hogwarts who cares about me." He had intended that as a simple statement, and was stunned to hear a hint of steel in his own voice.

Snape was surprised at both the words and the tone. He never thought about Potter outside Hogwarts. Definitely didn't want to think about Sirius Black, especially when the thought of the flea bitten mutt reminded him that he should really start the Wolfsbane potion for Lupin. Full moon was approaching.

When he realized Snape wasn't going to say anything, Harry added rather flatly, "I also think about the N.E.W.T.s. Don't know how I'm supposed to defeat Voldemort and pass the school year at the same time, though." He fell silent after that.

That was something Snape agreed on, even though he would say that the odds on Potter's passing the school year were small anyway.

He'd also realized that there was something Potter hadn't mentioned at all. Friends. The boy was rarely seen without at least one of his friends. Snape had seen the three of them walk together into the Great Hall these past two days, smiling and talking. How curious that the boy would leave that out. Keeping his voice neutral, he asked, "How about your friends? Everything all right with them?"

It had been obvious from watching Granger and Weasley that the two were worried about Potter's behavior. They tried to hide it, of course, but Snape was old enough not to be fooled by simple games played by simple people.
“Yeah.” Harry nodded, thinking about how he and Ron had spent Sunday together doing all the fun things they so rarely managed to do these days. Playing chess. Flying.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

“Well... And no.” Knowing he didn't have a reason to lie to Snape about this, Harry went on, talking about his friends. Explaining about the things that even he didn't really understand.

Listening to Potter ramble, Snape wondered just how on earth Dumbledore hadn't caught on to this before. He remembered watching Potter's father and his idiotic little group of friends and knew they had never had to deal with the things this new generation did. There had been problems, sure, but they had been dealt with. So what if one of the boys had been a werewolf? The others had still accepted him. And when they'd started to notice other boys and girls, they hadn't let any of them get between their friendship.

That had annoyed the young Severus Snape enormously. They had seemed like the core of Slytherin motto. Loyal and cunning. There had been no such loyalty among his housemates. It had been the early years of Voldemort's reign, and everyone had been more interesting in gaining personal power than making any real friends.

Snape couldn't help smiling at the irony. When Lucius Malfoy had finally tried to sneak behind his back and stab him, both figuratively and literally, he hadn't been at all surprised. He could only imagine the shock of the other three Gryffindors as they'd realized their most trusted friend was actually Voldemort's ally.

"But it's okay." Smiling wryly, Harry ended his explanation. "I don't think they would understand me, but they're still my friends."

Finishing with his tea, Snape nodded. "That seems to be the way things go, yes." He knew both Weasley and Granger and neither one of them would betray Potter. Too honest and stubborn for that.

Harry hadn't expected to get a real answer. Not that one was even needed. It was enough to be able to share his thoughts with someone. Didn't matter who, really. Before realizing Snape would be the only person he could talk to, he'd even thought of going to Trevor with his worries, just to have someone to talk to. The problem was that Neville never let the toad out of his sight these days.

It was actually nice to not have any sarcastic comments thrown at him, even if he'd been quite prepared for those as well. He'd come to expect for them, knowing they were a part of Snape, like the ever-present tea and various sweets were a part of Dumbledore. He couldn't imagine Snape without the cutting comments any more than he could imagine Filch without Mrs. Norris.

It was as if Snape was indeed taking his duty literally. He was listening, and that was enough.

He left the dungeons shortly after that. He didn't really have more to say to Snape. Wandering through the corridors, he wondered what to tell his friends; they were worried and they would be asking questions. Ron would be easy to evade with a growled 'I don't want to talk about it', but Hermione wasn't going to settle for anything that simple. She'd want to hear logical explanations.

In the end, he went with a half-truth. When Ron and Hermione cornered him the moment he was back at the Gryffindor tower, he simply said Snape had expressed his utter disgust with his schoolwork, saying he wouldn't probably pass his N.E.W.T.s at that rate.

Hermione looked stunned at that. "But you've studied just as hard as we have. And you haven't been
spending half the year running around the Forest or lying in the hospital wing." She seemed really annoyed at Snape's behavior.

"Well, you know Snape." It was all understandable to Ron.

Fortunately, there were no more questions after that. Harry was too tired to think of any plausible lies anyway.

That night, when he was lying in bed, Harry wondered about Ron's words. He didn't really think anyone knew Snape. He certainly didn't.

He couldn't believe what had happened these past few weeks. His own mental state, which worried him even now. Snape's strange offer of help. Or actually, Snape's response to his pleas for help; Snape wasn't exactly offering him anything.

Harry didn't really care why the usually so vicious man was willing to listen to him, it could be any reason. Maybe Dumbledore had asked him to do it, or Snape actually believed it was his duty. Maybe there was some part of the darkness he actually shared with Harry.

It didn't really matter.

Feeling sleep pull him towards sweet oblivion, Harry smiled. He wasn't going to think about anything right now. He was simply going to sleep.
Part 1

Spring had always been Draco Malfoy's favorite season.

He didn't know why; all logic would suggest the opposite. After all, he did enjoy the dark of autumn, then Yuletide. The first half of the schoolyear was shorter than the second. Most of his Slytherin housemates had their birthdays in autumn, so it was a time for parties and goodies.

But there was something about springtime that usually made him feel good. Snorting at the idiot nature lovers, he refused to even think that it was the way the whole world seemed to be full of life, green leaves blooming on trees. It was probably the fact that he wouldn't freeze his arse off flying.

This year, he should have loved the spring. So many things were finally either ending or beginning. There would be no more school after this year. He'd finally be rid of Hogwarts, ready to embrace his glorious future. It was just a couple of months until his eighteenth birthday and his father was finally trusting him with some of the Dark Lord's plans.

Draco had spent most his time trying not to worry about feeling a bit off; telling himself it was only natural. He was leaving his childhood behind, facing adult responsibilities. Things would be changing. His father already had plans for him. His future.

After proving his loyalty to Voldemort, he was to marry a pureblood girl -- probably either Millicent or Pansy, a choice that definitely depressed him -- and then spend his life serving his Master while his wife gave birth to the next generation of Malfoys. He would stand side by side with his father, ruling the wizarding world under Voldemort's banner.

Thinking about it made Draco nauseous. His perfect life had never felt less perfect.

His father had sent him an owl this morning. That wasn't unusual, but the contents of the letter were. Draco had read the letter twice before really understanding what his father was trying to tell him.

It had been quite clear when he'd finally managed to shake off his disbelief. His father had warned him about things to come, giving him certain dates; places he should avoid, days when he would need a good alibi. Things his friends would do, and to which he shouldn't be connected to.

Draco had spent a few hours before dinner trying to decide what to do with the knowledge he had.

He was glad of the free afternoon. Instead of spending his time off in the Slytherin common room, he'd hidden here in the library. Seeing his housemates would be too hard right now. He couldn't help wondering how many others had received mail from their families this morning. How many had received instructions for the upcoming battles.

Everything had always pointed in this direction; his upbringing, the fact that he happened to be yearmates with Harry Potter. His part in the fight had been clear ever since the Dark Lord had returned.

One day soon he would be called to battle against Potter and Weasley and their mudblood and Muggle-loving friends. He'd be drawn to the other dark figures wearing masks.

He was quite certain he'd rather turn his own wand on himself and end it all.
Draco heard someone laugh at the other end of the reading area. He didn't even have to look up to see who was making such noise. The sound was a familiar one, followed by another, deeper sound of chuckles. Granger and Weasley, probably accompanied by the boy who had the one thing he didn't. Freedom.

It was incredible how mad that sound made him.

Didn't these people know? Didn't they understand everything was racing towards a very ugly end? If they had seen what his father had written, they would be crying.

Like a part of him wanted to. But he couldn't. It simply wasn't what a Malfoy did.

The thought made him sneer at himself. No. A Malfoy wouldn't be human enough to show any weaknesses like that. A Malfoy would simply tremble before his Master and then obey any insane orders he was given.

He'd never felt such confusing emotions before, but his father's plans terrified him. Everyone at Hogwarts would get to know real pain and fear. There would be no great last battle. Only small, precise attacks on people no one really counted on, but who were vital to the ones Voldemort concentrated on.

That had been a shock to Draco. He'd assumed, as everyone else did, that the Dark Lord and his followers would attack Hogwarts in a couple of months. It was logical. One final battle between almost equal opponents.

The outcome of such a fight would have been impossible to predict.

Ignoring the noise the Gryffindor trio was making, Draco contemplated his options. He didn't have anything tangible. A few outlines of the plan. It could be real, or it could be a test to see how he would react.

A test he would pass with flying colors, for he didn't dare to do anything. No one would believe him anyway.

Nothing he could do. Draco smiled cynically. To hold so much power, and still be so damn weak. It was almost inconceivable.

Collecting his bag, he got to his feet. It was almost dinner time and his duty was to make an appearance with the other Slytherins. He would be the one the others would look up to; his father had made it perfectly clear.

He would have an important role in the plan. The Death Eater progeny would follow his lead.

Draco could see the irony in that; to be forced to take such an active role in something he detested was indeed poetic justice. He'd pay for the sins of his father.

Lost inside his gloomy thoughts, he didn't notice the Gryffindors walking towards the door.

"Hey!" Ron Weasley's offended huff brought him out of his reverie. "Watch where you're going."

Looking up at the redhead who'd managed to walk straight into him, Draco felt all his anger gather like a storm inside him. "If you don't want to be squashed like a bug, don't act like one, Weasel." At least this was an enemy he could fight against.

Harry and Hermione hovered behind Ron. Hermione obviously wanted to leave, to simply walk
away from the Slytherin menace and show everyone she had grown as a person. The expression on Harry's face was peculiar. He stared at Malfoy, looking puzzled. As if wondering whether he should laugh at him or curse him.

"Bastard." Grounding it out, Ron squeezed his hand in a fist. He'd not let Malfoy treat him like filth anymore.

The simple word made Draco react in an unexpected way. Instead of sneering yet another insult at Weasley, he smiled an open smile. "I wish." Life would be so much easier if he wasn't who he was. Being a bastard son of Lucius would be so much better. At least then he wouldn't have to uphold family traditions like a good son.

Ron saw the condescending smile spread on the hated face, and swung his arm. Seeing his fist connect with Malfoy's face was surprisingly satisfying. The Slytherin was thrown back by the strength of the punch, flailing to regain his balance. Then he fell down on the ground.

He didn't stop smiling.

Hand on his cheek, Draco stared up. It was clear that Weasley was enraged, his face flushed with an interesting shade of pink that clashed with his hair. The sight made Draco's mouth twitch. This was so stupid. So futile to snipe at each other, to keep up the old game.

"What the hell are you smiling at?" Ron growled at the grinning Malfoy. He could feel his anger burn even brighter as the git just kept sitting there.

Draco felt the smile drain from his face. It had once been a perfect opening for even more insults, but not now. He knew exactly what he was staring at, even though he was probably only one of two people at Hogwarts with that knowledge. "A dead man, Weasley. I'm smiling at a dead man." They were all dead, all future victims of the Dark Lord.

"You..." Eyes blazing with rage, Ron stepped closer to him. Malfoy was going too far. He was definitely going to kick his sorry arse this time!

To everyone's surprise, it was Harry and not Hermione, who grabbed Ron's arm. "Don't. Leave him alone." Harry's gaze was on Malfoy. There was something hauntingly familiar in the blond's eyes. Like a reflection of the weariness he sometimes felt.

Ron stared at his best friend for a moment, as if to see if he was serious. When Harry didn't waver, he growled out something, and then rushed out of the library. Looking worried, Hermione followed him.

"You'd better go see Madam Pomfrey." Harry watched Malfoy climb to his feet. "You're bleeding." It wasn't that bad, but there was crimson liquid trickling down Malfoy's nose.

The look in the grey eyes was cold as a midwinter's breeze. "Go to hell, Potter." Grabbing his bag, Draco walked out, not paying any attention to the group of third years who were standing at the door, staring at him and whispering loudly.

Harry shook his head slowly. "I probably will."

Trailing Ron and Hermione to the Gryffindor tower, he couldn't help thinking about the absolute desperation he'd seen in Malfoy. It wasn't all that hard to figure out why his nemesis was looking harried these days.

By some miracle, the winter had passed without any traces of Voldemort's final attacks. At first,
Harry had been even more stressed because of it, making his way down to the dungeons mind heavy with doubts and fears. There had been frequent Order meetings, where he'd hidden his true emotions and spent hours talking to the others, trying to figure out different plans to counter any possible attack.

The third week of February had been the most stressful. Then things had started to go better. Harry didn't know why. Nothing special had happened. It just felt like maybe there was a way to survive this after all.

Harry stepped through the doorway, smiling at the Fat Lady. That was something that had changed as well; he didn't have to force smiles these days. They were back, reminding him of a more carefree time.

Seeing Ron and Hermione bicker by the fireplace only widened his smile. Some of his lightened mood was undoubtedly due to his friends.

"I don't care if he's right or not. He's a bloody Death Eater, and you know it!" Ron was still seething with anger, his friend's soft words only annoying him further.

For a second, Harry stood still, words of denial raising to his lips. There was only one person at Hogwarts who had once been one of Voldemort's servants, and he wasn't one anymore. Then he realized they weren't talking about Snape.

Hermione looked doubtful. "We couldn't find any traces of a Dark Mark..." Noticing the way Ron glared, she sighed, "All right. Let's say for a moment Malfoy is a Death Eater. Wouldn't he try to do something worse than call you names then? And wouldn't it be more reasonable for us not to aggravate him if he's joined Voldemort already?" They were the only three people in the common room -- the others probably at dinner already -- but out of habit, the last bit came out as a whisper.

"I'm not going to start tiptoeing around the Slytherin scum!" Ron didn't even know why the whole thing was making him so irate.

"I'm not asking you to." Honestly, some days she wondered if he'd ever grow up. "All I'm saying is that you shouldn't let him goad you into a fight."

Ron grunted. He didn't agree with Hermione. If the bloody ferret kept annoying him, he'd punch him again. And again, until he stopped sneering at him. "Whatever."

Seeing her words had been completely futile, Hermione sighed, "Let's go and get something to eat." With luck, Malfoy would be in the hospital wing, and they could manage the rest of the evening without incidents.

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**Part 2**

There were dozens of people talking at the same time in the Great Hall.

Snape glared at the students in front of him. For once he'd like to eat his dinner in peace. But no. By Albus' order, he had to 'enjoy' his dinner in the loud hall. He didn't flinch internally at the sounds and the movements anymore, his years at Hogwarts had cured him of that. Still, he didn't enjoy the crowd.

He'd much rather be in his dungeons; his own private world hidden inside the huge castle. His sanctuary, where no one dared to interrupt him unless it was a matter of life and death.
Then again, that wasn't exactly how things were anymore.

He turned his dark gaze to the left, focusing on the Gryffindor table. He knew exactly where to look. It was the small group of people he'd watched for over six years now. Watched with annoyance, with burning hatred. Now there was simple curiosity in his eyes.

Snape had spent years hating the Gryffindors. Not all of them. Only the ones overly eager to abuse their status. For everyone knew Gryffindors were natural leaders, good at most of the things they set their minds to.

In his opinion, the lion crested House was highly overrated. It produced pompous, half witted people with nothing but stubbornness to give to the world. Most of the Gryffindors seemed to be so enthralled with their House, they didn't even think for themselves. It was always disgusting to see that. Minds wasted because of such stupidity.

It had been like that in his youth. He could remember his yearmates. They hadn't been all that smart, none of them mastering any of the subjects. Lupin had been the only one with any kinds of academic aspirations.

Still, they had managed to do various stunts and tricks, focusing all their energy on unimportant things.

Snape didn't really care what people did with their lives. He was a teacher, not a miracle worker. He did his best trying to get his students to actually think; whether they did or not was their own business. But to waste energy on childish pranks when a dark lord was gaining power was not only destroying one's own life. It was condemning others as well.

Feeling a stab of guilt, Snape lowered his gaze for a moment. It wasn't like he'd really done all that much better.

A moment later he focused his attention back to the Gryffindor table.

He'd seen Harry Potter as one of the arrogant kids even before the boy had arrived to Hogwarts. Everyone had been so excited about him. Praising him, babbling about him being the one who had saved them all.

Adding one of the unending brood of Weasleys and a know it all Muggleborn to the mix, and it had been impossible for Snape to see the boy as an individual. He seemed to be exactly the way he was thought of. Brave, stubborn. Sticking his nose into everything, especially things that didn't concern him. A privileged snotty bastard who was coddled by Dumbledore and his cohorts. A lucky brat who survived his first years at Hogwarts by pure chance.

Now it felt like Snape wasn't certain of anything concerning Harry Potter, and he didn't like the feeling.

Down at one of the long tables, Ron was glowering at the Head Table. "He's doing it again." It was a dark mutter. First Malfoy acting like an idiot as usual and now this. Damn, he hated the Slytherins.

"Who's doing what again?" Following Ron's gaze, Hermione shrugged. "Oh. So?"

Harry refused to let a smile show on his face. He knew exactly who they were talking about. "What?" The innocence in his voice was only slightly exaggerated.

"Snape. He's staring at you again, looking like he wants to hex you straight to the next century." Ron wouldn't be surprised if that was exactly what the greasy git was thinking about. Didn't he see Harry
was under enough stress without him adding his two Knuts to it?

"Let him. I don't care." It was difficult not to look over his shoulder, but somehow Harry managed to stay put. After all, he knew what he'd see if he turned around. The same thing as yesterday, and the day before that.

Snape staring at him with a dark look in his eyes. It was almost an identical to the one he was so used to. The man was a master at hiding his thoughts, only the burning in his eyes revealed the intensity of his scrutiny.

Harry could only wonder what Snape was trying to see. It wasn't as if he'd said anything strange to him recently. Quite the opposite, actually.

Grabbing his glass, he concentrated on his dinner.

He enjoyed the Friday evenings, the promise of a good night's sleep and a full two days with nothing special to do. They wouldn't be going to Hogsmeade this weekend, so there'd be plenty of time to just laze around. Of course Hermione would pester them all to study for the N.E.W.T.s, but sometimes even that could be fun.

At least Hermione seemed to think that. She kept babbling about the upcoming exams as if they were the core of her whole being. She hadn't sounded that ecstatic about studying since the third year.

By the time they were finished, Ron was looking a bit like a pigeon caught in front of a Firebolt. "So if nothing else comes up, we're going to go through the Arithmancy text one more time." Hermione didn't sound like she was actually asking anything.

Ron sighed, pushing his plate away from him. He was glad he'd finished his dinner, because he sure as hell didn't have any appetite left after that comment. "Yeah. Sure." It wasn't as if there was much hope of anything sudden happening. Life had been rather boring lately.

Standing up, ready to leave the Great Hall, Harry glanced to the teachers' table, hiding his smile as he saw Snape sit there with a dark cloud hanging over his head. It was clear the professor didn't enjoy Fridays as much as he did. Harry had been quite astonished to learn about the private tutoring the man gave to his least intelligent Slytherins every week. Maybe he shouldn't have been. There had to be an explanation why Crabbe and Goyle had managed to pass most of their courses.

Those four hours every week were the only time he was absolutely banned from Snape's presence.

Harry smiled at that, sobering the next moment as a shadowy figure drifted across the room, heading towards the Head Table. He followed the ethereal bird with his gaze, noticing how only a few people in the Great Hall seemed to be able to see the ghostly twin of Fawkes.

"You coming?" Ron turned to look at his friend, who was acting strangely again. Harry was like that some days, his eyes focusing on something only he could see and then muttering some excuses, disappearing for hours. "Hey, Harry! Are you okay?"

No. Harry wasn't okay. "I'm fine, Ron. You go ahead, I have to drop by the owlery to send a message to Snuffles." Keeping the lie as simple as possible, Harry didn't wait to get a reply. He walked slowly towards the hallway, sprinting off when he was certain no one could see him run.

Ron stared at the doorway his best friend had disappeared through. He didn't like Harry's disappearing acts at all, no matter how they seemed to bring him peace at times.
"One day he's gonna tell me what this is all about." Muttering to himself, he went to find Hermione.

There was a rhythm with which some of the staircases moved. Harry hadn't noticed that before the Headmaster had told him. It was good to know now. He knew he had to hurry, in case it was important.

Everyone knew about the Order of the Phoenix these days. Older wizards and witches could still remember it from the first reign of Voldemort; Dumbledore's semi-secret organization battling against the evil.

Fawkes was their symbol, and as tenacious as the phoenix, they were once again fighting to conquer Voldemort. It didn't matter how much it cost. Like Fawkes, the Order would rise from the ashes as long as the Dark Lord lived.

Harry had been proud to join the Order, knowing his godfather was a member. Sirius had told him that all the Marauders had considered joining before that terrible evening when Peter Pettigrew guided his Master into the small cottage in Godric's Hollow.

It was a rather pleasant thought to be following the path Harry's dad would have chosen if he hadn't been betrayed.

Few people knew that there was a small band of fighters in the Order that would not attend regular meetings. They were never spoken of, were never seen with other members. The few who would go to both meetings, never mentioned these secret ones to anyone.

Harry wasn't certain he wanted to be a part of the secret. He would have preferred to being one of those who simply followed Dumbledore's orders.

He reached the second floor, rushing across the hallway to the gargoyle. It had been only a couple of days since the last meeting, and he hoped this didn't mean something bad had happened.

Dumbledore was already in his offices, sitting on an armchair, speaking softly with Minerva McGonagall. He smiled at Harry as the boy stepped into the room. "Harry. Good. Come and sit down with the others." Gesturing at the men sitting on the plush couch, he didn't even try to hide his pleasure at seeing Harry grin and run to hug his godfather.

Seeing Sirius and Remus sit there looking relaxed made Harry feel better. He hadn't seen the two of them in months, ever since the holidays. There had been occasional letters, but nothing more.

It felt good to have Sirius wrap his arms around him. He didn't even seem to mind when Harry accidentally stepped on his foot, laughing at the youthful exuberance.

"It's good to see you, too, Harry." Teasing his godson, Sirius hugged him right back.

Next to them, Remus Lupin chuckled. He enjoyed seeing his old friend like this. These moments he shared with James' kid made him perfectly happy. "Hello, Harry."

"Hello, Remus." It came out naturally now. The urge to call the man 'professor' had passed some time ago. "How are you two?"

"We're fine. Just came back from a little trip to south." The fact that Remus was speaking for the both of them wasn't a surprise. Ever since the Triwizard tournament, the two had been inseparable.

Harry squirmed a little, sitting down on the couch, squeezing between Sirius and the armrest. "You know what this is all about?" He couldn't keep the worry out of his voice.
"Sure." Sirius nodded. "We have something to report. Just wait till everyone's here." Glancing around the room, he added, "Seems to me our favorite Slytherin hasn't yet risen from his dank dungeons.

"Good news or bad?" Not commenting on the jibe at Snape, Harry changed the subject. He didn't want to make fun of his professor. Not anymore. Not like this.

It was clear that Harry was worried, so Sirius hurried to assure him. "Not exactly good, but definitely not bad either." He could feel the boy relax at that. Maybe he should talk to Dumbledore; Harry was definitely under more pressure than anyone his age should be.

The door to Dumbledore's office opened, and Snape swept in.

"Ah, Severus. Now that you're here, we can begin." The Headmaster sounded pleased. "Arabella and Mundungus won't be joining us this evening, so it's just the six of us. Sirius, would you please begin?"

Focusing his attention on Black, Snape sat in his usual place, a rather comfortable chair by the wall. Hiding in the shadows was what he did well.

"Sure." Black nodded, and then started talking about a strange smuggling system he and the werewolf had uncovered in the south. Apparently people rarely paid attention to a lonely man walking a dog, so they had been able to spy on the half-Muggle half-wizard operation.

Snape listened to the story with interest. He understood the importance of this as he heard Black mention that most of the items smuggled into Britain were various magical creatures, both alive and dead. Jobberknolls weren't exactly rare, but their feathers would be important to anyone planning on making truth potions. Lethifolds however, were a bigger problem.

"We managed to see one of our old acquaintances there." Sirius' gaze was full of anger as he continued his report. "Otto Avery."

The name was certainly familiar; the man was a known Death Eater.

"So Voldemort is gathering his forces again." McGonagall sounded stern. "If he's using dark creatures to aid in his battle, we could be in serious trouble."

Dumbledore nodded. "I agree. We must tell the others about this. Hagrid can probably give us a comprehensible lesson on all the creatures Sirius and Remus saw. In the meantime, I suggest we all revisit Scamander."

McGonagall, Snape and Harry all had a similar annoyed look on their faces, though none of them would have admitted they were all as unenthusiastic about the news. Extra reading material was the last thing anyone at Hogwarts needed so close to the final exams.

The rest of Black's story was rather uninteresting. Snape sat back and listened halfheartedly.

These meetings were necessary, he knew, but he wished he didn't have to attend. It was always the same. First the news; Dumbledore explaining strategy and the progress of all the seventh years trusted with extra curricular activities. Then Black and Lupin's news from their network, listing Voldemort's atrocities. At that point Potter usually looked sick.

It went down hill from there.

Snape watched the others, cataloguing everything they said, with or without words. He was excellent
in reading body language, and was by now mastering Potter's rather well. Some of the things always hit him hard, especially the descriptions of the Death Eater deeds. Amazingly, Potter seemed to be connected to Voldemort somehow, like he could almost sense it whenever he was murdering people. It had come as a surprise to Snape, even though when he thought about it, he realized it shouldn't have.

They both had their scars, and whether they liked it or not, they would be connected to the Dark Lord until the day he was finally defeated. There would be no end to the nightmares any time soon, but at least these days Snape allowed himself a sliver of hope.

These private meetings were getting more frequent. Before the beginning of the year, there had been one every two or three months. As they world outside the castle started the green bloom of early spring, they were gathering together in secret every few weeks.

That meant all of the Order was also assembling more often now. Snape was glad Albus was not including him in those meetings; he was a spy, and as such, his dedication to the Order was to be known by as few people as possible. To his knowledge, only seven people knew of his work; Dumbledore, Potter, Black, Lupin, Figg, Fletcher and McGonagall. Not all of them were by his choice, and he could only hope they hadn't told anyone else.

He'd asked Potter about that after one of the meetings; had needed to know if he'd told Granger and Weasley about him. Another surprise there. He'd been certain Potter would admit telling his friends, but he'd simply shook his head, saying that they had never spoken of it since all the confusion during their fourth year.

Trust was the most important, and elusive, thing in Snape's world, and he was quite appalled by the way Potter had placed such trust on him. Yes, the boy was well aware of his status as a spy, but nevertheless, it was almost unthinkable.

Snape could remember Albus telling Barty Crouch junior -- under the disguise of Mad-Eye Moody -- about him being a spy; a confirmation of half-forgotten rumors from the days of the trials. The memory still made him shiver, a clear reminder that Potter wasn't the only one who was terrified. He'd gone to that first Death Eater meeting after Voldemort had truly returned fearing for his life, knowing all too well it wouldn't take much more than rumors for their lord to kill him. It had been a miracle Crouch had taken that secret with him to the Dementor who had kissed his soul away.

Albus had made the decision to tell the most trusted few of their order; mostly to offer Snape their protection should something happen to him. It did make sense and Snape agreed some people would have to know, he just didn't like Albus' choices. Telling Minerva had made sense, for she would never betray Albus willingly and none of the truth potions would work on her. Including Black and Lupin in the inner circle however... It was like telling Arthur Weasley about a Muggle invention and then expecting him not to be all excited about it.

As Snape had expected, his old schoolmates' reactions had been highly predictable. Lupin had smiled and nodded, always ready and eager to believe that everyone could be good inside; Black's ranting could have probably been heard across the castle if there had been no silencing charms around the Headmaster's office. Both their views on Snape had been painfully obvious for decades.

Nothing had really changed since then, including Snape's own thoughts of the mutt of a man. He couldn't stand Black, no matter how they now shared the fight on the same side, and it was always a relief when he and Lupin went away on a mission, sending notes on their progress from time to time.

Trying not to linger on such thoughts, Snape sat in place, listening to the others make plans about the Death Eater smuggling operation. His part of all that would be to make an inventory of all the items...
they'd identify or get their hands on, to find out just exactly what kinds of potions Voldemort might ask him to brew from them in the future. The sooner he figured it out, the sooner he could take counter measures and prepare antidotes. He knew for a fact that they would be needed.

Snape sighed as the meeting ended, storming out of the Headmaster's office with an angry dark look on his face, robes billowing around him. This would be a busy weekend, with all the reading and brewing.

Not to mention the fact that he'd probably have Harry Potter knocking on his door as soon as Black and Lupin left Hogwarts.

Part 3

Shifting his book bag to his side, Harry wiped his sweaty palm on his robe.

It was early and everyone in the seventh year dormitory had still been sleeping as he'd sneaked out of the Gryffindor tower. He hadn't actually planned on sneaking out again; he'd woken up before dawn, and since he hadn't managed to go back to sleep, he'd decided to go searching for some peace of mind.

Saturday had been wonderful. Remus and Sirius had spent the night at Hogwarts and instead of studying, Harry had stayed with his godfather, loving every minute.

By mutual agreement, they hadn't spoken about the war. Instead, Sirius had told Harry all sorts of stories about the times he'd been still a student at Hogwarts, reminiscing about all the adventures the Marauders had shared. Remus had commented on the most outrageous tales, trying to get his friend admit that some of his stories were highly colored by time and a very active imagination.

It had been glorious to escape the reality even for just one day.

Waking up this morning, Harry had returned back to the here and now. There were things he needed to do, mostly studying, and he was certain Hermione had forced Ron to spend the previous day reading. It was amazing how she could find the energy to do everything.

Harry had collected his books and tried to read in his bed, but Neville's loud snoring and the soft whimpers coming from Dean's bed were too distracting. Somehow, he couldn't concentrate on his reading and realized as he put the books away that sooner or later his mind would start to wander to Sirius and Remus; he was already wondering what they were doing now.

That of course lead him to think of the missions they were on, worry returning immediately. Yesterday seemed already unreal, like it had been a fantasy, their time spent together in peace something he could only dream of.

Such thoughts would only lead to even darker ones, but the more he tried not to think about how gloomy their reality was, the sharper the thoughts became.

How annoying! For once he was actually willing to spend the day studying, and now he couldn't concentrate long enough to even finish a page.

Eventually, Harry had shoved the books into his bag and got out of bed. He'd dressed quietly, making sure he had his wand with him, and after leaving a short note on Ron's nightstand, he walked out of the dormitory.

Now he was here, in the familiar corridor, hesitating outside Snape's door.
It was not unusual for him to come here at weird hours. Especially in the beginning, when he had been haunted by strange dreams. No matter the time, he'd always been allowed in. Sometimes he wondered just exactly when did Snape sleep. The man seemed to be awake every time he came to his door.

He'd never come here like this before; not without a good reason. Sometimes, he'd spent hours in the dungeons, doing his homework or holding a book in his lap, his mind working on something quite different. Snape had allowed him to stay, waiting for him to either come to some kind of conclusion on his own or start talking. This time, there was nothing bothering him. Not really.

Only the silence and being alone bothered him. The dark thoughts weren't swirling around his head, but they were waiting somewhere close.

Dumbledore would undoubtedly call this a pre-emptive strike. To hit the enemy before they could hit you.

Wiping his hand on his robes once more, Harry took a deep breath and then planted his palm on the ornament on Snape's door. He'd chosen to walk here, not sure if he should come after all. It was morning, so officially, he was allowed to be walking around the castle. If he'd decided not to come to see Snape after all, he could have just strolled around.

A few seconds later the door swung open, revealing the Potions master. Snape looked like he'd been expecting him. "Come on in, Potter." It was the usual curt command.

Harry followed him inside, closing the door firmly behind him.

The sight that greeted him was different from the neat chambers he was used to seeing. There were various boxes on the floor, some open with weird looking herbs inside. The acrid smell of bile came from the other end of the room and the comfortable chair Harry had claimed as his was covered in something that looked suspiciously like Veela hair.

It was quite obvious Snape was busy. Working hard to prepare the Order for whatever it was they were about to face.

Hesitating a little, Harry stood by the couch, wondering if he was welcome. He didn't exactly need to be here; he knew that if he left, he wouldn't exactly be reduced into a gibbering idiot in the matter of hours.

He wanted to be here. It was so much easier to stay in the dungeons. They were the last place anyone would come to look for him.

"You're busy. Do you want me to leave?" Harry asked Snape's back. The professor had walked back to the table as soon as he'd closed the door. He was obviously in the middle of chopping something. "I could come back later."

Snape turned to glance at him, his eyes shining with cold amusement. "Sit down. Unlike some of us, I can work and listen at the same time." The jibe was so obviously a reminder of several occasions Harry had been daydreaming during the Potions class.

Reading the meaning behind the words, Harry plopped down on the couch, his bag on his lap.

He'd brought his Potions textbook with him. After missing a whole day of studying, he'd decided to work on the subject he wasn't all that good at. Besides, he'd done his Potions homework in here a couple of times before, and Snape had graciously explained to him a thing or two when he'd been at a loss even after reading the chapter twice. Sometimes his professor hadn't even used the word 'idiot'
during those explanations.

Harry fingered the thick book, thinking about all the things he needed to memorize before taking N.E.W.T.s. It was almost enough to plunge him back to depression.

Instead of opening the heavy volume, he kept watching Snape. The man was moving around the table, adjusting jars and piles of roots. Something squirmed on the table, but one stab of Snape's knife seemed to take care of that. After everything was the way the professor seemed to prefer it, he grabbed some daisy roots and resumed the chopping.

"Snape?" Since the man had told him not to call him professor when they were alone in the dungeons, but had not offered him the use of his first name -- not that Harry had expected for that -- he simply called him by his family name. Just like Snape always called him Potter. "Can I help you with anything?"

The reply was the much anticipated snort. "Even in a hurry, I am not desperate enough for your help, Potter. We wouldn't want the Order to suffer more from the cure than from whatever poison they may encounter, now would we?" He finished with the root and poured the thin slices to a bowl. Then he grabbed another root. "Your style of cutting usually leaves much to be desired."

Harry smiled slightly at that. Sure, he'd asked for it. "Okay. Tell me if you change your mind." He leaned back on the couch, still watching his teacher.

These rooms seemed like a second home by now. It was rather amusing for a Gryffindor to find the Slytherin dungeons homely in any way.

Maybe it was because he'd spent so much time here these past two months. When they'd first agreed on this with Snape, he'd come here twice a week. When he'd realized his old nemesis had actually meant it when he'd said he could come by whenever he needed, his visits had become more frequent.

Even now, Harry refused to be ashamed of those visits. Snape had never seemed to mind his rants and bouts of doubt. Had never made fun of him when he was confused and lost. The jibes came only when they wouldn't cut to the bone, never when they would truly hurt.

At least not outside the classroom. There, everything was possible.

"Actually, there is something you could do, if you're just going to sit there."

Snape's words jolted Harry out of his thoughts, and he realized the man had stopped the slicing and was staring at him. "What?" He didn't say anything about the barely veiled comment on his silence. He felt good. Didn't really need to talk about anything.

It wasn't exactly the first time he wasn't babbling the moment he stepped through the doorway or out of the fireplace. He'd been stunned when he'd managed some intellectual conversation with his professor.

Gesturing at the bookshelf, Snape said, "If you have nothing else to do, you could get the Scamander book and read out loud. There's no need for us to waste the whole day. Like I said, I can actually work with Potions ingredients and listen at the same time."

"Oh." Harry realized it was a good idea. That way he didn't have to sit in silence and wonder if he should actually say something. "I have it right here." He pulled the small book out of his bag. He'd thought it would be refreshing after an hour or so of suffering through Magical Drafts and Potions.

The look Snape threw at him was surprised. "I'm amazed you actually have that book."
Harry grinned. There was a lot his professor didn't know about him, no matter how many secrets he'd shared with him. "It's good to have a manual close at hands whenever Hagrid's teaching about something new." With the visible classification of every poisonous and otherwise dangerous creature, the book was a life savior. Literally.

"I would imagine so." The sneer was back.

Opening the book, Harry flipped through the first few pages, shaking his head at things Ron had written on them. "All right. You want me to read the introduction too?"

"No." Snape had already turned back to his roots, his sharp knife making soft background noise as it sliced through the shriveled greens. "Start with the creatures themselves."

Harry nodded. "'Acromantulas. The Acromantula is a monstrous...'

He'd read about the magical creatures a dozen times before, but he didn't find reading the book again boring. After six and a half years studying at Hogwarts, he'd managed to bump into most of the non-lethal creatures. A couple of lethal ones too. He made a few comments about them as he read and was glad Snape just listened.

When Harry got to Dugbogs, Snape made an indelicate sound. After a questioning silence, he made a curt comment about the Dugbogs being highly underestimated. They did feast on more important roots than Mandrakes, and would be very vicious if annoyed. Apparently, their eyes were highly valuable in various love potions.

Harry shuddered at that. He was quite sure it couldn't be true love if it forced you to give someone a drink made of Dugbog eyes.

He kept on reading, pausing every now and again to have Snape make more observations. Most of his tales dealt with potions, which wasn't exactly a surprise.

Slicing the various ingredients he would need in his potions, Snape let his mind drift as Harry read to him. He made sure to comment on the creatures every now and then, when a familiar name awakened some memory of a thick skin or slimy intestines. Potter's voice was a pleasant buzz in the edge of his consciousness.

He was rather glad the boy had come to him this early in the day. He hadn't slept well. Strange nightmares had kept him awake. His dreams had reminded him of ages past, of the years he had cursed Hogwarts, not knowing the old castle would one day be a safe haven.

Usually these dreams were a warning, as if his Dark Mark knew of things to come. It worried him. The more frequent the Order meetings were, the fewer the dark gatherings were. He hadn't been called to his old Master since Yuletide.

That meant something big was approaching. Voldemort would scheme with some of his closest Death Eaters -- probably the Gryffindor traitor and Lucius Malfoy -- and when it was time to act, he would call all the others to marvel at his plan.

Snape didn't like it one bit. It would leave him very little time to act. Perhaps too little to stop whatever was coming from happening.

There would be casualties. People would be hurt, even die. And Poppy would need fresh batches of potions.

At least this was something he could do now. He didn't have to sit in his rooms and wait. No matter
how morose, brewing potions to help the wounded in the battles that would come was something he was best suited for.

By midday, Harry had finished with the book. He was actually surprised the reading had taken so much time. Must be because of all the things they had talked about.

Snape put away his knife, washing his hands on a basin before calling for the house elves for lunch. It was a familiar ritual by now. Every time Harry was here, they shared a meal together; neither wanted to go to the crowded Great Hall to eat.

Since the white strands of hair were still spread on the comfortable chair, Harry took a better position on the couch. He was starving, even though he hadn't even realized he was hungry before Snape mentioned food. The sight of the tray full of steaming bowls made his stomach growl.

The sound was surprisingly loud in the room.

"Go ahead and eat." Sitting on the other side of the couch, keeping his distance, Snape waved at the tray. "Brains need nourishment in order to work, and I do believe yours need as much help as possible."

Harry snorted as he piled food on his plate. "We can't all be geniuses, you know." He was proud of the sarcasm dripping from his voice.

Deciding not to grace that with a reply, Snape grabbed a roll.

They ate in silence. Harry had found out that he rather enjoyed the peace and quiet. Sharing every meal with hundreds of other teenagers all talking at the same time could be somewhat disturbing, especially if you were feeling a bit tense. The novelty of eating without having to discuss anything with anyone had not yet burned away, and he smiled as he refilled his glass.

Snape saw the faint twitch of lips. Curious. It almost looked like the boy was getting back to the way he'd used to be before this outbreak of -- what Snape considered -- sanity.

Everything Potter had said had been true. Astonishingly, he hadn't wallowed too much in self-pity, had never said things that would require Snape to show sympathy. Had never asked for pity or praise. That had been a surprise to Snape. It hadn't exactly shattered the image he'd had of the hope of the wizarding world, but he'd realized he could actually stand his presence.

Not that he'd ever admit that to anyone.

When they had finished, Snape sent the dishes back and then grabbed a dusty thick potions book from the shelf. He returned to the couch to read it. Even he didn't remember all the dark potions by heart, and needed some studying before choosing which potions he needed to make right away.

He snorted at Harry's surprised look. Students! They never thought about the vast amount of work their teachers did for every class. It was extremely annoying to see that they still didn't understand even the simplest of lessons their teachers had tried to teach. They didn't need to know everything; they needed to know the basics, and then where to find more information.

Oh the joys of educating the young ones.

Harry watched his professor sit on the other side of the couch with a book. He couldn't help but to stare. Snape had rarely stayed so close to him, or acted quite that relaxed in his presence.

He rather liked it. It was almost like staying at the common room, minus all the noise. He didn't really
want to leave yet, no matter how strong the bile smelled from the other end of the room. Since Snape so obviously needed to read, he decided to try the potions book as well.

Ten minutes later he realized he was still staring at the introduction on page five.

Harry couldn't really concentrate on the text. He kept thinking about how strange it was he wasn't all worried right now. Well, sure he was worried for Sirius and Remus, but he didn't feel the apprehension build up inside him like weeks ago.

After months of fighting desperation, he was slowly realizing that he might be able to survive the absurd mess that was his life after all. He was even beginning to see the irony of the whole thing.

All the answers had already been there, in his mind. He just hadn't seen any of them behind the overwhelming anxiety. Once he'd started to let out the jumble of confused thoughts, he'd been able to think about everything a bit more coherently. Had seen what Snape had obviously seen all the time and it hadn't been easy to accept. He was still not certain he wanted to accept it.

Life was what one made of it, but it was never fair. Sure, it was unfair he was treated like the savior of the wizarding world, when all he'd ever done was to have been loved by his mother. It was unfair that everyone expected him to be the hero, but that was life and nothing he did or said could really change it.

Accepting that had made things easier somehow. He no longer felt the all consuming dread when thinking about the future. It would come whether he dreaded it or not. Voldemort and he did share a bond, and due to it, he would most probably have to face the Dark Lord some day.

Brooding on it wouldn't help him that day. Trying to keep a level head would. That's what he was trying to do. Make sure he didn't store all his fears inside his mind, letting them fester there.

Harry turned his gaze back to the book, trying to concentrate on the text.

Potions. Potions ingredients. Preparing the ingredients. Getting proper tools with which to prepare the ingredients. Harry browsed through a couple of chapters, getting more frustrated every minute.

He'd always tried in class, had done his best. Even at Divinations, before realizing what an utter crap it was. He even understood most of the things he was studying, especially the magical creatures and DADA. Potions, however, were a mystery to him. He knew his Herbology, could calculate things, like his Arithmancy teacher could tell. Still, he couldn't find himself interested in Potions.

Annoyance made him even more determined. He slowed his pace, reading everything with thought. He could do this. Even Neville had managed to pass potions every year.

There were explanations on every page and the text wasn't all that complicated, but for some reason he simply couldn't grasp the point of most of the things he read. It was almost as if the author of the book was trying to contradict himself every now and again. First they said potions were the craft of a meticulous and patient mind, then there was a page that described intuition and something called 'sharpness of the eye'.

Harry wondered if the author had been somehow mentally ill. Wouldn't surprise him. Everyone so enamoured with potions must suffer with instability, probably due to spending so much time in the fumes. Maybe Snape was simply an exception to that rule.

It was infuriating, because he knew his lack of success in the Potions class wasn't because he didn't try. He did. He listened in the class, paid attention to every instruction Snape gave. He read the books, did his homework. And yet he was feeling he should be doing better.
"I suck at Potions!" Tossing the book to the side, Harry slumped on the couch. He hated this.

Snape raised his gaze from the book he'd been reading and nodded. "Yes, that is a rather accurate term." It was just a plain statement. He didn't even seem to be all that gleeful about Harry's words. "But if you study hard, you'll pass the N.E.W.T.s."

Looking highly suspicious, Harry glanced at him. He still wasn't sure if Snape was joking or not. What a strange notion; Snape having a sense of humor. "You sure?" He flustered a bit as he saw the raised eyebrow. Of course Snape would be sure. "Why? You know I've been doing the reading. Why do I... suck?"

"Because you have absolutely no eye for details."

That was certainly not true! "Sure, I do," Harry protested. He could prove that simply by showing Snape one of his Divinations papers. He'd got excellent at painting very vivid and detailed descriptions of his own death during the years.

Snape didn't make any comment on the petulant tone, even though it was slightly amusing. Once Harry had realized his comments during these moments he was in Snape's private rooms wouldn't lose Gryffindor House points, he'd stopped worrying about the things he said.

Impudence and snotty remarks were always met by scathing sarcasm. Honesty was usually appreciated.

"No, Potter, you really don't. You can handle the rudimentary potions well, because they are simple. A few ingredients and a certain way to make them. When there are various ingredients and variables to take account of, your work is a dismal failure. Maybe you were predispositioned to focus on only one thing at the time." It was said with confidence coming from teaching the boy for years.

Harry tried to figure out if it had been an insult or a compliment. Somehow he didn't think it was either. "Explain." A familiar command usually said by Snape.

Turning a little towards his student, Snape wondered how to make his point so that even Potter would get it. He could use any number of potions as an example, could mention various ingredients that would need special preparation before mixed together. Could probably talk until he ran out of words, but he was certain he wouldn't be understood.

"Quidditch." Seeing the blank look on Potter's face, Snape sighed. "It's like you and Quidditch. Maybe if you were a Beater, you'd be able to see all the nuances of potions as well."

Harry realized he looked like an idiot with his mouth hanging open. Had Snape just compared Potions to Quidditch? "So you mean..." He thought about it for a moment, glad that he wasn't prompted for a quick answer, unlike in the classroom. "You mean that since the Seeker focuses completely on the Snitch, he doesn't have to pay attentions to all the details of the game?"

It actually made sense. He always trusted the Beaters to make sure no one was brained by a Bludger, trusted the Chasers to get out of his way when he swooped down from the sky, trying to catch the Snitch.

"Something like that." Snape nodded. Maybe when the war was over, he would write a textbook for idiots. Maybe an 'Idiot's guide to Potions', explaining all the important things using Quidditch terms.

"I don't think that's really true." A memory of a gleeful smirk came to Harry. "If it was, Malfoy would be just as bad in Potions as I am." No matter how he wanted to blame Malfoy's good grades on the favoritism Snape still showed on him, Harry had to admit that the Slytherin was truly skilled in
Potions.

Was probably practicing for his future as a murderer. Backstabbing was always so messy. Better use a poison.

Snape's only answer to that was a cold stare.

"So I'll have to pay attention to the details." He could do it. Harry was sure he could. To hide from the stare, he grabbed the book, and tried reading some more. If he was indeed to pass the exams, he would have to at least remember the stuff he read, even if he didn't really get it.

Disappearing behind the book, he missed a rare sight. Snape's lips curled into a genuine smile. It lasted for a few seconds, until the man was able to get his expression back under control. Not letting his amusement show, he returned to his task of selecting poisons against which he would probably have to find counter measures.

Part 4

Ron was starting to feel like he was now living in the school library.

It had been like this for weeks now. When the classes were over, Hermione would drag him to the library. Whenever he was around, Harry would join them. They'd spend hours by the tables, browsing through books.

Arithmancy, Herbology, Potions, DADA, Divinations... It was all a jumble in his head. He wasn't sure he could get every single piece of knowledge he'd acquired in its right place. With his luck, he'd ramble about unstable parables in his Herbology test.

Too much knowledge was bad for you. It had been the Weasley motto ever since Bill had attended Hogwarts. Percy may have renounced it, but Ron was a firm believer. His throbbing headache was proving him right.

"That's it." He slammed the book he'd been staring at with glazed eyes shut. "I refuse to read another sentence. My head is about to burst open any minute now, and before that happens, I intend to enjoy this weekend."

Hermione had jumped at the loud sound, now staring her friend with disapproval clear on her face. The desperate words made her expression soften. "Okay."

Getting ready to rant and rave to defend his statement, it took a moment for Ron to actually realize Hermione had agreed with him. "Huh?"

"I think you're right. It's no use if you burn out studying." She smiled at that. What a novelty to most of her yearmates that must be. "Let's just leave the books till Monday."

Or maybe Sunday afternoon. She'd enjoy the Hogsmeade weekend like the rest of them. A sugar rush sounded perfect right now. So did sleep. Trying to take care of her duties as the Head Girl and studying for the final exams was almost impossible, but she did her best, and as a result rarely got more than five hours of sleep every night.

Ron was still staring. "Are you feeling all right?" He was only half joking. Ever since the beginning of the term, Hermione had spent all her free time studying.

Deciding it was futile to get mad, she just stuck out her tongue at him.
Harry was smiling at the both of them. It was good to see Hermione relax for once. The whole school was buzzing about the weekend. There would probably be lots of visitors for Madam Pomfrey's Sunday morning; there was such a thing as chocolate overdose.

Things were going quite well. He'd even managed to read through the accursed Potions book, even if it had taken him most of the week. Sirius had sent him an owl yesterday, telling him that everything was going smoothly.

He was going to enjoy the Hogsmeade weekend as well. It was only the second this year. This time nothing short of a Death Eater attack could stop the students from getting some happiness in their lives. How on earth were they supposed to study without sweets? Chocolate was supposed to be good for your mind.

Snape's comment about feeding the brain popped up in his mind and he wondered what his professor would say if he visited him while he was on a sugar high. Would probably sigh in exasperation. "I think we definitely need to visit Honeydukes."

"Oh yeah!" Ron was practically bouncing now. "They should have got that new shipment of Chocolate Frogs by now!" Last time they'd been to the store, they'd run out of his favorite sweets.

The glare Hermione threw at him reminded of the one McGonagall usually saved for her most irritating students. "You are not going to have a frog hunt in the boys' dormitory again." Ron's excellent idea had resulted in half the Gryffindor boys ending up in the hospital wing.

"Of course not! Wouldn't dream of it." Looking like the epitome of innocence, Ron patted his friend on the shoulder as he got up. When he was certain she couldn't see, he winked at Harry over her head.

Hermione pushed her books in the bag, and then said sweetly, "I believe you, of course." Her turn to share a knowing glance with Harry.

All three were wearing identical grins on their faces as they escaped the library.

Draco Malfoy slipped from behind the shelves he'd been using as a cover. He hadn't really been hiding, no. He'd simply tried to avoid yet another unpleasant encounter with Weasley. Didn't fancy getting his nose broken by him again. Once was quite enough.

Snorting at the thought, he walked to the tables. So maybe he had been hiding. How appropriate. He was a coward after all.

A cowardly descendant of a coward.

He sat down on an empty table. There were no Slytherins at the library at this hour. All were probably either in the Great Hall or the common room. He didn't really care as long as they stayed out of his way.

This was unbearable; to know everything was about to change forever, and simply stand by and watch it happen. Draco had been dreading for this weekend for days, hoping that by some miracle the teachers would change their minds and cancel the trips to Hogsmeade.

Now it seemed like hope had completely abandoned him.

There had been no notes from his father. The sly old fox probably knew mail would draw attention to his son. Draco had burned the letter he'd got a week ago. The lessons had been well learned; never leave evidence.
The words were still playing in his head, though. He didn't need to see them written down to remember every single sentence. He wished he could rid himself of the knowledge.

A line from one of the only Muggle stories he'd ever liked came to his mind. *Something wicked this way comes.* How true. Evil was arriving, and it would destroy everything. Not just the disgustingly goody-goody Gryffindors, but absolutely everything.

Draco would have to hide his real feelings. He'd have to go through the motions, appear an obedient son. Since there was no hope left, all he had was survival.

He wondered if he could just stay here in the library for the evening. He wasn't at all hungry. Actually, he was quite sure he'd throw up if he tried to eat. But everyone would be gathering in the Great Hall soon. Even Vince and Greg would be there, both looking frightened after their weekly tutoring session with Snape.

His absence would be suspicious; there would be questions later on. He wasn't stupid, he knew that there were always eyes watching. His father had been most adamant about the date.

Sighing, Draco collected his belongings.

He didn't bother to go to the common room, the detour would take too much time. Besides, once in the dungeons, he might be tempted to stay there. To continue hiding, not just from Weasel and his friends, but from the whole world.

The Great Hall was full. Dinner had already been served, and most of the people were eating and speaking at the same time, making plans for tomorrow. Especially the third years seemed to be excited. It would be their second Hogsmeade weekend ever, and since the first one had surpassed all expectations, everyone was thrilled.

Even those who would usually look dour or scared were now full of nervous energy. Draco sat at his usual place next to Vince and Greg, noticing that the two were looking rather happy.

He poured himself some juice, knowing that very soon, most of the Slytherins would look even happier. From the corner of his eye, he could see Millicent casting expectant looks at the huge doorway as if she was expecting for something to happen.

It certainly made Draco wish his father had not chosen her for him. He abhorred stupidity, even though his choice of company might sometimes suggest otherwise.

Vince and Greg he could handle. He didn't have to share a bed with either one of them.

Not really listening to whatever his friends were talking about, Draco kept his attention divided between other tables. He cast a brief look at the Gryffindor table, noticing that Potter and his cohorts were still joking and laughing. That didn't really interest him right now.

He could see some somber faces at the Ravenclaw table. It didn't exactly surprise him. Not all Death Eaters were Slytherin, no matter how eagerly the other Houses seemed to believe that.

Finally he looked at the Head Table. His gaze hit the empty seats at first. Oh yes. Hooch and McGonagall were once again patrolling Hogsmeade, making sure the students would be safe the next day. Nothing strange with that. Dumbledore was talking animately with professor Pahicna, managing to draw out a smile or two from her with his words.

The only person at the teachers' table looking gloomy and forbidding was Snape. Draco stared at him for some time, wondering if it was because that dark expression was Snape's trademark or because of
what would happen soon.

He honestly couldn't tell. Snape had always been a complete mystery. He seemed to be a rather simple man, with passion towards potions and tormenting his students, but he also had a secret life outside Hogwarts. His gaze was unreadable. Sometimes the dark eyes shone with malevolent glee, but most of the time, they were completely blank, like an obsidian mirror revealing nothing but a reflection of the one standing in front of him.

Snape had to know. From what Draco had seen, he was one of those people Voldemort truly needed. There weren't many Potions masters alive, and having one work for him voluntarily was not something the Dark Lord would willingly throw away.

It was amazing how Snape could just sit there and eat calmly, as if nothing was wrong. As if the world wasn't coming to an end.

"Draco? Could you pass me the potatoes?"

The small voice jolted him out of his thoughts, and he turned to see Blaise stare at him from the other side of the table. "Yeah. Sure." Grabbing the bowl he hadn't touched, he shoved the potatoes towards his housemate.

Blaise flashed him a smile, the first real one in weeks. "Thanks." He shoveled more food on his plate, his appetite probably due to the fact that Pansy was keeping her attention on the door and not on him.

Draco was about to mutter something polite to him as he felt a shiver run down his spine. It was a ghostly touch, a premonition.

Proving his instincts right, Pansy gasped, "Here it comes." She grabbed Millicent's arm in excitement. "Watch this!"

The door to the Great Hall banged open, the sudden movement drawing everyone's attention to the slight form entering. Whispers started immediately as Madam Pomfrey strode across the room, an angry expression on her usually so calm face.

She was accompanied by a brightly colored form that followed her with silent wings. Fawkes the phoenix was in the middle of his cycle, looking magnificent.

"Poppy?" Turning his attention from the DADA professor, Dumbledore frowned. It was rare to see her out of the infirmary. Seeing Fawkes follow her was even rarer. He usually never accompanied anyone but him. "Is something wrong?"

Keeping her steady pace, Madam Pomfrey walked to the Head Table, not saying anything. When she reached the Headmaster, she leaned down, whispering something urgently.

Everyone was staring at the scene. They wanted to know what had happened, knowing by now it had to be something bad. If someone had been killed, the Headmaster would undoubtedly make an announcement any second now.

Draco watched the old wizard's face. Even after ridiculing the man for so long, he was well aware he was the most powerful wizard alive, with the possible exception of his father's Master. That's why he felt panic rise when he saw the expression on the Headmaster's face.

No anger, no sorrow. Nothing. There was no emotion on Dumbledore's face, his eyes flat and lifeless.
Fawkes landed on the back of his chair, making a soft sound. The magnificent creature seemed to know his presence was sorely needed now.

When their mediwitch straightened herself again, everyone sat in silence, waiting. Dumbledore simply sat there, staring into distance. The sight was scaring everyone. If the news affected their Headmaster like that, it must be terrible indeed.

He didn't seem to be aware of the curious looks. It was as if his consciousness had disappeared somewhere, leaving only a lifeless husk behind.

Fawkes made the soft sound again, like a questioning note.

It brought Dumbledore back to this moment. He blinked, and then nodded at Madam Pomfrey. "Thank you, Poppy. Please stay." Clearing his throat, he stood up, only his iron will keeping him from swaying. "People! I am sorry to have to tell you this, but the flying lessons have been cancelled for an indefinite time. Madam Hooch has been seriously injured."

There were a few gasps at that.

"Also, due to an unfortunate accident, the Hogsmeade trips have been cancelled." It was added almost as an afterthought.

This time there were more gasps, even barely concealed protests. They died at the Headmaster's stern glare. No wonder. Dumbledore rarely showed such a grim face.

"That is all. I suggest you all finish eating and then go to your dormitories." Pushing back his chair, Dumbledore reached out with his hand. "Come." Fawkes obeyed the gesture immediately, rising into the air and then following the Headmaster as he and Madam Pomfrey walked out of the Great Hall.

Everyone was so busy talking at the same time, that no one noticed the phoenix brush his wing against Snape's head as he passed the Potions master by.

From the general commotion, it was clear that no one would be eating anymore. The noise level in the vast room was almost deafening. Even the teachers were talking out loud with each other, no one controlling the spreading turmoil. It was usually the Headmaster's work, and if he was indisposed, professor McGonagall would quickly take over. Neither was present now.

Draco for one wasn't at all surprised when Snape's voice rang out even over the ruckus. "Everyone, follow the prefects back to your Houses." He paused for a fraction of a second, and then added, "Immediately."

His voice was probably the only thing everyone present would obey. If not out of respect, then out of sheer fear and self preservation. The prefects jumped up as if prodded with a spear and began herding the students towards their common rooms. Draco was one of the first Slytherins to get up. He just wanted to go to his bed and pretend none of this was happening.

Sleeping would be difficult, probably because most of his yearmates would want to party.

Harry sat frozen in place, not following the others as they hurried towards the door. Ron and Hermione sat with him, both looking alert. They all had seen Dumbledore's little gesture with Fawkes, the soft word he'd uttered as clear as a message, as if he'd addressed them directly.

"We should follow the others and then slip away from the crowd and head to his offices." Hermione's lips barely moved as she whispered that out. Not that anyone would have paid her attention even if she'd shouted it out loud.
Nodding, the boys got up and drifted towards the door.

Out in the corridor, they followed the crowd to the staircases. Once on the second floor, the three Gryffindors slipped away from the mass of rather frightened students. Hiding in the shadows, they sneaked around the corridor towards the familiar gargoyle.

"Phoenix," Harry declared. Unlike the other password, this was unchanged. The gargoyle started to move, and he hopped to the stairs, letting the spiral carry him up. His friends were following right behind him.

The Headmaster's chambers were almost full of people, most of the Order members who lived in Hogwarts or Hogsmeade were already there. Harry saw Dumbledore standing alone by the wall, a blank look on his face. Madam Pomfrey was talking to Hagrid, looking angry.

Harry, Ron and Hermione walked quietly to the couch, sitting down without a word. They could all sense the undercurrent of grief and unleashed violence thrumming in the room.

"What is going on, Albus?" Professor Sprout was the only one with courage enough to ask the question.

Dumbledore turned to face his people. He seemed to ponder about the question for a moment, then he shook his head. "Poppy will explain." With that, he gestured at the slender woman.

"All right." Keeping her voice level only because of the seventh year students present, Pomfrey nodded. "Earlier this evening, Rosmerta and Xiomara flooed into the infirmary from the Three Broomsticks." She glanced at the tavern keeper, who was sitting by the fireplace with a large glass of something definitely alcoholic in hand. "Xiomara was badly injured. She and Minerva had been attacked by Death Eaters."

That drew loud gasps from most of the people in the room. Hermione looked around frantically, and then whispered to Ron. "Where is professor McGonagall? She's not here, is she?"

Ron glanced around as well and shook his head. She was nowhere in sight.

"Thanks to Fawkes, Xiomara will live," Gratitude in her eyes, Pomfrey looked at the phoenix that was sitting on a shelf next to the Headmaster. "She had been hexed, but also attacked physically and stabbed with a sharp object. Without Rosmerta, and Fawkes' tears, she would be dead now. She will recover fully, she regained consciousness right before I came to see you."

There was a silence full of dread and expectation. It was clear something bad would come next. A simple attack would not affect Dumbledore like this.

"However... She was able to tell me that the Death Eaters weren't apparently after her. They were concentrating on Minerva."

At that point, all the hair on Harry's neck seemed to prickle. He forced himself to breathe. This was not happening. Not like this, not now.

"Is she dead?" Horrified at the words that had slipped out of her mouth, Hermione stared at Madam Pomfrey. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear about it.

The mediwitch gazed at Madam Rosmerta. "Apparently not. At least there was no... body to be found when Rosmerta found Xiomara outside her tavern." Her voice was angry. "Xiomara's words seem to confirm it. The Death Eaters took her alive."
It was a relief, even though a small one.

"What can we do? We need to find her somehow." Ron's words were full of anger bordering on rage. No matter how stern McGonagall had always been, she was the Head of the Gryffindor House, and they'd do anything to get her back. "Do we know where they took her?"

It was a sign for everyone to start talking at the same time. Hagrid's voice boomed over the others. "'e's right! We can't leave 'er to those bastards!" Realizing there were students present, he looked a bit sheepish. "I shouldn't've said that."

No one paid attention to his slip.

Harry listened to the suggestions and demands with a sinking feeling in his stomach. They were too scattered, the small group of people not enough to rescue anyone. Even if they knew where McGonagall was kept, they'd have to wait for days until everyone of the Order would arrive there.

Their secret -- or not so secret -- Order wouldn't be big enough to attack Voldemort's forces. They'd need the help of the Aurors, and that would be a problem. As long as Fudge was the Minister for Magic, he wouldn't let the Aurors join a fight like that. If the Death Eaters attacked Hogwarts, they would come. But not now. Not when they were needed.

His gaze meeting Dumbledore's, Harry realized the Headmaster knew all this. The look in the wise eyes was shattered, full of terrible pain.

"No."

The husky voice carried over all the noise as if boosted by the sonorus charm. The room silenced in a second, and everyone turned to look at Dumbledore.

"We have no way of finding out where they are keeping her." Still looking at Harry, Dumbledore repeated. "None. We can not fight now, not yet. Our order is too small for a full attack on Voldemort's forces."

A part of Harry had hoped the Headmaster would find some solution to this; maybe something Harry hadn't thought of. How horrible to realize he could not do everything after all.

Hagrid shook his head. "What if we sneak in, save 'er and sneak out?" It sounded like a simple plan.

"No. Even if we knew where she is, we can't risk that. For that kind of a mission to succeed, we would need to know the place where they are holding her as well as our own home. We'd encounter dozens of Death Eaters. Maybe even Voldemort himself. It simply is not possible."

Dumbledore's every word hit Harry hard. He knew he was right; no one was so valuable to their cause to justify such a desperate attack. Not McGonagall, not Dumbledore. Not even him.

"Albus! You can not be serious!" Professor Sprout's comment was echoed by her most trusted Hufflepuffs. "It's Minerva we're talking about!"

"Yes. I know. And believe me, there's nothing I wouldn't do to save her if I thought we had even a small chance of succeeding. But we can not risk these children for one person, or leave them alone to go on a rescue mission which will undoubtedly fail," Dumbledore said with a cold voice. "We will have to wait and see what Voldemort wants. Until then, it will be your duty to keep our students safe. The rumors are probably spreading already, and you may have to deal with fear and hysteria. No one should leave the castle alone. Everyone should either stay in the common rooms or gather in the Great Hall to make sure we're all safe. Curfew starts at nine."
Professor Flitwick nodded. It was a good plan. He would make sure his Ravenclaws were safe. The thought made him glance at the three Gryffindors sitting on the couch, looking pale. Poor children, so lost without Minerva.

"But..." Sprout swallowed the rest of the sentence as she saw the extremely rare glare on Dumbledore. She wanted to protest, but knew he was right.

They simply couldn't go after the Death Eaters now.

"If everyone's clear with the plan, you should all go back to your rooms." Firmly dismissing his Order, Dumbledore watched most of them head to the door. "Harry. Please stay for a moment."

Harry smiled faintly at Ron and Hermione. "I'll catch up with you in the common room."

Looking worried, his friends trailed the other teachers out of the room. Hagrid followed them, closing the door behind him and leaving the Headmaster and Harry alone in the chambers.

As the door closed behind the groundkeeper, Dumbledore's shoulders drooped slightly. He looked at Harry, and Harry was shocked of how old the Headmaster suddenly looked. The familiar twinkle of mischief had disappeared from his eyes. It was quite possible it would never return.

"I asked you to stay, because you need to hear this." His voice barely a whisper, Dumbledore still managed to call out, "Severus. Please join us."

Snape stepped from the shadows he'd been standing at, hidden from everyone. "Of course, Albus." He looked calm and composed, his arms crossed over his chest.

It was clear he'd practiced that look to perfection, hiding any and all true emotions behind it.

"You will probably be summoned soon." Albus didn't have to elaborate. They all knew what he was talking about. "When you are, I don't want you to take any risks. Do you understand? I forbid you to send any messages to anyone in the Order. I do not want any foolish attempts to rescue one person, because it will only result in deaths of many."

Harry looked from Snape to Dumbledore, wondering if he should say something. McGonagall was the Head of his House after all. Still, inside he knew that there was nothing to say. He would gladly risk his life to save her, but wouldn't risk anyone else's. It was probably the way the Headmaster felt as well.

"She's probably held at the Malfoy Mansion." Snape knew Lucius wouldn't let this opportunity pass him.

"I know. I also know Lucius has wards all over the place. We couldn't get close without being detected." Rational words. Intelligent words that cut like glass. "She would be dead before we ever reached her. No, Severus. We'll wait and see what they want."

The dismissal was clear, even though the Headmaster didn't exactly say it. Snape nodded. This was logical. "All right."

Dumbledore glanced at Harry. "Do you understand?"

He wanted to shake his head. Wanted to say that no, he did not understand any of this. Instead, he nodded slightly. "Yes, I do." He wasn't sure what Dumbledore meant; his own role in this, Snape's, or something else? He had no idea. But he did understand, all of them.
Didn't mean he liked it.

"Good." Once again looking like a weary old man, the Headmaster gestured at the fireplace. "You should floo over to your common room. Your friends are already there. They need you tonight."

Harry certainly didn't want to wander alone through the corridors right now. He walked to the fireplace, grabbing a fistful of floo powder. Before leaving, he glanced at Snape. He was glad to see real emotion shine in the dark eyes. Anger. Impotent rage. It mirrored his own feelings perfectly.

"Sometimes we must choose our battles, Potter."

That was painful, but true. Harry nodded again, not wanting to agree with this either, even though he knew he had to. Heart heavy, he tossed the powder down. "Gryffindor common room."

Part 5

The common room was full of scared people.

Ron and Hermione had arrived to find that most of their housemates were still up. Even the first years were gathered in the common room, huddled together on the couches. The older students tried to calm the younger down. Strangely, Neville was the one managing to soothe the most frightened ones.

Then again, he had always been a patient one. His calmness was reassuring.

Hermione was trying to answer everyone's questions at the same time. The rumors of McGonagall's disappearance had indeed spread like a forest fire. Since Dumbledore hadn't said anything about keeping it a secret, she affirmed the rumors.

Seeing tears in her fellow Gryffindors' eyes made her lower lip wobble but she didn't give in to the need to cry. The Head of their House was missing, and as the Head Girl, she would now make sure everyone was all right. It didn't matter none of the teachers expected her to. She felt it was her responsibility.

Ron on the other hand was seething with anger. He'd barely managed to hold his anger in the meeting, knowing his outburst would only make things worse. But now, his mind was filled with rage.

How the hell were they supposed to just sit here and wait, doing nothing? Maybe when Harry got back, they could think of a plan to help McGonagall out. Surely he would have an idea or two. They could use the Invisibility Cloak to get to her undetected or something.

Any plan was better than to just wait here.

By the time Harry stepped out of the fireplace, surprisingly soot-free, things had calmed down a bit. There were no more questions asked. Everyone was quiet.

Hermione pulled Harry to the side, closely followed by Ron. "So, what did Dumbledore have to say to you?"

"Nothing important." The lie was easy to utter. Harry had kept Snape's secret for almost three years already, and wasn't about to start telling it to people now. "Just something about Si..." Realizing someone might hear him, he coughed. "Snuffles."
It was a safe lie. The other members of the Order would be warned -- if indeed Dumbledore hadn't done that already -- and Sirius would undoubtedly hurry back to Hogwarts as soon as humanly possible.

"Oh. Okay." Hermione nodded. Maybe the people who'd fought in the first war against Voldemort would be able to think of something they hadn't.

Ron copied her gesture. "Yeah. But what about McGonagall? We have to do something about this."

"Like what? We don't even know where they're holding her." Always the voice of reason, Hermione dismissed Ron's anxious question. "We'll just have to do what Dumbledore said." They'd have a lot to do in the castle, mainly to make sure everyone was all right. She'd have to talk to Terry in the morning. As the Head Boy, he'd have similar duties as she did.

During moments like this, she was glad they had chosen a Ravenclaw as her partner. She loved her housemates dearly, but sometimes you just needed someone levelheaded in a crisis. Terry Boot was definitely that.

"Come on, Hermione! You can't mean that!" Face changing color rapidly, Ron hissed the words out. Damn it!

Harry grabbed his shoulder, squeezing hard. "Stop it. You won't help anyone if you have a coronary right here. I'm definitely not going to explain to your mother how I let you get killed over some bout of stupid heroism." The scathing words came as a surprise, reminding him of a certain professor of his.

"What?" Ron could only stare at his friend. He'd been certain Harry would agree with him.

"You heard Dumbledore. We can't win this. No matter what we do, we can not win." It was killing Harry to say that. What good was there to be seen as a all powerful hero when he couldn't save someone he honestly cared about?

Nothing, absolutely nothing.

Snape's words rang in his mind. Yes. This was a battle he couldn't fight, so he had to make sure Ron got that as well. He didn't want to see his friends die because of this.

Looking angry enough to either hit someone or burst into tears of rage, Ron gowled, "But if we knew where she is..."

"But we don't. We don't know where she is or how many people there are. Damn it, Ron. We don't know anything. And as long as we don't, we can't make any plans." Harry wished Snape hadn't speculated about the Malfoy Mansion. It would have been easier to say this if his words had been true. "You do something rash now, and you get us all killed."

Ron blanched, his hands squeezed into fists. He stared at his friend for a moment. Then he turned around and stormed up the stairs to the dormitory.

"Let him go." Placing his hand on Hermione's arm, Harry sighed, "He needs to be alone now." He knew Ron. He wouldn't react well to words at the moment.

Hermione nodded. "I know. You should talk to him when he calms down, though." She remembered the months of silence from a couple of years ago. The situation had resembled this, a misunderstanding really.
"I will."

Deciding to let Ron cool down, Harry stayed in the common room. He sat on one of the chairs, listening to Neville tell the youngsters stories of his grandmother. The descriptions of her attire always made him smile. It was peaceful to listen to those tales. They were interesting enough to keep him from thinking about anything.

Harry was torn by his need to stay with his fellow Gryffindors and his desire to go to find a place where he could be completely alone with his desperation. Alone with just his feelings and Snape. He knew he couldn't leave the room. If only the common room was empty, he might risk it, but not like this.

After almost an hour, he decided he'd better go to bed. Saying good night to Hermione, who was sitting on the floor, holding one of the first years next to her, he climbed up the stairs.

Ron, Seamus and Dean were all asleep in their beds. The soft moonlight filtered through the window, and Harry could see his roommates clearly, all curled in their beds. There was a torn book next to the wall, looking like it had been flung there in rage. He went to pick it up, sighing as he saw it was Ron's beloved *Quidditch Through The Ages*.

The very rare first edition he'd got for his friend for his birthday only a couple of weeks ago.

He'd ask professor Flitwick for a charm to mend it in the morning.

Harry went through his evening routines quickly. Then he cast one last look at Ron. There were wet tracks on his freckled cheeks, a silent proof of tears. It didn't surprise Harry. He was both afraid and angry enough to cry as well. Sighing, he climbed to his bed.

Things would probably not be better in the morning.

On the other side of the castle, the Hufflepuffs were all huddled in their own common room. No one feeling secure enough to sleep alone, they had all carried their beddings into their common room, sleeping on the floor or couches. On the most comfortable couch lay the Head of their House. The Hufflepuff prefect had asked professor Sprout to spend the night with them all.

It had been an unusual request, but this was an unusual situation. She'd agreed immediately, knowing her children needed her the most now.

Most were probably thinking it could have been her disappearing. This would soothe their minds.

All around her, youngsters were asleep. She lay awake, wondering if her friend was still alive.

Albus must be mad not to try to rescue Minerva. There had to be something they could do. Something that didn't mean risking dozens of lives in something that might be completely futile. The fact that she had no idea what that something was didn't really mean a thing.

Ravenclaws were all already in bed. There had been tears and talks of fear, especially when the rumors of professor McGonagall's disappearance had been confirmed by their Head of House. But the Ravenclaw rooms were quiet now.

They would reserve energy for tomorrow, when they would need their logic with them.

Down in the dungeons, there were no tears or fear. Some of the Slytherins were asleep, uninterested in the whole mess. Those of the pureblood ancestry were celebrating. The schemes their parents had so painstakingly conjured were finally working.
Pansy Parkinson was gloriously drunk, staring at Crabbe and Goyle who were arguing over a piece of chocolate. It was almost hypnotic to watch those two. Funny as hell as well. She giggled as the boys started to shove each other around.

Men! They were such kids. In five minutes, the piece of chocolate would be forgotten, and the two of them would be best friends again. It had been like that ever since their first year.

She giggled again, falling sideways on the couch. When she awoke there in the morning, she'd probably throw up on the carpet. Too late to worry about that now.

Draco Malfoy was down in the dormitory, enjoying the silence there. He couldn't exactly sleep, so he lay on his bed staring at the ceiling.

This was guilt; a gnawing feeling that whatever was happening now might have been prevented by one single sentence from him. His silence had sealed his destiny. He could have just as well asked for the Dark Mark be branded on his arm, a mask handed to him.

It was a strange emotion, one he'd rarely felt before. Unlike simpler feelings, this clung to him no matter what he tried to think of. Draco wondered if it would ever go away. With his luck, the guilt would only grow during the years, festering inside of him until he couldn't live with it anymore.

Maybe he would get lucky and be killed in the battles against Dumbledore and his people.

Deeper in the dungeons, Severus Snape was fast asleep, a vial of the *Draught of the Living Death* half empty on his nightstand. It was an old companion of his, helping him to sleep whenever the darkness of his own mind and his past were swallowing him. Getting into bed, he'd known this might very well be the last night for a long time he could sleep through. Since the summon hadn't come before midnight tonight, it would quite probably come tomorrow.

He'd have to be alert then.

Albus Dumbledore kept vigil over the castle, sitting in his favorite chair with Fawkes watching over him.

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**Part 6**

The atmosphere in the Great Hall was subdued the next morning. By then, everyone had heard about professor McGonagall's disappearance. It drove away the disappointment about not being able to go to Hogsmeade from most of the students.

Even the Slytherins didn't really complain about it. The ones who might have, were suffering from headaches that morning and were in no condition to argue.

Draco was one of the few of the seventh year Slytherins who was able to sit through the whole breakfast without turning green. He ignored Blaise's worried looks and concentrated on eating.

He didn't want to look at anyone right now. Didn't want to see the fear and the worry on anyone's face. All the reddened eyes would just stare at him accusingly later when he tried to sleep again.

Finishing with the eggs and juice, he did cast a look at the Head Table. He couldn't help it. Ever since stepping into the Great Hall, he'd felt like someone was watching him. It wasn't hard to guess who.

Snape was sitting at his customary place, looking as cool and composed as ever. All the other
teachers looked rumpled and tired. He’d obviously had a good night, had probably slept through all those hours Draco had laid awake thinking dark thoughts.

It was frightening. How could the man just sit there as if nothing had happened? Draco felt an odd surge of resentment.

How could Snape be so calm about this, when he was anything but? Why couldn’t he be as serene? What did one have to do to stop feeling the guilt? Would the Dark Mark burn away his conscience as well?

He sat there, staring at Snape. A moment later the burning black gaze was turned on him.

Draco shivered at the look. His favorite professor was once again showing no emotion. There was no recognition in his eyes, no glee for a work well done. There was nothing.

Maybe that was all he had to look forward to. To be so cold inside he couldn’t feel anything. Maybe it was a blessing. That way it would stop hurting.

After breakfast, many opted to stay in the Great Hall. Especially the Gryffindors, who seemed reluctant to go to their common room, needing something to distract them from the constant worrying. Some of the professors stayed there as well. Professor Sprout had left for an hour to tend to her plants, but had then returned and was once again surrounded by her Hufflepuffs.

Harry watched his friends study. Hermione was clearly hiding her anxiety by concentrating on the Charms text. Her gaze moved on the page fast, her knuckles almost white as she held the book tight. Ron on the other hand was sitting there, staring into distance. In front of him, Trimble’s book of Dark Arts lay open on the introduction page.

It was painfully obvious he wasn't reading.

Trying to concentrate on his own book, Harry couldn't help thinking about this morning. He'd tried to talk to Ron, but his friend had refused to listen to him. It had brought back painful memories.

This was the thing he feared the most. By taking on the role people so eagerly offered him, he would have to start acting like a leader, would have to see the big picture.

He wanted nothing more than to grab his Firebolt and his dad’s cloak and rush to save McGonagall, but it would be suicidal. Voldemort had been gathering his forces, and there were dozens of Death Eaters with him all the time. He’d never even get close to his professor. Someone would hex him the moment he apparated close to the Malfoy Mansion.

Ever since he had first faced death -- not his own death, but the death of a friend -- Harry had started to read more about war. It was a part of his work in the Order, to get to know about these things.

Dumbledore had given him a list of books he should read, his expression grave. They had both known the wizarding world would not allow Harry to be a teenager. Nor a child, really. If something happened to the Headmaster, everyone would turn to Harry.

The responsibility had been the subject of many of his rants down in the dungeon. The unfairness of the whole thing, his fears of being inadequate for the job.

Now he knew why Dumbledore had insisted he read those books. Because without knowledge of strategy and casualties of war, he would probably be out there right now, getting himself and his friends killed.
It was possible to rescue professor McGonagall. Of course it was. Almost nothing was impossible in a world full of magic. Death was the only barrier that remained uncrossed from the other side.

Simple. They needed all the seventh years to be trained as Aurors. Then, with other Aurors, they would make a plan to attack the mansion. At that point, a detailed outlay of the house would come in handy. Maybe they could hex it out of Draco Malfoy. Then they would have to move the troops without anyone on the other side noticing. When they were ready, Snape would go to see Malfoy the elder. With someone inside, the Order would make their move.

Even if that was possible, it would take months to plan. Casualties would be high. But McGonagall might be saved. If she still was alive.

Harry sighed at the thought. He really didn't want to think about her being dead. Or anyone else dying.

The sound made Ron raise his head, and for a moment, they stared at each other. Both could see pain and worry in the other's eyes.

Ron was the first to look down. He couldn't really talk to Harry right now. Didn't want to admit that maybe he was right, because if he was, everything was just plain wrong.

Suppressing another sigh, Harry turned his attention to the book in front of him. Ron would have to figure this one out on his own. It would be painful and would probably take a long time.

He wished he could leave the Great Hall and hide for a while, but lunch time was approaching. Maybe after they'd eaten he could slip away and follow the familiar way to the dungeons. Even for only a few minutes. He needed that, needed someone to understand him.

Since he couldn't do that, he would study.

Lunch time came with the rest of the students and teachers arriving in the Great Hall. They were all there. Snape was looking as collected as ever. Dumbledore on the other hand looked nothing like their Headmaster.

It was like he had faded away. Shifted into the world between this and the one belonging to the ghosts. He didn't eat, but sat there, looking like any Muggle half his age. Old. Weary.

Harry couldn't watch him, feeling the last of his appetite disappear. Hot anger surged through him, and he knew that right now he could well take Ron with him and rush to do something really stupid. The only thing stopping him was the thought of Dumbledore's face if he tried something and failed. His death would definitely not make anything better.

Stabbing at his food with his fork, he sat there, trying not to notice how his friends were treating their meals the same way.

Half way through the lunch, a loud sound rang through the Hall. Everyone turned to the Head Table to see what was going on, only to look away the next moment. Glaring, Snape reached to retrieve his fallen fork.

He planted the utensil on the table, then glanced at his left forearm briefly. His expression never wavered.

The summoning was strong, his Mark burning with intensity that scared Snape. He cast a sideway look at Dumbledore, who seemed more aware now. The Headmaster looked grim. There was a slight nod.
Not hurrying to finish, Snape drank his juice. He couldn't leave in the middle of the lunch. That would be sloppy, and all the already curious Slytherins would undoubtedly report of his peculiar behavior to their parents. He had to appear cool and detached, even facing the calls of his Master. He had to seem like the perfect spy. Ironically, he was that, even though not the way most thought.

Snape waited until he was certain his leaving could be explained by his usual abruptness. With one last glance around the room, he prepared to get up.

His gaze met a worried green one. Cursing silently, Snape tried to look away from Potter. Damn the boy. He was the only one daring to stare at him. The only one with a question in his eyes.

Harry had known what would happen the moment he saw Snape fidget on his seat. The movement had been minuscule, but to him it had been painfully obvious. Snape was being called to Voldemort. He realized this might be the end of something, as well as the beginning.

What if Snape never came back?

The thought froze him. This could very well be the beginning of an open war. What if this was the big thing everyone had been waiting for? Voldemort would gather all his troops. It would mean Snape was not going to come back, at least not for a long time.

Everything would turn into a chaos as battlelines were drawn. Fudge would have to stop hiding in his illusions. He'd have to send the Aurors into Hogwarts.

There would be no studying for the N.E.W.T.s or O.W.L.s. The only training would be for Defense Against Dark Arts and healing, so that those who would go against Voldemort would have a chance for survival.

All those plans they had spent hours conjuring up in the Order meetings would become a reality.

Harry knew that, had known this would happen for a long time. Now that the moment was at hand, he realized he wasn't ready. Doubted he ever would be.

Wasn't ready to lead his friends into a fight. Wasn't ready to take that last step into maturity and leave the illusion of safety behind.

Wasn't ready to watch Snape walk away.

What a strange feeling. Squirming with the uncomfortable notion that he was being truly selfish, Harry stared into Snape's black eyes. He saw anger and defeat. Also a hint of resignation. Snape was well aware of where he'd be going.

The feeling of pain almost floored Harry. He didn't care if he didn't have anyone to talk to right then. He'd never go to Snape again if that meant the man would stay safe.

He wished he could find words to tell this to Snape, that he could turn his half formed thoughts into coherent sentences.

There was no chance for any words now.

It would look suspicious if he rushed after the man. It was the one thing he couldn't do, for suspicion amongst the Death Eaters could be fatal. Besides, he couldn't really go and tell Snape he wanted to thank him for being there for him. For not being an intolerable git.

He really couldn't think of a proper term to use. Even if some thought that the enemy of their enemy
was their friend, he was certain Snape would be appalled by such a word. It was not one Harry wanted to use either.

So he did not move. He simply sat there and stared at his professor. Tried to say all the things he was thinking with no words or expressions

Snape placed his napkin on the table, his gaze still locked with Harry's. After a moment of hesitation, he nodded his head slightly, as an acknowledgement. He was certain no one had seen the gesture but the one it was meant for. Then he got up.

Without a backward glance, he strode out of the Great Hall, using the side door.

"I wonder where he's going." Hermione's voice was puzzled as she watched Snape leave. She'd been keeping an eye on Dumbledore, worried about the old Headmaster, and had noticed the Potions master's weird behavior.

Harry schooled his expression immediately, aiming for nonchalance. "I have no idea." If only his words were true. He didn't want to know.

"He's probably in the middle of brewing some stupid potion."

It was the first thing Ron had said since the breakfast. Both his friends turned to him at the sound of his voice. He rarely sounded like his every word tasted of bile.

"I mean, that's what he does. Hides in the dungeons like a bloody vampire. Doesn't care what happens here." Ron barely left the rest unsaid. He was really mad, mad at everything. The Slytherins or the Head of the Slytherin House was always a good channel for all his anger.

This time, it didn't really work. "You..." Harry snapped his mouths shut. He couldn't say that Ron understood nothing, because he didn't. No one understood. The challenging look on his friend's face made him tingle with anger.

He reveled in the sensation, for anger was better than the melancholy that had filled him earlier. Anger was a strong feeling, one that could carry him on. It would burn inside of him, incinerating every sad thought.

The glare he threw at Ron was cold. Not an apologetic look like the ones that morning.

Hermione watched her friends exchange angry looks and then continue eating in the freezing silence. She had a sinking feeling. Whatever had just happened between those two, it had made things worse somehow. She had no idea how to make everything all right again. It was beyond even her knowledge.

She wished professor McGonagall were here.

Part 7

The Malfoy Mansion was a bleak and dismal place, built centuries ago during a time when opulence and pomp warred with good taste. It was painfully obvious which had won here. Long corridors and low ceilings in the levels closer to the ground. Huge ballrooms and dining halls in upper levels. Almost every surface possible was gilded. The glow of the torches multiplied by the warm gold.

Probably the only warm thing in the whole house. Unlike Hogwarts, that glowed with a warm welcome, the Malfoy Mansion almost oozed coldness and malevolence. Not a place one would visit
Snape’s eyes were hurting. Still he kept staring straight ahead, following the path set out by the guttering torches.

He reached the end of the corridor, finally finding himself in a large hall. Even with his love for dungeons, he was happy to find himself out of the seemingly endless maze of the basement. There were too many painful memories here, too many dark secrets only a few men alive knew of.

Severus Snape wished he wasn’t one of them.

It had been a long time since he’d last slept. He wasn’t certain what time it was. Or what day. He remembered arriving at the Malfoy Mansion early on Saturday afternoon. After that, it was a blur.

All the Death Eaters had been there, shivering and cowering before their Master. The usual prostrating had been brief this time, at least for Snape. He’d been whisked away to the familiar laboratory, to test some samples. He didn’t need to be told whose blood was in the small vial he’d been handed.

He’d been spared all the ‘fun’ the Death Eaters had been having. The sounds of laughter and screams of pain had wafted even down to the basement. Snape had ignored all sounds, concentrating on his work.

It had been a long evening, and an even longer night. He was testing the blood he’d been given against certain potions, seeking to find out if it was safe to use various truth potions on their prisoner. It had been a gruesome task to calculate exactly how much poisons the bloodstream could handle before the person died in agony.

Snape had worked diligently, pushing away everything but this duty. It was a necessity. His part in this senseless drama.

Hours had passed as he’d mixed his potions. He’d managed to sleep for two hours as the shrivelfig was soaking in the goat milk. Other than that, he’d been working constantly.

Now it was over. He had given his full report to Voldemort, and had blessedly been dismissed.

The worst part was still ahead, he feared.

Standing alone in the vast hall, Snape wondered where to go next. He wanted nothing but to find a bed and sleep for hours. The basement of the mansion was not designed for brewing potions, and the stagnant air had made his eyes water as he’d worked over the hot cauldrons.

Cleaning up sounded marvelous as well. Getting something to eat would be almost as good.

He wouldn’t be able to listen to the needs of his aching body yet. He had a message to deliver. The sooner he found the owner of the house, the sooner he could rest.

Turned out he didn’t need to go looking for the man. The sound of boots hitting cold stone came from one of the corridors, followed by a short silence.

"Well?"

Snape turned to see Lucius Malfoy standing there. He'd rarely seen the always so sophisticated man look so anxious. This time there was a valid reason for such an emotion. If what he heard was right, most of Lucius’ future depended on this. "I tested the sample."
"I know that." Cold voice held only a hint of fear in it. Lucius' face contorted in annoyance. "What did it reveal?"

The most annoying part of the test had been the fact that Snape had been completely certain of the outcome. "She has taken the *Ueraciter Tutis* serum. I'm sorry, Lucius." He wasn't really.

Lucius didn't show his disappointment. His gaze icy, he asked, "Are you absolutely sure it would work."

"Yes." Of course Snape was sure. He'd made the potion himself. It had been a difficult one to make, even more difficult to hand to people he didn't completely detest.

But it was a good precaution.

He hadn't liked it when Dumbledore had asked him to brew the potion for him and a couple of other members of the Order. It was one of the nastiest potions he knew; one that would react badly if the person who'd ingested it was forced to drink *Veritaserum*. It would cause an instant and messy death.

To his knowledge, only five people alive had taken the potion. Four of them only recently; Albus, Minerva, Mundungus and Arabella. Most of the others didn't even know such a potion existed.

It was a big decision to make, to be willing to sacrifice oneself to protect the others. The serum wasn't fool proof. Some lie detecting charms would still work, but no one would be able to make a person under its influence spill every truth out.

An excellent protection for a spy who might one day be caught by those he spied upon.

Lucius let out a deep sigh at that. He'd known it was a gamble, but it still stung to lose. With his Master, it was quite probable that dignity wouldn't be the only thing he lost. This complicated things. "I see."

"Our Master is waiting for you." Deciding not to comment on their prisoner's condition, Snape winced as his stomach made a rather inappropriate sound. "While you're seeing him, might I be so bold as to..."

"Yes, yes." Waving impatiently at the corridors on the left, Lucius cut the sentence. "Victor will take you to the kitchen. I'm certain the house elves will get you something to eat."

Snape wasn't at all surprised to see Crabbe Sr. step out of the shadows. It was such a familiar sight, he rarely even thought about either generation of Malfoys without their silent companions. A shame really. He knew Vincent and Gregory were abysmal students, but was certain they wouldn't be quite that bad without years of conditioning.

Not paying any attention to his fellow Death Eater, Lucius brushed past Snape and strode to the corridor leading to the basement. He was followed by the huge form of the elder Goyle.

"The kitchen is this way," Crabbe mumbled. He guided Snape to the cavernous kitchen, not bothering to dodge the scurrying house elves. It was clear he didn't care if some of them got trampled under his big feet.

Snape bit his tongue to keep the scathing words unsaid. He knew where the kitchens were; it wasn't like this was his first visit to the mansion. He knew this was Lucius' way of showing him his superiority and mistrust.

It was a part of a foolish game they had been playing for years. The Malfoys had always been rich
and powerful. The Snapes had not been elite, but they were purebloods, one of the older wizarding families. Their rivalry had always been subtle, Snapes usually showing allegiance to the more powerful House.

Lucius had always reveled in Snape's quiet withdrawal. Especially during the years of Voldemort's absence, it had amused him to pay visits to Hogwarts, shoving his position on the board of governors down the simple Potions master's throat. It was somewhat different now.

This whole scheme wasn't going on very well. It was clear whom Voldemort would blame. It certainly wasn't the simple Potions master who had only done his job, and done it well.

Snape didn't even try to hide the smile that curled up his upper lip.

The house elves at the mansion all looked scared, running around in eerie silence, bringing the two Death Eaters enough food to feed a small army. Snape was grateful of the fact. He was absolutely starving. It was good that Crabbe was about as loquacious as the house elves. He didn't want to hear idiotic stuttering right now.

About half an hour later, the door to the kitchen opened, and a slightly disheveled looking Goyle sneaked in. He looked relieved as the door slammed shut behind him, as if he was hiding from someone.

It wasn't all that difficult to guess from whom.

"What happened?" Lowering a small cake he'd been nibbling at, Crabbe looked up to his friend.

Goyle's gaze moved from him to Snape and then to the feast on the table. He stepped closer to the table, but then seemed to change his mind. "Our lord was not pleased with lord Malfoy."

The title made Snape raise an eyebrow. He chose not to say anything.

"He... He said some things to him. I didn't really... Um... Hear them, but he sounded angry." Goyle would rather die than admit that he didn't understand what had been said in front of a professor. Snape had always been brainy, and sometimes Goyle couldn't help feeling uncomfortable in his presence.

Crabbe nodded. It was familiar to him. Their lord seemed angry all the time now, but the anger wasn't often directed at lord Malfoy. It was a frightening thought.

"So he said something about going back to the house. Took lord Malfoy with him."

That made Snape look up, his expression blank. "He took Lucius with him?" Seeing the nod, he mused out loud, "I wonder what he wants me to do now."

Good thing he said that. Goyle had almost forgot. "Oh, he said you should help us interrogate the prisoner, even though he doubts she will talk. Then we should leave the body somewhere they'll find it. And you go home." He had to close his eyes to remember all details correctly.

Sometimes lord Voldemort's plans were so darn complicated. He was certain he'd remembered right this time.

Snape didn't let any of his emotions show on his face. Of course. He had anticipated this. It was surprising Voldemort himself hadn't stayed to witness the whole thing. Such spectacles were usually his greatest joy, and he took great pleasure in watching his Death Eaters torture others.
He wanted to refuse, wanted to walk away right now no matter how impossible a dream it was. He would not do anything to cause displeasure to the Dark Lord.

Suddenly he didn't have any of his appetite left. "All right. Perhaps you should show me where she's being held." Cool, clipped tones.

Goyle was busy stuffing a small cake into his mouth, and he took his time chewing and swallowing before he said, "Don't you need to rest first? You spent awfully long in the laboratory. I could show you to a guest room."

The only reply he got was a cold stare.

"Or I could show you where we're keeping her." It was clear now why Gregory was in awe of his professor. Snape certainly could look chilling.

Snape stood up slowly. His body ached all over, and he wanted nothing more than to go to bed, but even the thought of sleep was impossible now. He would only spend hours staring into darkness, wondering what was happening to Minerva while he rested.

Perfectly aware of the tastes of his fellow Death Eaters, he knew a _cruciatus_ flung at her and then a merciful death would a bliss.

"Show me." He motioned at the door.

The journey through the corridors was long. Crabbe and Goyle both walked ahead, as they headed back towards the basement.

Snape tried to detach himself from what he was doing. He refused to think of anything beyond this moment, not lingering in the past either. His mind kept repeating his usual mantra. _He was Severus Snape, the Potions master of Hogwarts. A former Death Eater, current spy. He owed his life to..._ He skipped that part over, jumping straight to; _The Order must survive. He would do anything for the Order._

It didn't really help. With every step his feet grew heavier, more reluctant to walk towards the small room they were heading to. He could already hear laughter and screaming.

So much screaming.

"Here we are." Goyle looked delighted as they reached the door. It was a heavy wooden one, designed to keep people locked in. He didn't hesitate at all, but pushed the door open.

He and Crabbe walked straight in. Snape on the other hand stood by the door, closing it behind him. He tried to justify his hesitation by the need to get his eyes adjusted to the light, knowing it was a lie.

There were about half a dozen robed men standing in the room. Some had their masks on, others had opted to go without. After all, their Master wasn't present, and those damn things were extremely uncomfortable. A few turned to see who had entered, but as soon as they saw the silent trio, they turned their attention back to the woman lying on the floor.

Snape watched as Crabbe walked slowly towards their prisoner. He didn't even flinch as the man raised his wand and cast a very clumsy _cruciatus._

A shrill scream filled the room, the agonized sound breaking a moment later as Minerva McGonagall convulsed on the floor, trying to escape the overwhelming pain. Her long grey hair was obscuring her face, her robes torn and filthy. It was quite obvious the Death Eaters had been having fun that
night.

Crabbe lowered his wand. "I like the way she screams."

On the floor, McGonagall twitched a few times before lying still. She took deep breaths before lifting a shaking hand to brush her hair out of her face. Somehow she managed to cast a look of pure contempt on her tormentor.

The words made Snape want to punch Crabbe, but as always, he locked the emotion away. It was time for him to play his part. Walking slowly out of the shadows, he approached their prisoner. "It's definitely better than her endless yapping about her Gryffindors." His tone a low purr, oozing with malice.

"Severus?" Fighting to focus her gaze, McGonagall lifted her head, looking up at her colleague. "Severus?"

Snape hoped she was still in control of her emotions. "Good evening, Minerva. Imagine my surprise seeing you here." His mind was racing even as he uttered the lines.

There was only one exit from the room, no way to get past the Death Eaters. Minerva wouldn't be able to escape, even if she had a wand. She looked barely able to sit up. He knew there wouldn't be a cavalry coming any time soon. The Order wasn't ready for an open war against the Death Eaters and Voldemort. Lives would be lost for nothing.

Keeping that in mind, he crouched next to McGonagall, grabbing her hair and tilting her head back. He smiled at the long cut on her cheek, hearing Crabbe and Goyle snicker on the background. "You have something on your face." That made the other Death Eaters laugh as well.

McGonagall blinked. "But how..." It looked as if she realized something, for her expression changed from confused into enraged. "You traitor!"

"Depends on the point of view, really." Snape was grateful for her quick mind. Not that he'd ever tell her that. Not that he'd ever have a chance to tell her that. "You Gryffindors always see everything in black and white."

The Death Eaters laughed at that, a sound that seemed to echo in the small room forever.

It wasn't as if Snape didn't realize his own words proved the narrowmindedness of the Death Eaters - especially the Slytherins -- as well. He was certain he was the only one to appreciate the irony.

McGonagall muttered something, her voice too quiet for anyone to hear. There was a steely look in her eyes, and Snape knew she wanted to tell him something, but couldn't with all the others listening. Tightening his hold on the grey mane of hair, he leaned down a bit.

"Tell Albus to continue the fight till you kill the bastard." It was whispered with determination.

As Snape lifted his head, he could see forgiveness in McGonagall's gaze. It made him swallow hard. Not an emotion people usually showed him. Only one person had ever really forgiven him; Albus Dumbledore.

Before her old colleague could say anything, McGonagall raised her head and spat on Snape. She managed a broken laughter, watching his face darken as spittle ran down his cheek. "Traitor!"

Some of the Death Eaters muttered something at that, surprised the old bag still had the strength to do that. It would have been quite amusing to test her resolve, to find her breaking point. They all knew
that it would have been simply the matter of time until she cried and begged to be killed. Too bad they wouldn't be able to do that. Snape was already whipping his wand out, and by the look on his face, there was only one curse in his mind right now.

Snape's gaze was unreadable as he stared at McGonagall. He thought of how the two of them had always been natural enemies. The Head of Slytherin and the Head of Gryffindor. Minerva with her ridiculous interpretation of rules. Her incomprehensible trust and hope in people.

Her utter devotion in her job, her total loyalty towards Albus Dumbledore. His most trusted ally. It probably went far beyond that.

He remembered the way Albus had suddenly seemed to age before his eyes when they heard of her disappearance. Every person had their limits, and even though the death of Minerva McGonagall wouldn't kill the Headmaster, his eyes would lose their twinkle, and he'd start looking his true age.

The Order was more than just one man; it was the only thing standing between the wizarding world and Voldemort, the one thing keeping everyone safe. They needed all the information he could get, so he could not let the Death Eaters find out he was a spy. Couldn't risk hundreds of lives because of one. He had only one choice right now, one thing to do.

It would be mercy, not murder. He knew what would happen to Minerva if he simply left. She'd be tortured for countless of hours until she'd beg to be killed. There would be unimaginable pain and humiliation, and it wouldn't stop until there was nothing left of her mind.

Snape held his wand firmly. Two simple words. Determination behind them. That was all it would take. He knew it was the only way. She knew it as well, closing her eyes against the green sparks.


He was glad she wasn't looking at him anymore. The clear intelligent gaze would only remind him of things he couldn't afford to think right now. Of the compassion Dumbledore had shown him as he'd crawled to Hogwarts years ago, seeking for some kind of a redemption. His fears and pain after realizing what he'd done, years of self loathing; those passed and those yet to come.

Pushing all thoughts away, he concentrated on the curse.

*Avada Kedavra. Avada Kedavra. Avada Kedavra...*

Not the first time he used the Unforgivable. He remembered thinking about the killing curse long ago, before he had any blood on his hands. He'd always thought it was a rather easy way to die. Also an easy way to kill. What an idiot he'd been. There was nothing easy about staring your colleague in the face when you were about to kill her.

Wouldn't have been much easier if she'd been an enemy. As a Death Eater, he'd indeed been a failure. Killing wasn't something he'd ever enjoyed.

*Avada Kedavra. Avada Kedavra...*

It was now or never. The sneer he forced on his lips probably looked more like a grimace of pain, but it didn't matter. The twinkle in Albus Dumbledore's eyes didn't matter and neither did all the Gryffindors who would mourn McGonagall's death.

There would be nightmares, and days he spent walking around Hogwarts like a ghost. His empty quest for some kind of a redemption was going to damn his soul forever.
But there was nothing he could do to change what had to happen. His words to Harry had been a lie. A cruel joke fate was now playing on him. Sometimes, there was no choice.

Snape stood up slowly, his wand pointing at McGonagall's heart. Ignoring every excuse his mind was conjuring up, he ground out, "Avada..."

Part 8

Harry had never thought he'd come to hate any part of Hogwarts. The castle was the only real home he'd ever known, and there was no place there he absolutely loathed.

He didn't even hate the Chamber of Secrets. It gave him the creeps and was really disgusting, but he didn't have any feelings towards it as a place. As long as he didn't have to go there ever again, he was completely okay with its existence.

The Great Hall on the other hand was becoming a place he couldn't stand.

It had always been the heart of Hogwarts; a warm place where everyone was welcome. Now it had become a prison of sorts. A place from which Harry couldn't really escape.

Not that he really wanted to. He hated it still. Because no matter how hard he tried to, he couldn't stay away for long. Needed to be there in case something happened.

This was a rare moment of peace. Everyone else was in the Great Hall, and he had the dormitory all to himself.

"What's with the sad face?" Voice gentle, Sirius sat next to his godson. He'd arrived with Remus late last evening, and had spent the night as Snuffles in the seventh year dormitory. He still wasn't aware of everything that was happening here, but could sense a huge amount of tension. Even in his human form.

Harry looked up and tried to smile a little. He wondered what Sirius would say if he told him the truth; that he wasn't only worried about professor McGonagall, but about Snape as well. That he hated staying in the dormitory no matter how awful it was to sit at the table in the Great Hall, trying not to watch the door all the time.

"Just thinking... About stuff." It was easier to shrug the question off and let his godfather draw his own conclusions than to explain. "Nothing serious."

Sirius nodded, letting the white lie slip by. He knew what Harry must feel like now. After all, it was the way every single Gryffindor was feeling, him and Remus included.

They had all hated the Head of their House at some point. Also loved her. Respected her a lot, no matter what they called the old bat. Having her in Voldemort's clutches was making everyone mad.

Only Dumbledore's quiet words about protecting Harry had kept Sirius from rushing into danger.

It had been a frustrating day. Harry had spent most of it in the Great Hall, fidgeting. There had been an awful silence between him and Ron, both glaring at each other from time to time. He hated the way things were turning out. Nothing was clear right now, not even if the kidnapping of McGonagall had truly been the first act of the open war everyone had been waiting for.

Harry leaned against Sirius, wishing he had someone to talk to. Being held close was a very good substitute though. Especially now that he could be openly sad, and didn't have to think about
worrying anyone.

Sadness wasn't the only emotion churning inside of him. He was also scared. This might well be the
time he had to be strong. The dawn of the battles. And he felt lost.

Apparently that was common these days. Even Dumbledore seemed almost unaware of his
surroundings as he sat in his usual place in the middle of the Head Table, careful not to look at the
empty place on his right.

Harry didn't know what to do. If things didn't change, hysteria would spread throughout the school
like a fire. People would need someone to guide them. He certainly didn't want to be the one to guide
anyone. Not now.

The only problem was that people would undoubtedly look to him for guidance.

He decided not to think about that and leaned closer to Sirius. The warm embrace felt so good.

There was a soft knock on the door and a moment later Remus Lupin peeked into the room. He
smiled at the sight that greeted him, ignoring the way the huge black dog growled at him. "Sorry
about that." He sneaked inside and closed the door behind him. "I just came from Dumbledore. He
said we should go to his quarters after dinner. Another meeting."

"Oh." Easing away the scowl, Sirius sat back on the bed next to Harry. "He wants us all there?
Openly?"

People had looked stunned at the return of professor Lupin. His presence had not been explained.
Neither had been the black dog accompanying him everywhere.

Remus nodded slightly. "I believe he thinks it's time for us to show ourselves. We can't afford to wait
for Severus to come back before making our plans."

He gained another scowl at the use of that name, but fortunately Sirius didn't say anything.

"So it's after dinner then?" Harry was proud of the way his voice stayed firm. How on earth was he
supposed to suffer through yet another meal in the Great Hall? It would be torture; trying not to stare
at Dumbledore or Ron or the door all the time.

"Yes," Remus said.

Harry nodded at that. He felt Sirius lean against him again and was glad of the support.

He'd left the Great Hall a little after lunch. It had been hard, but staying would have been impossible.
The crowd had started to make him nuts, not to mention the depressive mood at the Gryffindor table.

No one had said anything as he'd wandered through the halls, walking slowly towards the
Gryffindor tower. For a moment, he'd thought about hiding in the dungeons, but even thinking about
going there to sit outside the empty rooms made him feel sick.

It was no good hiding down there if he had to do it alone.

Harry had tried to work on his assignments once he'd reached the dormitory, but somehow he simply
couldn't concentrate on anything important. He'd thought of writing a paper for the next day's
Divinations class -- if there would indeed be any classes held on Monday -- but had decided against
it.
Writing about doom and destruction would be wallowing. He couldn't afford any of that right now.

Academics didn't really matter. If anything, he could always tell Trelawney that Snuffles had eaten his homework. The Divinations professor had been suitably impressed seeing the dog, muttering something about a Grim. She would undoubtedly see any action by him as an omen.

The thought brought a genuine smile to Harry's lips. He'd been happy to see Sirius. His godfather had sneaked into his rooms before he'd started to think really gloomy thoughts, and had managed to keep him entertained for hours. Nothing major; they had played some cards and Sirius had talked about his life with Remus, trying to gloss over certain details Harry already suspected.

It had been peaceful, even though neither of them was famous for being patient. Both ached to do something.

Harry had been glad for the distraction. Without Sirius here, he would have been a nervous wreck. This way, he would probably be able to stay relatively calm during the dinner. He didn't know about the Order meeting.

He would have to wait and see.

The hallways were deserted as Harry and Remus walked towards the Great Hall. Snuffles padded behind them, his tail between his legs. The atmosphere in the whole school was oppressing even with no one at sight. Everyone was probably already at dinner.

Most of the students were literally living in the huge room, comforted by the crowd. It was probably safe to say the students had never studied as hard as they had for the past two days. Some played wizard's chess; most just sat there, reading a text book.

Remus and Snuffles stayed at the other end of the room with some other Order members. None of them wanted to sit at the Head Table.

With a parting glance, Harry walked to his usual place at the Gryffindor table. He smiled wanly at the big pile of books next to Hermione's chair. She had probably read them all. At least once. He tried to meet Ron's gaze, but his friend kept staring at his empty plate.

It was probably for the best. Harry was too tired to fight anyway. He hadn't slept well, strange dreams flinching him up every few hours. In the end, he'd spent the rest of the night sitting by the window.

Hoping his scar wouldn't start to burn.

Food appeared, and the sound of utensils clinking against porcelain filled the room. Eating was a simple pleasure, keeping the body happy even as the mind was full of fear.

Hermione looked up from her plate, her gaze moving first to Ron, then to Harry. "Did you hear there'll be a meeting later on today?"

"Yeah." A simple word after which Ron continued eating.

"Yes, Remus told me," Harry said. He was glad Hermione had asked. The silence was getting on his nerves. "Dumbledore asked him and Snuffles there as well."

That made Hermione shiver. It meant things were getting serious, for she had never seen those two attend to a meeting before. "Good. I mean, we should be prepared for anything." A safe, rather neutral way to say they were screwed.
"I guess that's the plan." Harry's words were calm and quiet as well, not reflecting any of his inner turmoil. He cut through a piece of fish and shoved it into his mouth, the chewing a good way to hide the fact that he had nothing more to say.

All three of them ate in silence.

Harry was the first to lower his fork. He wasn't hungry anyway. Everything tasted like sawdust in his mouth. He should know; the taste had woken him up many times in the past, when Dudley had jumped on the stairs, sending sawdust flying down on his face from the ceiling of the small cupboard.

People around him were busy eating. He could see the vacant look on Neville as he shoveled more food into his mouth. The same expression was on many other Gryffindors.

That thought made him glance at the Slytherin table. Most of the looks there were bored. A certain few even seemingly jubilant. He didn't look at the most annoying person there. Didn't want to chance losing his temper over the infuriating smirk that would certainly be on Malfoy's face.

Out of habit, Harry turned his attention to the Head Table. The vacant seat at the end of it was a painful reminder of his life being thrown upside down again. Just as he'd found some peace, it had been yanked away. It seemed to be the story of his life, this disappointment as bitter as all the rest of them.

Something had changed. He could almost sense it in the air. Shivering slightly, he looked at Dumbledore, meeting his clear blue gaze.

The Headmaster was sitting straight. There was pain and anger in his eyes, replacing the awful vacancy. He nodded slightly at Harry.

Harry nodded right back. He felt a strange mixture of pain and relief. This meant he wouldn't have to take responsibility for everything. Dumbledore was pushing his personal feelings away, concentrating on keeping his people safe.

After a long moment, he turned his attention back to his plate. Yes. He was finished here. No matter how difficult it would be, he would follow the others to yet another meeting, would listen to whatever plans were conjured.

Because the truth was, he had no other choice.

On the other side of the table, Ron tried very hard to look like he wasn't watching Harry.

He'd spent the whole day in the Great Hall, trying to study, trying not to think about professor McGonagall. Evading Hermione's questions about what was going on with him and Harry.

Mostly because he didn't know the answer to that. He'd been infuriated by the cold way Harry had shrugged off the whole kidnapping as if it didn't mean anything. What good was it to have a secret Order if they were just going to sit back and watch one of them die?

He didn't know why Harry would react like that. Of course he didn't, because his best friend in the whole world didn't really talk to him. Not about the important things. Ron wasn't a complete moron; he knew there were things going on with Harry he didn't know anything about. It had taken him some time to figure it out, but now that he did, it was too obvious to ignore anymore.

Keeping his head down, he drank the last of his hot chocolate. The house elves had been right in including it on the menu tonight. Chocolate was always soothing, no matter the form.
Ron wondered if he should have a word with Harry after all. Maybe ask him for an explanation. There could well be a reason for all this. Something that would make everything all right again.

He would talk to him after the Order meeting.

Seeing most of the students were finishing their meal, Dumbledore sat up straighter, his gaze sweeping over the vast room. It was time he spoke to his people. Tomorrow would see the beginning of a new week, and they would have to deal with classes. Both Transfigurations and Potions classes would be postponed, but otherwise, life in Hogwarts had to continue.

"May I have your attention for a moment, please?" Dumbledore felt everyone look at him. "Tomorrow morning, classes will..." That was as far as he ever got with the sentence.

The enormous door leading to the main hallway banged open. A cool breeze wafting from the outer hallway made the candles flicker, and for a moment, the whole Hall was filled with ominous shadows.

A frightened silence settled over the room.

Even though the students knew there were wards around Hogwarts, there was no one who didn't feel a stab of terror right that moment. Were the Death Eaters attacking? At least it looked like someone was approaching.

"Oh my good God!" To everyone's astonishment, it was uttered by the DADA professor. She was the only person capable of speech. Everyone else simply stared.

Taking slow, pained steps, Severus Snape walked into the Great Hall. He was a shocking sight; his hair wet, glued against his head, robes torn and muddy. There were bloody scrapes on his face, the red blood a clear contrast against the chalk white skin.

He was carrying something in his arms, a limp form of a human being.

Dumbledore rose slowly to his feet. His gaze was locked on the slowly approaching man, as if he was afraid he would disappear if he let him out of his sight. "Severus..."

"You... should... probably..." Snape took one more step, swaying on his feet. He shuddered, his step faltering.

Everyone just stared as he slowly sank to his knees, the limp form in his arms firmly pressed against his chest.

The silence in the room was shattering. It was almost as if people were frozen in place. No one dared to approach the Potions master. Finally Dumbledore stepped away from the table and walked towards Snape.

He realized his hands were shaking, and did nothing to hide his shock. Not even for the sake of the students. The body lying in Snape's arms was so familiar, so heartbreakingly still. He didn't want to go close enough to confirm his terrible suspicion, but he had to.

Snape raised his head, focusing his dark gaze on the Headmaster. Struggling to get the words out, he said, "Call... for Poppy. She's barely... alive."

The words made Dumbledore halt for just a second. Then he rushed towards Snape, yelling, "Get Poppy here. Now!" The last few steps were a blur, and then he was kneeling beside the tattered figures, his hand going to brush against the mop of grey hair covering the head resting on Snape's
shoulder. "Minerva..."

"Dear Merlin!" Neville's gasp echoed in the room. "It's professor McGonagall!"

It seemed to be the permission everybody needed to start talking again. Gryffindors rushed up, encircling their professors, needing to see McGonagall. Most of them were crying and smiling at the same time. At least now there was hope, no matter how faint.

Ron and Seamus had to climb over the table to reach the others, but neither seemed to care. Especially Ron didn't seem to notice anything around him. His whole attention was tuned to the scene before them.

"She's alive! Did you hear that? She's alive!" Hermione kept tugging at Harry's sleeve as she sniffed the words out. She couldn't believe this was true. After all the fear, the Head of their House was alive!

Harry patted her shoulder, smiling brightly. Yes. She was indeed alive. And Snape was back. Everything was all right again.

Madam Pomfrey appeared from the side door, hurrying through the crowd, making shooing noises as the most stunned Gryffindors didn't seem to understand to move out of her way quickly enough.

With Dumbledore's assistance, she managed to ease McGonagall on the floor. Ignoring everything else, she went to work, knowing they could still lose her.

As the mediwitch worked, the Headmaster turned to look at Snape, who was slumped on the floor. His wounds looked even worse this close up. Bringing Minerva back had not been easy.

Snape raised his gaze up from the floor again, as he felt a hand land on his shoulder. He looked into Dumbledore's eyes, swaying a little as he saw the brightness shining there.

"Oh Severus. You foolish boy. You foolish, foolish boy!" Voice thick with emotion, Dumbledore squeezed his shoulder, unable to do anything else right now.

"We need to get her to the infirmary." Madam Pomfrey's voice cut through the commotion. She stood up, replacing her wand and a couple of small vials into the small bag she carried. Glancing at the other teachers, she gestured at Hagrid to come closer. "Floating her will disrupt the stabilizing charm. Would you please carry her?"

Silent tears running down his cheeks only to disappear into his beard, Hagrid nodded a few times before bending down to lift McGonagall from the floor.

"Somebody get him to the infirmary as well!" Pointing at Snape, Madam Pomfrey hurried to follow the half-giant out of the Great Hall. Most of the professors rushed after them.

An eerie silence fell in the vast room.

Harry turned to look at the Slytherin table. Every one of the Slytherins were still sitting there, looking completely poleaxed. Draco Malfoy seemed to be saying something over and over again, but there was no sound whatsoever coming from his mouth. All his housemates seemed as stunned.

None of them got up to see how Snape was doing. They all just sat and stared.

"Come on, Severus." Smiling a little, Dumbledore nudged the Potions master gently. "You heard Poppy. You should get up now."
Snape took a deep breath and then nodded.

The motion seemed to break a spell. Some of the students left the Slytherin table, walking towards the Head of their House. Blaise Zabini seemed to be the first one to react.

Seeing Dumbledore move to help Snape up, Harry stepped forward as well. He could help. Snape looked so weak he'd probably fall on his face if he didn't have someone to lean on.

"I... can manage... just fine." It was amazing how cool the words were, when Snape's voice was so weak. Declining the Headmaster's offered help, he slowly climbed to his feet. He noticed Harry standing close by, and his black eyes burned with a very clear message.

Realizing Snape did definitely not want his help, Harry stood back and watched in silence as Snape walked out of the room. It looked painful, the slow measured steps the man took. He didn't allow any of the pain show on his face, his expression a cold mask.

"I believe it's best if you all went to your Houses now." Dumbledore turned to address the students before he reached for the door. "Prefects, would you please?" The polite tones just barely softened the command.

There was a rush of movement, people hurrying to obey.

"Are you coming?" Something made Hermione ask that. She'd seen the expression on her friend's face, and knew it was quite probable that he'd disappear for the night again.

Harry shook his head, not even bothering to hide his intentions. "No. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right." With that, he headed towards the side door.

No one really paid any attention to him. People were smiling and laughing, happy to be on their way to their common rooms. The teachers and the prefects herded the crowd towards the staircases, urging even the petrified Slytherins to leave the Great Hall.

Slipping out of the side door through which Snape and Dumbledore had disappeared a moment ago, Harry inhaled deeply. He knew there was an idiotic smile on his lips, but didn't care.

He knew his friends would want to know why he'd left, not to mention Sirius. His godfather would probably be frantic, searching for him in the Gryffindor tower, sniffing around for his scent. All the explanations could wait. He needed to do this now.

It was strange. He couldn't explain any of this to himself so that it made sense. Had no idea why he felt he had to be here, trailing the annoying Potions master. The man who would definitely not want his company right now. Still, here he was.

He wasn't surprised to see Snape leaning against the wall only a few steps away from the door. It was clear he was at the end of his rope. The Headmaster was standing at his side.

"Would it have hurt you to show your humanity in front of the children this once?" Dumbledore sounded sad. He saw Harry approach, and smiled gently. "Harry. Help me get this stubborn man into the infirmary before he collapses."

Harry was glad to comply, slipping close to Snape, and wrapping his arm around his waist. On the other side of the man, Dumbledore was copying his movements.

"I do not... need the assistance... of the greatest... nuisance of the... wizarding world," Snape ground out from between his teeth.
"Nevertheless, I will help you." Twinkle in his eyes, Dumbledore started their way across the corridors. "And I believe Harry won't mind this either."

Deciding it was extremely wise not to comment on that, Harry simply grinned at the Headmaster. Without any further delay, they headed towards the infirmary.

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**Part 9**

"Get out."

The words, even though said with calm and quiet voice, silenced everyone in the infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey nodded at the silence. "That's better. Now if you insist on arguing and yelling, be so kind as to do it somewhere else. This is a hospital, and we have sick people here."

Most of the people gathered in the infirmary managed to actually look embarrassed. With a parting glance at professor McGonagall who was still unconscious, they started to file out, dodging the black dog sitting in the doorway.

Professor Dumbledore remained where he stood, refusing to budge. "We will meet tomorrow," he said to anyone who was listening, knowing the Order would get the message. They needed to know about the things that had just happened, but this was not the time for a meeting. Everyone was tired and relieved, and probably needed a good night's sleep before anything else happened.

It was also a moment for him to be completely selfish. He'd managed to stay calm during the terrible hours of waiting, refusing to think about his old friend. Now that she was lying here, pale as a ghost, he wanted a few hours for just himself. Didn't want to be forced away from Minerva's sickbed.

Madam Pomfrey had examined her earlier and announced she would live. She'd sent an owl to St. Mungo's for consultation, but was confident in her skills in treating her patient.

Soon, there were only five people left in the infirmary. Madam Hooch and McGonagall were both sleeping. Snape on the other hand was wide awake, glaring angrily at Poppy, who was measuring potions for him to drink.

"I am perfectly capable of taking the appropriate potions myself." Grimacing with distaste, he took the offered spoon anyway and swallowed the syrupy concoction.

Poppy glared right back. "Don't be ridiculous, Severus. You should stay in bed for at least two days. Preferably here in the infirmary, so I can monitor you."

That sounded about as much fun as a shopping expedition in the Muggle world. Snape wondered if Poppy really imagined he would stay. "No. If you must fuss over me, go ahead and do it quickly so I can leave."

With a suffering sigh, Poppy went to get some bandages. The man was truly infuriating!

Dumbledore turned his attention from Minerva for a moment, taking in the pained look on Snape's face. It didn't seem to be completely due to physical discomfort. "What happened, Severus?"

"Would you mind waiting until I get some sleep before I tell you all the sordid details?" Only an ounce of his usual sarcasm in his voice, Snape sighed. "I have something to do before I can rest, and I..." He couldn't find the proper words for this. The familiar feeling of helplessness washed over him, and he hated it. Hated it just like he had all those years ago when he'd first bared whatever was left of
his soul before this man.

Gaze full of warmth, Dumbledore nodded. Right this moment, he couldn't refuse Severus anything. He would give him whatever he wanted. "All right. We will talk about this tomorrow."

After Poppy had finished bandaging Snape' arm, she grudgingly allowed him to leave. She knew the only way to keep him in her infirmary was to knock him unconscious. That went against her oath, so she settled for muttering unflattering things about stubborn men as he slowly walked out.

Snape let out a deep breath as he stepped out to the corridor. He hated spending time at the infirmary. Hated all the fussing and being at the center of attention.

Maybe he should have followed the last bit of reason he had, then, a small voice chided inside his head. He snorted at that. Yes. Maybe he should have. It was so easy to think of that now, when it was all over.

"Um... Professor? I mean, Snape?"

The hesitant voice made Snape roll his eyes. Perfect! Just the person he least wanted to see right now. Not counting Voldemort and his cohorts, of course. "Go away, Potter." Not even bothering to look at the boy, he started walking down the corridor towards the dungeons.

Harry hurried after him. He'd stayed outside the infirmary, knowing he needed to see the man alone. It had taken him some time to convince Sirius and Remus to leave him alone here, but eventually the two men had left. Not before Sirius managed to get him to promise to tell him what was going on with him the next day.

A promise he might have to keep.

It wasn't difficult to keep up with Snape. He was clearly exhausted, the potions Madam Pomfrey had given him were not really helping him with that. Harry knew better than to try to assist him, standing still as he stumbled a few times on his way downstairs.

Snape was ready to hex the boy by the time he reached the dungeon level. "Do you not understand simple speech? Go away. Go back to your friends and have a party. Go to bed and sleep. Go to that mutt of a godfather of yours. Do whatever you want, as long as you do it somewhere else!" He couldn't even get all his ire and sarcasm into the words, a fact that infuriated him even more.

"Sorry, Snape. The Headmaster's orders." The lie was easy to say. Harry was certain that Dumbledore would approve.

Cursing the meddlesome coot, Snape turned around and tried to ignore Harry. He had more important things to think of now. The night had been a dismal failure, and it was not over yet.

He walked past the Potions classroom, not heading towards the corridor that held his private chambers. Instead, he went to the Slytherin rooms. His students would be awake still, probably all wondering what was going on. They'd have to continue wondering. He was not going to justify his actions to a group of Death Eater children. At least not now.

There was a message he had to deliver. One that was not a pleasant one. Not to him, and not to the one he was taking it to.

Harry didn't say anything as Snape stopped outside the Slytherin common room. He simply leaned against the wall. If his professor thought he was going to leave, he didn't really know him. The poisonous glare Snape was once again throwing at him suggested that he did.
"I would appreciate it if you weren't here when I return." With that, Snape muttered the password, and watched the wall reveal the doorway. He did not look back as he stepped into the common room.

The lights were low in the Slytherin rooms, casting shadows on the cavernous walls. Most of the older Slytherins were lounging in the deep green couches and chairs, clearly waiting for something to happen.

Snape stood silently at the doorway, looking at his students. He could see shock and puzzlement on many. Even anger. It was not unexpected. He'd seen the children of the Death Eaters in the Malfoy Mansion that Yuletide and knew that most of the students he'd helped to raise would take up the masks the following summer.

It would be painful. A failure. Especially since now he would be forced to fight against them. He'd thought he might be able to spy on them, to seek for weaknesses that might lead them to betray the Dark Lord. One more opportunity he had thrown away in a moment of utter madness.

His students were now staring at him, stunned by his appearance. That reminded Snape he was still wearing his torn robes. It didn't really matter. His looks were the least of his problems.

"Many of you will receive owls from your parents tomorrow morning." Voice cold and clear, Snape focused his gaze on Draco Malfoy. He knew Lucius. There would be others as well. "I would like to remind you, that while you're under this roof, you will not get away with any illegal activity. No matter whose commands you follow."

Comprehension dawned on some young faces, followed by utter horror.

Snape nodded curtly. "Obeying the Dark Lord is only one option. Being a Slytherin does not mean you have to join him."

There were whispers now. Stunned words of disbelief. Pansy Parkinson was leaning against Millicent Bulstrode as if she was feeling faint.

Draco Malfoy on the other hand was simply staring at Snape.

"Go to bed everyone." Snape made a small gesture towards the dormitories, barely hiding his disgust. His words wouldn't matter; most of these children were already lost.

The reaction ingrained into them years ago, the Slytherins obeyed the Head of their House without comments.

"Mr. Goyle. Stay. You too, Mr. Crabbe, Mr. Malfoy." Once again not a request, but a command.

The three Slytherins remained standing by the hearth as the others disappeared into the dormitories, feeling stunned. It was a rather usual emotion for Vince and Greg, but this felt different. Ominous.

Draco watched Snape stand there, his mind completely blank. This couldn't be happening. His father's letter had clearly stated they were going to kill McGonagall. If this was some kind of a ruse to lull Dumbledore into trusting a known 'former Death Eater', it didn't really make any sense. Neither did Snape's words.

It had sounded almost as if the professor had warned them all against acting the way their parents and the Dark Lord wanted, but that was ridiculous. Snape knew as well as they did, that no one could resist lord Voldemort. He was one of the loyal ones. Why would he want anyone to resist?
His scrutiny didn't really tell him anything. Snape looked as cold as usual, his dark gaze focused on the three of them.

When the door leading to the dormitories banged shut, Snape stepped to the center of the room, turning to look at Goyle. He stood there for a long moment, his face revealing nothing.

Goyle was starting to shake. It didn't matter the professor was the Head of his House. He was always terrified when that glare was set on him.

"Mr. Goyle. Gregory." Snape's voice was softer now. There was no sign of malice or anger. No sign of any emotion.

The lack of the usual clipped tones and sarcasm made Goyle tremble even more. Next to him, Crabbe was fidgeting as well. They didn't react to Snape in the Potions class. There, he never focused solely on them. Official Slytherin business and those horrendous hours they had to suffer through every Friday were different.

Ignoring the overwhelming urge to flee from the room, Snape looked at his student. The expression was so familiar; the boy was almost a mirror image of his father with the same blank look on his face. He crammed the nausea down; there was no point in thinking about that now. Better just go on with his duty.

"I'm sorry to inform you, but earlier today, your father passed away."

There was a silence in the room. Goyle's eyes were huge as he looked at the Head of his House. He did not understand. What was Snape talking about? He must have misunderstood the words and their meaning. He had heard wrong. Glancing helplessly at Draco, he asked, "What?"

Draco couldn't say anything, his mouth horribly dry.

"Gregory." Seeing the boy return his gaze to him, Snape said softly. "Your father is dead."

The simple words seemed to register. Goyle blanched. Next to him, Crabbe let out a whimpering sound. World seemed to crash down silently, muffling everything around him.

"How? How did he die?" Goyle's voice broke at the last word. Die. Died. Passed away. His father was dead. His hands were starting to shake.

Snape was quiet for a moment, the only words coming to his mind were the horrible truth. I killed him. I pointed my wand at him and dropped him with Avada Kedavra as he was about to kill Minerva. I killed your father, Gregory.

"He was amongst the people who took professor McGonagall. He was killed during the... rescue mission." What a simple way to describe the blur of motion and the madness. The desperate fight raging in the small chamber. "I truly am sorry."

The uncharacteristically kind words seemed to hit Goyle. With a soft sob, he sat down on the couch and started to cry. Crabbe was by his side immediately, patting his shoulder awkwardly.

No. Snape had never been a good Death Eater. He did not feel any glee at the moment. No satisfaction of having his enemy dead.

His enemy? A simple man he'd known since his early teens. A man whose only son was his student, a member of his House. His responsibility.
"Take this." Snape took a small vial from under his robes and handed it to Malfoy. He knew he could trust on the boy with this. "It's *Draught of the Living Death*. He will probably need it later."

Draco nodded woodenly, accepting the offered vial.

Snape knew his presence would not be wanted anymore. This was the one occasion he couldn't fulfill his duty as the Head of his House. He could not offer the boy any consolation. There was no way he could have Goyle and his friends at the infirmary either. It would put McGonagall's life back in danger.

He would have to contact the only other Slytherin staff member and ask her to come and look after Goyle. Juno was used to spending nights awake, watching her precious stars. "I will send professor Sinistra to you." The words were still aimed at Malfoy, the pale boy probably the only one in the room capable of thought at the moment.

"Thank you, sir."

Since there was nothing more he could say or do, Snape turned around and walked out of the Slytherin common room.

He stumbled a little as he stepped into the corridor, leaning against the wall for support. Unable to remember when he'd last rested, Snape wanted nothing more than to crawl into his own rooms and sleep.

"Snape?"

Somehow he managed to find the strength to look up and glare at that. Maybe he would simply turn Potter into something unpleasant and then crawl into his rooms. Ignoring the boy, he straightened his back, and started walking again. Fortunately the way to his own door wasn't all that far.

With a simple touch on the snake -figure, Snape opened his door. He walked in, realizing only as the door closed a moment later that he wasn't alone. "I don't remember inviting you in, Potter."

"No." Shrugging, Harry walked to his usual chair, sitting down. "You didn't."

The casual attitude made Snape grit his teeth. "Ten points from Gryffindor. Now leave before I'm tempted to reduce them even more." For once, the annoying brat should listen.

Harry looked at the man, his gaze serious. He didn't know what had happened during the hours he'd been gone, but he had a hunch that it was all bad. People would be concentrating on professor McGonagall now, leaving Snape to slither back here. It didn't matter it was probably just what he wanted, it didn't feel right to leave him alone right now.

"I'm not going to leave. Even if you..." He swallowed the rest of the sentence. Better not risk Snape really taking every single House point off. "I feel I should stay."

"How lovely. Now get out!"

The Gryffindor stubborness was definitely not a myth. "No. You know as well as I do that we are..." Harry hesitated, trying to find a proper term. Nothing appropriate really came to his mind.

Snape glared at Harry. "You think we're... What? Friends?" The last word dripped with sarcasm. "If that's what you think, you truly are out of your mind."

"Don't be such a git." Not letting the barb get to him, Harry shook his head. "And no. I don't think
we're friends. But we are both members of the Order of the Phoenix. That means something to me. So unless you want to bodily throw me out, I'm staying."

That earned him an even fiercer glare. "If that is what it takes..." It was clearly an empty threat. In his present condition Snape might just be able to throw out a Flobberworm, but not a full grown wizard.

Realizing this was not getting them anywhere, Harry dropped his gaze. "Please, Snape. I need to stay here." His voice was pleading.

"Oh for Merlin's sake..." Muttering a few words from under his breath, Snape surrendered. He had given the boy his permission to stay here whenever he needed it. "Fine. Just stay out of my way."

With that, he staggered to the bathroom.

It was a good thing he didn't see the smile on Harry's face. The expression would have probably driven him to do something extreme.

Snape kept his gaze away from the mirror as he stripped out of his dirty robes. He'd refused to take them off at the hospital wing, allowing Poppy to treat only the most urgent wounds on him. The robes pooled into a heap on the floor, but for once he didn't really care about the mess.

Even though he was dead on his feet, he needed a shower. He also needed a drink, but with the brat in his living room, there was no chance for that. So he had to settle with a shower.

Careful not to get the bandage on his left arm wet, he stood under the hot spray, hearing nothing but the rush of water and his own heartbeat.

Washing the grime and sweat away felt wonderful. Snape had to pry his eyes open again after rinsing his hair. He felt ready to drop any second now, but he had to get clean before going to bed. He stepped out of the shower stall, yawning so hard his jaws ached.

There was a long sleeved night robe hanging from the towel rack, and after towelling himself dry, Snape pulled the robe on.

His mind was half asleep already. He managed to walk out of the bathroom but the rest was a blur. He remembered there was something he had to do, but he couldn't manage more than another yawn, followed by some incoherent words. He'd simply come to the end of the line, his brains shutting down. Somehow he ended up in bed, covers drawn over him, just the way he preferred. He didn't care how he'd got there, nothing really mattered as he drifted asleep.

Harry was careful not to breathe too hard as he silently sneaked away from Snape's bedroom. He'd stayed out of the man's way, but when it had become apparent Snape was about to collapse on the floor a moment after he emerged from the bathroom, he'd hopped up and helped him to the bedroom. It was better than letting him sleep on the floor.

Snape had been so exhausted he didn't even really notice Harry, which was a good thing. He would definitely not be grateful for any kind of assistance right now. Muttering something about needing to get professor Sinistra to take care of his Slytherins, Snape had allowed himself to be led to bed.

Walking back to the living room, Harry took a deep breath. This whole situation was freaking him out. Somehow things were changing again. Desperation had turned into fierce joy at the sight of McGonagall alive. And seeing Snape.

The comment the man had flung at him earlier was ringing in his head. No, the two of them were
definitely not friends. But they were something.

Harry walked to the fireplace, trying not to think about it now. He needed to contact Dumbledore about Snape's wish. The Headmaster would get to professor Sinistra. Then he could go to his chair and get some sleep.

He'd spend the night here, like he had so many times before. Trying to sleep, trying not to worry about anything. Keeping the memory of Snape curling in bed as he pulled the covers over him somewhere at the back of his mind.

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Part 10

The scent of blood was all around them.

Snape tried to keep his gaze away from the still figures on the floor. Tried not to listen to the groans of those who were still alive. He concentrated on the woman in front of him.

What madness had caused this? What had made him destroy everything he'd worked for?

He tried not to think about that right now either. Thought wasn't important, movement was. If he didn't hurry, his body would soon lie on the floor as well.

"Oh, Merlin... Severus what on earth did you just do?" The voice quivered with weakness.

Snape ignored the question. He hauled Minerva McGonagall up from the floor, making sure she was still holding onto the wand he'd tossed at her. "We have to move. Now." Only one way out of here. Out of the mansion.

The journey through the basement was a nightmare. Minerva had spent what was left of her strength during the short fight, and soon Snape had to carry her instead of dragging her. His arm was burning, not the Mark, but the cut next to it. He'd been surprised to be stabbed by Crabbe.

Definitely not as surprised as the Death Eaters had been when he'd turned his wand on them.

Snape kept hurrying through the corridors. He had no idea how many people there were at the house. Some of them might be after them already. He doubted any of those present in the small chamber were able to chase them. Most would spend days in bed recovering.

Some would never do anything ever again. Like Graham Goyle.

Not a good thought. Snape couldn't afford to think about the consequences of his idiocy right now. He had to move faster, to get out of here before...

Turning around the corner, he stumbled against a familiar figure. He slumped down in shock as the red eyes bore into him, a wand already raising. Voldemort hissed the curse, and green sparks engulfed Snape, burning away everything.

Snape jolted awake, sitting up. He made no sound as the nightmare vanished, leaving him alone in his bedchamber.

"Lumos." Rubbing his face, he looked around him. He had a feeling it wasn't exactly morning. The thought made him blink, and he had to think for a moment to figure out what day it was.

Realizing it was probably Monday, he slipped out of the bed. He had no memory of how he'd got
there. His last real recollection was hot water washing him clean. It was amazing he'd managed to crawl here after everything that had happened.

The nightmare still fresh in his mind, he went to get dressed. It really was a wonder he and Minerva had managed to escape with their lives. Wincing as his arm was caught in his sleeve, he glared at the bandage so conveniently covering his Dark Mark.

Alive, but not unharmed.

"Morning."

Snape froze in the doorway. Remembering his uninvited houseguest, he glared at Harry, and then stormed to the bathroom. He certainly wasn't in the mood for idle pleasentries right now. He was going to take another shower, even though he didn't really need one.

A twinge in his left arm made him flinch as he dried himself. After a moment of hesitation, he unwrapped the bandage. His arm looked both better and worse now. He swallowed hard, and then opened the cupboard, reaching for a small jar of deep green salve he'd never really thought he'd need.

Finishing his morning routines, he stared at his reflection for a moment before returning to the living room. He looked tired. No surprise there. Even with hours of sleep, he was still feeling exhausted.

It didn't matter.

He was not going to spend the whole day in bed like some invalid. That thought held firmly in mind, he pushed the door open.

"I hope you don't mind. I ordered some breakfast. er... Lunch. Dobby was so happy to hear you brought McGonagall back, he kind of overreacted." Smiling sheepishly, Harry gestured at the huge amount of food on the table.

The only reply he got was a grunt.

Sitting down, Snape poured himself some tea. He did not want to think about what he'd done with Minerva. The whole thing was making him boiling mad. Mad at himself.

Harry realized Snape was not going to say anything, so he went on, "I talked to Dumbledore earlier. He said we're having a meeting after lunch. So when we finish eating, we should probably go to his rooms. If you're up to it, I mean."

He decided it was probably the best he didn't repeat the Headmaster's words about Snape being too stubborn to let his body heal.

That made Snape grimace. The food didn't seem all that appealing anymore.

"I also... Called him last night and told him to send professor Sinistra to the Slytherin common room." Harry wasn't sure he'd done the right thing. When he'd guided Snape towards his bedroom, the man had seemed adamant about that. Had wanted someone to stay with his seventh years.

"Juno? Why would you... oh. I see." If he'd forgotten to make the call himself, he had indeed been drained yesterday. "Good."

They ate in silence. It was a familiar scene; both had got over the awkwardness weeks earlier. Snape still thought eating breakfast alone was preferable to this, but Harry's presence didn't really bother
him. He was used to him by now.

Harry was content with just being here. He'd slept well on his chair. It was rather comfortable when it was enlarged. Knowing Snape was sleeping in the next room had made his sleep peaceful.

It was a bit disturbing. He had hated the nasty Potions master from his first Potions class. Hating Snape had been something he never had to think about, it was a constant force in his life, like his utter dislike of his cousin, or the wistful feeling he got every time he thought of his parents.

He wondered what had changed it. Why wasn't he burning with hatred anymore when he was in Snape's company? Could a few months really change his preceptions of him so completely?

That first night he'd come to the dungeons, he hadn't really been certain about anything. He was still wondering about the darkness of his thoughts back then, knowing they surpassed usual fear and pain and anger but didn't plunge him into real depression.

Not that he was an expert, but even he knew that one didn't snap out of depression by talking to someone like Snape.

Yet even when his mind had been a whirlwind of chaos, he'd trusted Snape with his fears. Because the man never coddled him or told him what he wanted to hear. If anything, Snape was always honest with him.

Harry was stunned by the thought; that word had never crossed his mind before. But Snape really was honest; never told him lies about life. Sure, his view was sarcastic and evil, but it was probably the best way he had to go through all the nasty things life threw at him. Or deal with the nasty things he'd done.

It wasn't easy to label Snape anymore. He was so many things, some of which contradicted the others, but one thing was for certain.

Harry realized he rather liked the man.

Hiding a smile, he concentrated on his breakfast. He could just imagine Snape's expression if he told him that. The glare would be annoyed as hell.

Almost like the one on his face right now. It was strange, really. There wasn't any reason for Snape to glare.

It reminded Harry he hadn't said anything about McGonagall yet. Not about the relieved look on Dumbledore's face that morning when he'd announced she was already conscious. Not about how grateful he was to Snape for what he had done.

"About yesterday..." He wondered how to phrase it.

The dark gaze was raised from the tea cup to meet his. "What about yesterday?" There was irritation in Snape's voice, as always when he was disturbed while he was busy thinking of something.

Harry looked hesitant. Then he barged head on with it. "Thank you."

"For what?" Snape asked. Then he shook his head in anger. "Don't you dare thank me for that!" How predictable that he would not see his act as it was.

"You brought the Head of my House back from a certain death. You're damn right I'm going to thank you for that! And so will every other Gryffindor." No matter how much they all hated Snape,
they would still be grateful.

Placing his cup on the table, Snape got to his feet. He would not listen to this stupidity.

"Because of you, she's still alive." Harry said calmly. He could well guess what had happened during the long hours she'd been gone, but didn't want to concentrate on that. He was simply grateful she wasn't dead.

Snape looked down at him, wondering if he would ever understand. "And others are not. And even more people will not be alive, because we have lost our only chance of getting to know the Dark Lord's plans."

"I know people died. I figured it out. There was no way you could have just taken her and left." The cuts and bruises had made it obvious that Snape had been fighting for his life. Harry knew the Death Eaters, knew that sometimes only death would stop them.

A slight nod acknowledged his words.

Harry wasn't finished yet. "But you don't know about what will come. None of us do. So we don't have a spy anymore. We'll just have to deal with it. Life isn't fair, you know."

Snape didn't know whether to be pleased or annoyed by the way his own words were now thrown back at him. At least Harry had got his point.

No, life most certainly wasn't fair. Not for anyone. It was ironic; after all these years of being seen as a villain, he would now be considered as one of their champions. And only because he could not stand the idea of telling Albus of Minerva's death. Couldn't face the man afterwards, with her blood on his hands. That one moment of weakness would probably be seen as heroism.

It was ridiculous.

"I am no hero." He mumbled it to himself.

Harry smiled at that. This was something he could relate to. "Neither am I. We can't change the way people think about us, though. You will probably have other annoying Gryffindors thank you before the day ends."

"What an appalling thought." Snape shuddered. Still, he relaxed slightly and sat down to finish his breakfast.

After the house elves had cleaned the dishes away, Harry went to use the loo. He grimaced at his reflection as he washed his hands. Damn, he looked like he'd spent the night on someone's couch. Which, in a way, was true.

There was nothing he could do about it now. Dumbledore had said to come to the meeting after lunch, and they were already late.

Resigned to looking like a scarecrow once again, he walked back to the living room. Since Snape seemed almost ready to leave, he simply walked to the door. "We should be going."

Lowering the small vial he'd just emptied, Snape nodded. He knew Poppy would probably nag at him, but he really did feel all right now. Didn't want to postpone this lunacy. He was ready.

A memory of something assaulted Snape, and he turned to stare at Harry. "Mr. Potter. Did you call me a git last night?" There was honest bafflement in his voice. No one had dared to call him that to
his face in years. If memory served, the last person who had, was currently blushing in front of him.

"Um... I think I might have. Sort of. Or not. Maybe." Harry wondered how many points that would lose. Probably more than they had.

"I would suggest you not to go around calling your teachers names. That is not very productive." With a glare, Snape brushed past Harry.

It took Harry a few seconds to realize the matter was closed. Then he grinned and rushed after Snape.

There were few people walking through the corridors. Snape was glad of it. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now, or to explain why he was accompanied by Potter. He probably should have used the floo, but for some reason he'd simply followed the boy's lead. It was well known that Harry Potter did not like flooing.

Snape wondered if he should have reduced Gryffindor House points after all, simply due to the fact that Harry was a nuisance.

He shrugged mentally. Walking was not that bad. There was no need for secrecy anymore. His own actions yesterday had already declared him to be anything but a docile Death Eater. All his Slytherins had to know the truth by now.

It would have been interesting to be present at breakfast to see how many owls were sent to his students. It had probably rained feathers in the Great Hall.

The voyage to the second floor wasn't long, but as they reached the gargoyle, Snape was trying to hide a grimace. His back ached, muscles still sore from yesterday. All the smaller cuts and bruises were also happily reminding him of their existence.

"You go ahead. I'll follow you in a minute." Snape most definitely didn't want to appear in his first non-secret Order meeting with Harry Potter.

Apparently the boy understood him perfectly. With a crooked grin, Harry said out the password, and then climbed the stairs up to Dumbledore's offices.

After a short moment, Snape followed him.

He could hear people babbling, and his expression hardened. This was not right. Not his place. There would be lots of people here, both teachers and students, none of whom should know he was a part of this. Of course hoping for any sort of secrecy now was futile. He had kicked himself out of that broom closet quite thoroughly when he'd carried Minerva across the Great Hall.

Walking through the doorway, the first thing he could see were Albus Dumbledore's clear blue eyes. There was the familiar twinkle dancing in the wise gaze, and for that moment, Snape couldn't really regret what he had done.

What a disgustingly soft thought.

An eerie silence had fallen over the room as Snape stepped in. People were staring at him, most of the students with their mouths actually open. Madam Pomfrey cast a nasty look at him, knowing he should still be in bed.

Not paying any attention to the stares, Snape walked across the room to his usual place by the wall. No one had claimed the chair, most probably due to its scruffy looks and the distance from the
He liked to sit in the shadows, being able to observe everyone and stay shielded from most of the stares at the same time.

Harry was able to slip into his usual place on the couch, grinning at Snuffles. He really did love his godfather, and was always comforted by the way his arm usually ended up around his shoulders in a half hug. Or, like now, the great dog lay his head on his shoulder.

"Good. Now that we are all here." Gesturing around the room, Dumbledore said, "I'm sure you can all see some unfamiliar faces here." That was aimed at the ones still gaping.

"And some old familiar ones." Professor Sprout wasn't sure if she was angry or not at seeing Mundungus and Arabella here. After all, she'd known those two for years. Not very well, she assessed as she watched both squirm under her gaze.

"You can say that again!" There was awe in Ron's surprisingly loud whisper. He couldn't help glancing at Snape, even though he returned his gaze back to Harry a moment later.

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah, yes. I believe it's time for me to introduce some of our Order who have been forced to work behind the scenes."

The rather pompous words made Snape sneer. Concentrating on this show was better than worrying about what would undoubtedly follow the introductions.

"Arabella Figg and Mundungus Fletcher have been with the Order ever since the First War."

Dumbledore smiled at the two who waved at everyone.

There were murmured greetings. Professor Sprout was still glaring.

"And of course you all know Remus Lupin, who was a teacher here four years ago."

This time the greetings were more enthusiastic. Ron and Hermione grinned at the werewolf, glad that he was also a part of this. They'd had their suspicions, but because of Sirius' safety, neither had asked about it out loud.

Dumbledore looked at the black dog sitting on the couch. It almost looked like the dog was laughing inside. "You are shedding all over my couch, Sirius. Please turn back into your real form."

Lolling his tongue out for a moment, the dog just sat there. Then it seemed to blur, turning into a grinning man. "You always did have a flare for dramatics, didn't you Albus?"

"Dear Merlin, it's Sirius Black!" One of the Ravenclaws jumped up in panic. He looked like he wanted to run out of the room. Unfortunately the couch on which Sirius was currently lounging was between him and the door.

There were similar reactions all around the room. People all talking at the same time, staring at the man with wide eyes.

Harry could feel Sirius tense at that. He leaned closer to his godfather, offering silent support for a second before calling out, "He is a member of this Order and my godfather. Stop panicking, people."

It worked. Even though he was seen as their moral leader, especially by the younger people, Harry rarely spoke out in the meetings. Now that he did, everyone stopped babbling and listened.
"Harry is right. Sirius is indeed one of us. Furthermore, he is also innocent of all the things he was charged with more than sixteen years ago," Dumbledore's voice was firm.

That made even the frightened Ravenclaw sit down.

Madam Rosmerta was staring at Sirius with a stunned expression. "I remember you. You used to come to the back alley every night. I even fed you sometimes." She'd known there was something familiar about the dog the moment she laid her eyes on him.

"Yes." A faint blush appeared on Sirius' face at that.

Seeing one of the most feared men in all the wizarding world fluster at a friendly comment brought smiles to the faces of most of the adults.

"Sirius can tell us his tale later." Dumbledore was certain he would, too. He'd always been outrageous with his stories. Even worse than Fred and George Weasley put together. "We have more urgent business right now."

There was a quiet murmur of agreement, emphasized by nods.

"We have one more member we have never spoken of in the meetings before. Professor Severus Snape."

Harry couldn't help smiling a little at the dumbfounded expressions. Everyone was looking at the shadowy corner, meeting a cold stare in return.

"But he's a..." It was one of the former Hufflepuffs who worked at the Ministry, training to become an Auror. She couldn't help remembering all the agonizing Potions classes, where the fear for the professor's sarcasm and cutting remarks had felt palpable in the air. "Well, you know. One of them!"

More quiet murmurs. Severus Snape's past was public record, after all. A record known to everyone in the wizarding world.

"You can say it, Miss. Midgen." There was a sneer on Snape's face, and he sounded like he had just spotted an error in her answer in class. "I believe the proper term is 'a Death Eater'. A former one, actually."

Midgen shrank back, shivers going down her spine.

Before anyone else could make a comment, Dumbledore interfered. "Yes. Severus is indeed a former Death Eater. He has also served as a spy amongst Voldemort's cohorts." This time, he did not offer any other explanations, like with Sirius.

No one said anything to that.

After a moment of silence, Ron cleared his throat. "Why didn't you tell us?" The words were aimed at the Headmaster, but he looked at Harry, hurt in his eyes.

He'd spent most of the night talking with Hermione, both coming to the same conclusion. Snape was not what he appeared to be, and whatever he was, Harry knew about it. Hermione might have shrugged the issue of trust off with her cold logic -- which might have been a front to cover her true feelings, he didn't know -- but Ron was definitely disturbed by it.

"It was my decision, Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said. "I apologize, but Severus' status as a spy has been too important to risk. You should know how big a chance there is for any one of us to fall into
the hands of Voldemort's people." That was said with a pointed glance.

Ron didn't say anything at that. Yeah, he did know. The memory of what had almost happened to Bill during the summer before their sixth year was still a fodder for nightmares.

Meeting Ron's hesitant looks with a half-smile, Harry wondered if their awkward silence would get worse after this. He hoped not.

"Now, I'm sure we all want to know just exactly what happened yesterday." Voice growing harder, Dumbledore looked at Madam Pomfrey. "Poppy has informed me that Minerva will indeed be all right, but she has been seriously hurt. Mostly by the cruciatus curse, but she has also been... mistreated otherwise."

The icy look in his eyes made everyone swallow. It was no wonder Voldemort did not dare to openly attack this castle with Dumbledore protecting it.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips together so that they blended into one thin line. She didn't say anything, simply nodded.

Turning to look at Snape, Dumbledore added, "Severus, would you please tell us all what happened?" It wasn't exactly a request one could refuse, especially since the look in the Headmaster's eyes was still full of barely veiled anger.

With short, precise sentences, Snape described what had happened at the Malfoy Mansion. The events followed the course of his nightmare, but telling about them didn't make him relive it again. The ending was different as well, for in reality, no one had caught them. He had managed to carry Minerva out of the ghastly house, and then continued on his way towards Hogwarts.

There were soft gasps coming from the teachers, and even some students, when he told them about the few Death Eaters that had perished during the fight. All comments were curbed by a rather stern glare from behind the half-moon glasses. Dumbledore was not going to permit any interruptions.

Snape kept staring into distance as he admitted that one of the casualties had indeed been the father of one of his Slytherins. Expression devoid of any emotions, he recounted the moment Goyle Sr. had fallen, the Death Eater's wand dropping right next to Minerva.

He wondered if it was still somewhere in her robes. She had been quick to grab it, using it to help him in the desperate fight, sending binding spells all around. Apparently she wasn't going to use the Unforgivables.

Unlike he had.

When he finished his story, the only sounds that could be heard were soft sniffles. Professor Sprout was staring at Snape with her mouth open.

She had never thought him capable of something like that. Looking at her own Hufflepuffs, she wondered if she could have done the same as he had. Wondered if she could have endured years of double life and then thrown it all away because of one person. Severus didn't even like Minerva.

Hermione was smiling beatifically at Snape, even though her face was still trailed with tears. It didn't really matter that the man was an evil and vindictive teacher. He had saved her favorite professor, and that was enough for her.

Her sentiments were clearly shared by most of the people in the room. All the younger people were in awe. Arabella Figg seemed to be lost in thought. Professor Flitwick was quite obviously in shock.
The reactions all around the room were exactly what Snape had anticipated. Or feared, actually. He could see the students all smile at him, the expressions really alien. He was used to feared looks or barely disguised anger and rebellion. Now there was no trace of them. Even Black wasn't scowling at him.

It was disturbing. He could see how misguided idiots would come to interrupt his peace and quiet with inane babbling. As if he was somehow a different person now.

He suffered through Harry's presence in his rooms out of necessity. At least the boy had a good sense not to bother him with small talk and other ridiculous things so important in the so called polite society. He was not a complete nuisance, a fact that had surprised Snape. Now there would undoubtedly be others trying to get his attention. Invading his privacy.

"We should all try to consider how this affects the students." As if reading his mind, Dumbledore's voice sliced the silence. "There will probably be some outbursts of emotion during the next few days. Not only from well wishers, but also from those whose parents have now been thwarted by Severus' actions."

No one bothered to mention the fact that the ones most disturbed would be his own students.

Snape nodded curtly. "We should also be prepared for the Death Eaters to retaliate. This whole thing was orchestrated by the Dark Lord's most powerful supporter, and he is not known for his patience."

"You mean Malfoy is going to do something rash?" Spelling it out loud, Sirius raised an eyebrow. There was still no malice in his gaze. If anything, he looked a bit bemused.

After all he'd said to Remus about needing to see the Head of their House alive again, he couldn't really be hostile towards the greasy git now could he?

"Yes, Black, that's what I mean." Snape's glare was once again poisonous.

The implications of the words were serious. The Order would have to make plans for the rest of the school year. Death Eater attacks would be more probable than ever and that meant they had to contact every ally they had in the Ministry. There would be no more visits to Hogsmeade. More DADA classes for everyone; even the younger children would have to be able to defend themselves.

It was the beginning of an open war, they all knew it. A war that would not end with a peace treaty, as most Muggle wars did. No negotiations would be made, because none of the terms Voldemort could offer would be acceptable.

Except his total and unconditional surrender, of course.

"All right, everyone. We have work to do." The familiar words from Dumbledore were a sign to start talking.

Leaning towards those closest to them, the members of the Order started bouncing ideas. It didn't matter if they were ridiculous or not. They might work anyway.

Snape watched the bustle, feeling suddenly exhausted again. The potion he'd taken was clearly wearing off. His whole body ached, and he longed to be in his dungeons again, all alone in the blessed silence.

He cast a look at Dumbledore, and saw an understanding nod. Good. He knew he had to get used to being a part of this larger organization, but not now. Not until he'd had some rest. In his present condition, he was no good to anyone.
It was best to leave now, before he was completely beat, and would have to be helped to his rooms. Madam Pomfrey was already casting suspicious looks at him. If Poppy so much as nagged him right now, he would probably have to resist an urge to hex her and every other well meaning idiot.

The thought made him turn to look at Harry. The boy was listening to something his godfather was saying. As if feeling the dark gaze on him, he lifted a hand to scratch his neck, and then looked over his shoulder.

His gaze met Snape's. For a moment he just sat there, his expression unreadable. Then the look in his eyes softened a little, into a very familiar looking twinkle.

Snape rolled his eyes as he got to his feet. Only Potter could be impudent with a simple look.

Not paying any attention to the curious glances his swift exit gained him, Snape walked to the door. He would definitely not get out of his rooms until the next day's classes, and if anyone dared to approach the dungeon, they would be really sorry.

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**Part 11**

The seventh year dormitory was never really quiet at night.

There were sounds of bedsheets rustling, people tossing and turning. Neville usually spoke softly in his sleep during the early hours of the new day. Then he would also fall into breathing evenly.

Ron lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep, no matter how tired he felt.

It was actually weird, since the day had been long. There had been no classes. No studying. Only wandering around the castle during the morning, trying to figure out where everyone was. No, where Harry was. He'd been accompanied by Hermione and Snuffles, but even with the dog's good sense of smell, they hadn't been able to locate him.

Maybe they hadn't looked in the right place. Ron didn't know. But he sure as hell had been stunned to see Harry walk into Dumbledore's office two seconds ahead of Snape.

He sighed.

Damn the Slytherins. He was beginning to think they were all going out of their mind. First with all the silence during lunch, most Slytherins looking like they hadn't slept all night. Malfoy keeping his gaze at the door as if he was waiting for something. Goyle looking like he was sleepwalking.

Of course now he knew the explanation for that. It made his stomach clench. He'd never liked the ape-like boy, but still... He'd lost his dad.

Ron didn't even want to imagine how he'd feel if something happened to his own dad.

Things got definitely worse after lunch, when the Order met. There had been some faces he hadn't seen before. Seeing Lupin and Sirius there had been great. He'd always known they had something to do with the Order even though they never attended the meetings.

Having Snape walk in there had been a shock. Apocalyptic, even. Like Trelawney making sense, or Hagrid managing to bake edible cookies.

Snape was definitely not a good guy. He was a nasty old Potions master. A greasy git, whose only joy in life was to make his life miserable. A stupid, pig headed creep. With no redeeming qualities.
None whatsoever. He was a bastard.

Except that he had done something no one else had even tried. And Dumbledore had said he had been on their side for years.

And for some unimaginable reason, Harry seemed all right with that.

It had hurt. Even more than when he'd thought Harry was really going for the fame and glory and the money at the Triwizard tournament. There were things his best friend in the whole world had been keeping secrets from him, and he had no idea how to react to that except with a gut feeling of pain and anger.

Shame.

That was the worst feeling. Because all the things he could now see were huge. Enormous. Harry knowing stuff, hiding them from him and Hermione. Probably for a reason, because he was told to. Keeping it all inside for who knew how many years.

He had never seen it. Had never thought about it, had shrugged off the way Harry would sometimes get really quiet. He'd even ignored all the disappearances lately.

What if Harry had been doing stuff on his own? Gone on missions alone, without anyone to back him up.

Ron slammed his fist against his mattress. Damn it! He just didn't know. Didn't know how to ask Harry about any of this. He felt like an idiot trying to make things right now that he'd been banged on the head with some heavy truths.

It was like he was saying he didn't trust Harry. Like his word wasn't enough.

"Could you please brood a little quieter." A soft voice came from the bed next to his. "Some of us are actually trying to sleep here."

Jolting up, Ron stared at the figure sitting on the edge of the other bed. "Um... Sorry, Harry." The words caused him to grin involuntarily. It was just like old times.

To his utter amazement, Harry smiled back.

They sat there staring at each other for a moment. Both uncertain what to say next. Then Harry got to his feet, and padded softly to Ron's bed. "Move over." Gesturing to his friend to make way, he sat down next to him.

Ron scrambled to the other side of the bed. It was a familiar thing from years past. Ever since they'd started really noticing girls, they had sometimes spent hours like this, lying on a bed, babbling. Mostly about girls. Quidditch. Very rarely about school.

As an echo of those nights, Harry muttered softly a silencing charm, muffling their words so that none of the other boys could hear them. Then he lay down, his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"So... I was thinking maybe groveling. Or at least begging. For forgiveness, you know. Something with style." Hiding his fear behind flippant words, Ron kept his gaze on the ceiling as well, not wanting to see how his best friend would react to what was essentially an apology.

Harry was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I was actually thinking along the same lines."
"Huh?"

"If I should apologize. For everything." For being himself. For being forced to act like an adult and shield his friends from all the ugly truths.

Rolling on his side, Ron gawked at Harry. "Are you serious?" He could see the rueful smile on his friend's face. "You're serious."

A nod. Yes, Harry really was serious. It didn't matter that Ron had reacted badly to his harsh words. It didn't really matter that he'd had to keep secrets. He just didn't want things to get any worse. Needed his friend now.

"I'm being serious too. I was an arse." Ron smiled at that. He could do honest. "So are we cool?"

"Yeah. We're cool." Smile widening, Harry nodded. He should have known Ron would be eager to grasp the offered truce. He was feeling relieved too.

Ron wasn't at all surprised by the fuzzy feeling sweeping over him. He'd been so damn angry at first, when no one had seemed to understand him. Then he'd been scared as hell, certain everything was ruined now.

There were still things he was worried about. Things that he was angry about. He had no doubt that he would yell at Harry when they discussed Order things, especially if he tried to sprout some of that cynical stuff again. The important thing was that they were talking now. No more silence.

"So... You wanna talk about it?" He didn't know how to specify what he meant by 'it'. Order business. McGonagall. Snape. Anything and everything Harry might want to tell him was just fine.

Harry wanted to. Not about everything, but maybe the smaller issues. But it was too early for that. "Nah. Maybe later." If they both survived the war, he'd buy Ron a drink at the Three Broomsticks or at the Leaky Cauldron, and they'd talk. He would tell about all the decisions he'd had to make during the years. Things Ron had never heard of. But not now.

This was the time to enjoy the silence and the friendship they had.

"Okay." Not wanting to push, Ron nodded. It was enough to just be here and not think about all the nasty stuff that had been going on in their lives for so long.

After a moment of silence, Harry asked, "You mind if I stay here?" It wasn't usually something he had to ask. There had been so many nights during which he'd simply fallen asleep next to his friend.

"No. You can stay." A yawn blurred Ron's answer. He was feeling warm and relaxed now. Sleepy. Having Harry right there was like being home again with his brothers, and he never minded the company.

"Thanks."

It was good to be talking with Ron again. Harry smiled. Even though with Ron, it was usually not talking. Just hanging around. Being comfortable with the non talking, playing chess or reading Quidditch magazines.

Friendship. Somehow reminding him of Sirius. They shared the same kind of relationship, even if it had some aspects that took it beyond simple friendship. That made Harry's smile widen. What a foolish idea. He and Ron had passed 'simple' years ago. He was as much family as Sirius was.
Harry was quite comfortable with the concept now, but it hadn't always been like that. Family had been a dream. A fantasy only heightened by the nonexistent warmth between him and his relatives.

Now there was Sirius; his godfather who loved him. With him came also Remus Lupin, for those two were inseparable. Harry didn't mind at all. He liked his former professor.

He'd thought a lot about the future lately. At the end of the school year, he had a choice to make. Dumbledore had hinted he could stay at Hogwarts, maybe in some official capacity. Teaching or coaching Quidditch. Or he could stay in Hogsmeade, preparing Order forces for the war.

Sirius had asked him to come live with him and Remus. That had been a pleasurable shock. It had proven Harry that he did indeed have a place to go. People who cared about him.

Ron would no doubt slug him if he heard his thoughts. A sideways glance told Harry that his friend was already dozing off. Good. He needed the sleep. They had classes tomorrow; the dreaded doubles, both in Divinations and Potions.

It wasn't like he didn't count the Weasleys as family. He loved Mrs. Weasley very much, but she had enough work with her own children. Knowing he was selfish as hell, Harry had to admit that he liked the fact that he didn't have to share Sirius with seven other kids. Eight if you counted Percy's wife.

Harry was glad he had options. He was tempted to go to live with his godfather, though he knew it would probably be wiser to stay close to Hogwarts. The Order needed him, and he needed the security his old school could provide. It would be important to him to be able to visit Dumbledore often. The wizarding world might depend on him in the battles, but he knew it was Dumbledore who guided the Order.

It meant he would have to come back here every week. Maybe even more often. To meetings with the Order.

In the relative silence of the dormitory, Harry admitted to himself he would probably come back here for another reason as well. How amazing that a couple of months had changed his mind like this. Snape's words were still echoing in his mind. No, they weren't really what could be called friends.

He knew it was far more complicated than that. But there was no use to label it. Not really. Because it didn't matter what he called it. It didn't change anything.

Life was strange. He'd never thought he'd come to understand Snape the way he did now. Or like him. Even respect him. A couple of years ago he would have laughed at such insane thoughts. Now they were making sense.

Frightening.

In Dumbledore's office, Harry had seen how uncomfortable Snape had been with all the attention. He knew that he was a very private man, but it had still surprised him a bit. Because of that, he'd stayed away from the dungeons that day. Had given Snape all the privacy he needed.

He was sure it had been the right choice, even though he wondered how Snape was faring. The stubborn man was probably not resting. Working with his potions again. Immersing himself in his work like he always seemed to do when he didn't want to think about something.

Like killing people.

Harry closed his eyes, shifting his position a little. He couldn't even begin to know how hard it had
been for Snape to kill someone like that. Someone's father. Goyle's father. Remembering the flicker of pain he'd seen in the man's eyes before it had been replaced by anger outside the Slytherin common room, he wondered how Snape had managed to have the strength to go and tell Goyle about what had happened.

It was so like Snape. Duty was so obviously important to him. Why else would he suffer through Harry's ramblings? Harry smiled at that. Certainly not from the goodness of his heart.

Even thought there was that too. Maybe not goodness but definitely not just darkness. He wasn't as nasty as Harry had always thought. Wasn't the ogre people most often saw.

Snape was... Snape. Harry wondered why the name didn't make him raw and angry anymore. Probably because he saw beyond professor Snape, into the man. The human part of someone who had never seemed to be at all humane. It was strange, that he couldn't really hate the man, even in the Potions classroom.

Had to be because he liked Snape.

It was weird to think about Snape as a person. Not a whatever-nasty-thing-he-could-think-of Potions-master, but as a regular guy. Or as regular as someone like Snape got.

Even with the short temper and the obvious pleasure he took in terrifying whomever he labeled as an idiot, Snape had always seemed larger than life somehow. That had changed. He was just a man.

Harry was comfortable with that. Yep. He could still remember how Snape had trembled as he'd helped Dumbledore guide him to the infirmary. How he'd sagged against him later in his dungeons. How the man had curled on his bed, like any other person, and sighed when he'd pulled the blanket over his body.

Hearing Ron start to snore quietly, he shook his head. Here he was, lying in bed with Ron, thinking about Snape in bed. This was definitely too weird, even for him.

Since Ron's bed was awfully soft, and the few steps to his own bed seemed suddenly too hard to take, Harry squirmed to get a better position, and then dozed off.

He dreamed of Quidditch, soaring after the Snitch on his Firebolt as the sun shone brightly from above.

Part 12

Hermione's reaction the next morning was quite predictable.

Seeing Ron and Harry come down the stairs together, talking and laughing made her grin broadly. "I was wondering how long it would take for you two to come to your senses."

And that was it.

She did reserve the right to make snide comments later on if she felt like it though. It made Ron look a bit worried. He knew exactly how devious she could be, and was sure she'd say something if she felt he deserved it.

Divinations that morning was strange. The near-tragedy of these past few days was apparently enough for professor Trelawney. She didn't make any morbid remarks about anybody's mortality. Actually, she seemed unnaturally cheery.
A fact that was far scarier than any predictions of doom.

When the class ended, the seventh year Gryffindors padded to the Great Hall for lunch. Harry didn't really have much of an appetite after spending hours breathing in the scent of incense. The fumes usually made him drowsy, and even the thought of eating was enough to make him nauseous.

Skipping lunch was never a good idea. Even more so on a day when you had double Potions right after lunch.

Harry nibbled his lunch, listening absentmindedly as Ron and Seamus argued about the Cannons. The Quidditch World Cup would be held in Bolivia this year, and apparently one of Ron's favorite Cannons would be joining the English national team. It was a perfect venue for some teasing and Seamus embraced it wholeheartedly. Comments about the English team being inferior to the Irish team were once again making the redhead look like a beet all over.

Staying clear of the argument, Harry concentrated on the mood in the vast room. People seemed to be doing fine, with a few exceptions. The Slytherins looked strange. Some of them were wearing expressions of anticipation, most merely glaring and brooding.

Eyes squinting with suspicion, Harry glanced at Malfoy. He looked too calm, too peaceful. Probably scheming something as always.

Some Gryffindors were acting strangely as well. On the other side of the table, second years were trying to hide reddened eyes and wobbly lower lips by concentrating on their lunch. Alarmed by such odd behavior, Harry made a mental note to talk to Hermione about it, so that she could investigate. Then he remembered the second years had just had Potions class before lunch. No wonder they were all shaken.

He wasn't exactly looking forward to the classes this afternoon. Not because he hated Potions -- which he kind of did -- but because of the utter humiliation that was waiting for his classmates. He'd seen Lavender and Parvati whisper and cast suspiciously soft glances at Snape during the breakfast. They'd had the Daily Prophet open in front of them. He never read the paper anymore, but he could guess from experience what the main article had been about. Dean and Seamus weren't making choking noises whenever the double class was mentioned. The only one acting like he always did was Neville.

Nothing would probably convince him Snape wasn't a total monster.

After finishing breakfast, Harry took his time collecting his books and cauldron. Dragging his feet along, he followed Ron and Hermione, feeling the drumroll of upcoming doom with every step he took.

"You look like you're going toward your execution." Glancing back over his shoulder, Ron grinned at his friend. "What's the matter Harry? You afraid that you're gonna lose us more points?" With the last words the grin faded, replaced by a worried look.

Harry shook his head. "No. But I'm afraid someone else will."

"But it's Snape we're talking about." Hermione had stopped as well. "Isn't he a good guy now?" It was still a weird notion after all these years, but she couldn't deny the facts. Dumbledore had said it himself. Snape was one of them.

"No. Snape is definitely not a good guy." At least not in this context. Harry wasn't sure about the rest of time. "I mean, he's okay, and definitely not one of Voldemort's people, but he's..."
Ron caught on with it. "You mean he's not been hiding behind the mask of an utter bastard? Like Parvati and Lavender think. They say it's all been a sham. That he's really a sweet man, who's been playing a nasty Potions master all these years."

A snort of laughter escaped Harry. Sometimes his housemates couldn't really see what was right in front of them. "Nope. Snape is exactly the guy we know. Sarcastic and evil." He wasn't going to add all the nicer stuff here. It wasn't like Ron or Hermione would ever see that side of the man anyway.

"Oh good grief!" Ron was starting to look really worried now. "He's going to kill us all."

Harry nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. "I'd say we'll definitely be on the minus side when this day is over. Not even winning all the Quidditch matches will help us now with the House Cup." Not that there was any danger of that. With the studying and anguishing over life, he hadn't been practicing as hard as he should have.

They walked to the dungeons feeling really anxious.

All the Slytherins were already inside the classroom. They were a subdued lot, sitting quietly at their usual places. No one looked up as the Gryffindor trio walked in.

It was easy to guess why. The smell of roses was overwhelming in the closed space. Harry stared with his mouth open at Snape's desk that was literally covered with the long stemmed flowers. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This was idiotic.

"Don't just stand there! Take your seats!" Parvati hissed. "We want the dear man to be surprised when he comes in, and he can't bloody well be surprised with you three standing there like that!"

Harry, Ron and Hermione exchanged looks, and then simply went to their places. None of them wanted to be standing in the way when Snape finally arrived. They might be brave and courageous, but not suicidal.

They had barely made it to their seats as the door banged open again.

Robes billowing behind him, Severus Snape stepped into his beloved classroom. He looked as annoyed as ever, gaze burning as he walked straight towards his desk, not pausing to see if the door swung shut behind him. The motion with which he entered the room was honed into perfection, succeeding every time.

Even the Slytherins looked up to gauge his reactions to the off place decoration on his desk. The expressions on the students varied from disgusted and scared to blithely happy.

A few steps from his desk, Snape twirled around, his gaze going immediately to the Gryffindors sitting on the left side of the room. He didn't even bother looking at Harry, knowing the boy wasn't stupid enough to do something like this. Instead, he fixed his attention on the two blushing girls in the back row.

The expressions greeting him made Snape want to groan. Was idiocy a requirement for the Gryffindor House? How many times would he have to go through this before these children learned he didn't give a damn?

Suppressing the urge to growl out something nasty, he continued to his desk. These idiots weren't even worth his ire.

Snape didn't say anything. He simply grabbed the roses and tossed them into the wastebasket. As the flowers came so obviously from a magical greenhouse, they weren't even worth cutting into potion
ingredients.

"But sir..." From the tone of Lavender's voice, it was obvious she was shocked by the professor's actions. She stood up and stared at the man, her mouth still working. No sound came out.

Gaze completely empty, Snape sneered. "Ten points from Gryffindor for unspeakable stupidity. You know I don't tolerate any outbursts in my class."

"But... We just wanted to..." Lower lip wobbling, Lavender tried to explain that they just wanted to thank him for what he'd done for McGonagall. All the things she and Parvati had talked with some of the sixth years had disappeared from her head.

"Twenty points. Now sit down." Snape's voice wasn't even raised.

It was like a déjà vu, reminding everyone of the first year. There had been no real commotion in the Potions class since then.

People around Snape learned things really quickly; not necessarily about the potions he taught, but the way to survive the class. To obey and be quiet.

Keeping his head bowed down, Harry hoped the others would not continue trying to treat Snape like a person. He wasn't, not in the classroom. Harry knew Snape didn't want anyone to think of him as a human being and did everything to discourage such illusions.

Lavender seemed to realize she was way out of line, and she sat in her seat silently. Under the table, Parvati grabbed her hand for support. She'd been convinced that their professor was really not as bad as he let everyone think, and it was quite a disappointment to see him act like he always did.

"Now, if you're all done with childish displays of cretinism, you may select partners and then work on the muting potion you'll find on page 378." Not bothering to stay and watch everyone rush to obey, Snape walked to the blackboard to scribble additional notes there.

"Hermione. Would you?" Before anyone could say anything, Harry was already pushing Ron aside and stood there next to her.

Sighing, Ron stepped next to Neville. "That means we'll have to work extra hard at trying not to blow up anything." He smiled while saying that, even though they both knew he wasn't exactly joking.

The look in Hermione's eyes was inquisitive. Unfortunately, Snape chose that moment to turn to glare at the class, so she decided not to say anything. She simply selected the ingredients needed while Harry stood by the cauldron looking like he was lost in thoughts.

As everyone started working, Harry kept his head down, casting sideways glances at the Slytherins. He'd seen the resentful looks some of them were aiming at their professor.

He didn't really believe anyone would be stupid enough to actually attack Snape, but didn't want to risk it. Even Crabbe and Goyle who would be the ones capable of such total lack of judgement seemed to be busying themselves with the potion.

The look on Goyle's face wasn't full of anger. He seemed completely lost.

Harry let Hermione do all the real work, chopping ingredients for her. It was strange. He couldn't concentrate on the assignment. Before the class, he hadn't really thought of worrying because of the Slytherins.
Now, however, he couldn't help thinking about the way some looked at Snape. About the hatred shining in Pansy Parkinson's gaze. About the completely blank expression on Draco Malfoy's face which was clearly a mask used to hide everything.

It was enough to make Harry's skin crawl. So instead of working on the potion, he kept his gaze on the Slytherins, his hand never far from his wand.

The Potions class seemed to last forever. Fortunately the potion was a complex one, occupying everyone for the duration of the whole class. Snape made his usual comments about Neville's incompetence, his glare making Ron shiver as well. Gryffindor lost ten points because of the pinkish slime those two managed to produce. Then ten more because Dean couldn't stop staring at their professor.

At that point no one felt like Snape should be cuddled and hugged and thanked for being such a nice man anymore.

Lavender was the first person to rush out of the classroom when they were finally finished. She was followed by the Slytherins. None of them looked like they wanted to stay in the Potions classroom for a second longer than they had to.

"Let's get something to eat." Hand on Neville's shoulder, Ron muttered the words out loud enough for Harry and Hermione to hear.

Harry nodded absentmindedly. He was hungry, but going to the Great Hall wasn't all that appealing. He wished he could skip dinner and stay in the dungeons.

Staying behind would be noticed, though, and he didn't want to make things any worse than they already were. Snape would probably want to make his presence known in the Great Hall as well, sitting there next to the other teachers, looking like everything was perfectly fine in the world.

During dinner, everyone at the Gryffindor table was talking about Snape. Hermione listened to everything, nodding sagely as the second years reported about their class that morning. Apparently it hadn't gone as well as theirs had. Snape had actually snarled. Made some of the girls -- and a few boys, even though they flat out denied it when asked -- cry. Reduced fifty House points from Gryffindor.

Neville looked a bit relieved at that. After all, it was more than they had managed to lose.

It was generally agreed that no one should try to do anything nice for their Potions master again. None of the efforts were appreciated anyway, so why bother?

Harry smiled at that, hiding the expression behind his spoon. At least his friends had got the message rather easily, and no one was hurt. Except for Lavender, and even with her, it was her feelings, nothing worse.

Everything was going to be all right.

There were vacant seats at the Head Table, both McGonagall and Hooch still staying in the infirmary. Dumbledore was looking his normal self again, talking with the DADA professor while eating, casting knowing looks around the room every once in a while.

Not paying any attention to the Slytherins, Harry finished with his dinner. He looked at Ron as he collected his stuff, wondering what to say to him. Their relationship was still a bit shaky after all the lies of omission he'd been forced to tell.
Ron caught the look and smiled. "See you later then." He was burning with curiosity, but knew asking wouldn't really help. He could deal with this.

Feeling really proud of the way he was treating the situation, he turned back to Seamus, determined not to let him mock the Cannons again.

Harry walked out of the Great Hall, not even bothering to go and take his bag to the dormitory. Better to carry his books with him. At least that way he had a good excuse to visit Snape again.

It wasn't like he needed to go to the dungeons again. But he was a bit worried.

So he headed downstairs.

At the end of the stairs his path was blocked. A big black dog was sitting there, looking like he was waiting for something. He looked intimidating, the glint in his eyes almost menacing.

"Hi Snuffles." Harry managed a casual tone. He was actually amazed he'd been able to postpone the talk this long. "Are you sitting here in hopes of getting your ears scratched by some nice Slytherin, or are you waiting for me?"

A row of yellow teeth were revealed as the dog growled, his lip curling up as a warning.

Sobering up, Harry nodded. "All right. I think we should go to the dormitory for this." He cast a longing look at the dark corridor opening in front of him, and then turned around, going up the stairs. The dog padded right behind him.

There were a few Gryffindors in the common room. They didn't really pay attention to the familiar sight of Harry being followed by professor Lupin's dog. A couple of first years tried to call for Snuffles to be scratched, but he ignored them completely.

"Okay. Here we are." Harry walked to his bed, slipping his bag on the floor, and then sat down.

Snuffles tilted his head, listening for a moment. Satisfied that no one was approaching, he blurred into Sirius again. Instead of looking angry like Harry had assumed, he looked worried. Even a bit hesitant.

He walked to the bed as well, sitting down next to Harry. Both sat in silence for a moment.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

It was a familiar question. Harry smiled and nodded. "Never better."

"Good. Good to hear." There was a brief pause as Sirius obviously wondered what to say next. "Just wondered. Because with all the things that have happened lately I wouldn't be surprised if you were upset."

"Not upset, really. Just annoyed. I really wish this was all over." Harry's gaze was serious. He'd been afraid of the future for so long, but now he just wanted it to be over. Didn't want any more killing.

"So... I talked with Ron earlier, and he said you haven't been around lately. You've been seeing Snape then." Voice a bit too casual, Sirius glanced at his godson. "I mean... You were there yesterday, weren't you? At his place."

Harry wondered why that sounded so strange. As if he was doing something insane. "Yes." He steeled himself against the sermon.
There was none. Sirius looked down at his hands. "Order business?" Now his tone was hopeful.

"Yeah. I needed to talk to him about something... And since he used to be... well, you know, he knows stuff. That I needed to hear. You know?" Harry wasn't sure he got the point of his words either. He didn't want to explain this to Sirius.

Because the truth would be painful, for both of them, and it would open doors neither wanted to be opened. Would reveal things that were best to be left alone. Harry didn't want to burden Sirius with his dark thoughts any more than Sirius wanted to talk about his own pain and suffering.

Sirius pondered about Harry's words for a moment. Then he asked, "Are you sure you can trust him?"

"Yes." The answer came too quickly, and Harry flinched at the way he sounded. It was the truth, but he didn't mean to make it sound like it was something he had spent hours thinking of.

"All right."

They sat there in silence. It was painfully obvious this conversation wasn't over yet. Harry fidgeted as the silence seemed to weigh on him. This was worse than the reaction he'd feared. His godfather usually ranted and raved when angry.

"You... You know you can tell me everything. Right?" Sirius wondered if that was true. "If you ever need to talk about something. You know you can come to me. Or Remus. We're here for you."

Harry nodded, not looking up. He did know that. Knew Sirius would never send him away, would always be there for him. That was why he couldn't tell him about everything; because the man wouldn't shield himself from things that would hurt. He'd take all Harry's pain and try to make things better when nothing ever could.

Maybe if he hadn't spent over a decade losing himself in the darkness, if he was not hiding from the world himself; then Harry could have gone to him. Would have gone to him.

"Harry?"

Looking up, he met Sirius' gaze with a real smile on his face. "I know it, Sirius. I really do." It was funny, but just the fact that he did know that made him feel better. Sirius' concern and love were unconditional. Something that was rare in his world.

Sirius felt relieved to see the smile. His arm went around Harry's shoulder again in a familiar move. As familiar as the way Harry leaned into his half embrace. "You thought I'd be angry because you're..." Realizing that phrase made it sound like his godson was doing something incredibly stupid, he said instead, "Working with Snape."

Even though it wasn't a real question, Harry nodded. "It's pretty obvious what you think of him." After all, he'd never kept his thoughts about this matter secret.

"Yep. I think he's an annoying, vindictive man. He was like that as a boy and I don't think he's changed. At all. He's also nasty, evil, and yes, I know it has nothing to do with his mind, but he's also a disgusting greasy git." Now there was real emotion in Sirius' voice. No, it was definitely not a secret that he didn't like Snape.

Harry didn't interrupt him. None of the things he said was actually wrong. But they weren't all Snape was. He knew he'd never have Sirius or anyone else see what he saw, mainly because no one else would want to see it.
"Still, he did save old Naggy's life." Realizing he'd let the age old nickname slip out, Sirius grinned. "I mean our dear professor McGonagall of course."

It felt good to laugh again. Harry wiped off tears of laughter as he collapsed against his godfather. "I never heard that one before." Ron would love that, though it was best not to mention it to Hermione.

Sirius decided he would tell his godson every single joke about the professors if it made him laugh like that again. It didn't matter Remus would probably kill him when he got to the raunchier ones. Seeing Harry laugh was worth anything.

"That was bad, Sirius." Harry smiled against the man's shoulder. "But I love you anyway."

Funny how easy it had become to say it like that. Casually. As if Sirius wasn't the first living person ever to hear the words from Harry's mouth.

"I love you too, Harry." A bit raspier than he'd intended, but Sirius didn't really mind his voice.

They sat there in silence until sounds of footsteps forced Snuffles to emerge again. Harry could see a question in the dog's eyes, and decided to follow him downstairs to look for Remus Lupin. He didn't want to lose this moment, feeling peaceful and at ease with his godfather.

He could go to the dungeons tomorrow. It wasn't like Snape was going to disappear anywhere.

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Part 13

Snape was feeling cranky that morning.

Had to be because of the annoying scene at breakfast. There had been an incredible number of owls flying over the tables, bringing letters to the brats with the Gryffindor ghost looping around them, making joyous sounds.

That nearly headless nuisance had always seemed too cheery for a ghost. Still, Snape could understand the reason for such behavior. After all, all the living Gryffindors looked like they might want to join him in his unearthly dance over the tables.

All because of the slim form appearing from the side door and walking slowly to her place next to the Headmaster at the Head Table.

Minerva had looked her usual cool self again. It was a relief. Maybe Snape could now push the images of the ravaged woman away from his mind and try to forget the desperate flight through the corridors of the Malfoy Mansion.

It was apparent his colleague hadn't forgotten any of it. The annoying woman had stopped by his side and smiled at him, briefly touching his arm before gathering her robes tighter around her and moving on, careful not to touch anyone else.

At least she had the sense not to try to hug him. Shuddering at the thought, Snape walked to the corridor leading to his private rooms.

He was relieved he had the morning off. There were no classes scheduled before lunch, and even after the midday meal it would be double Potions for third year Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. Nothing he couldn't handle in his sleep.

Hurried footsteps from behind him brought Snape out of his thoughts. A shiver going down his
spine, he spun around with his wand in hand, coming face to face with a heavily breathing Harry Potter. The boy had the gall to smile at him. "Potter. I see you still haven't grown a survival instinct." Shoving his wand back under his robes, he turned around and continued towards his rooms.

"Sorry." Harry's voice indicated he wasn't really. "Just didn't think I should stand here in the dungeons and yell your name."

Snape didn't say anything, but agreed with the boy. The last thing he needed right now was to have his Slytherins to know he was having Harry Potter in his rooms.

Not that it could really make things any worse. His children were already angry and confused. He understood them perfectly. After all, he had turned their world upside down.

Stepping through the familiar doorway, Harry said, "Hagrid gave us the morning off. The Jarveys are sick, and he didn't think we should be crowding them." He walked towards his chair, deciding against it at the last moment and went to sit on the couch instead. "So we have an assignment to write an essay about the attempt the American wizards made to transport Jarveys across the Atlantic in 1950's."

"One of the most idiotic attempts they ever made." Snape couldn't help commenting on that. Only the Americans would first exterminate a whole race of magical beings and then decide to transport a new breed from across the sea.

Harry nodded, pulling his quill from his bag. "Yes." He sat back with his left ankle raised to rest on his right thigh to give his parchment some support. "It is." With that, he started scribbling.

The look Snape threw at him was a curious one. Instead of asking anything, Snape walked to his desk, looking grimly at the stack of essays lying there.

With luck, he'd manage to grade them during the morning. He wasn't counting on luck, though. After years of teaching, he'd come to the conclusion that either most people were idiots, or Potions was the most difficult subject in the whole world. Since there were as many great Potions masters as there were excellent Charms masters, he had to go with the former. Not that it surprised him, really.

Grabbing his quill, he started reading the essays.

The small room was filled with the sound of two quills scratching on parchment. After his initial comments on the matter, Harry browsed through his Care of Magical Creatures book, looking for references. Hagrid never gave impossible assignments -- unlike someone he could mention -- and it was relatively easy to find information on the Jarvey Transport mess.

Snape couldn't help muttering darkly as he wrote comments on the parchments. He could understand how the long spring term could make first and second years a bit restless, thusly impairing their learning. But the older children really should know better than to write pointless drivel on their essays.

It was disappointing to see that some of the seventh years hadn't obviously started studying for the N.E.W.T.s yet. How on earth were they going to pass the final exams if they couldn't even tell the difference of Manticore juice and Polyjuice?

At least he was certain some of the students were doing what they were supposed to. His Slytherins were too scared to come to his class unprepared. Some of the Ravenclaws were actually up to their House motto. There were even a few Gryffindors who seemed to be preparing themselves for the exams.
Hermione Granger was always reading, sometimes sounding like a walking textbook. Even though she didn't seem to be as totally -- annoyingly -- bookish as she used to, she was still by far the most intelligent student Snape had had in years. Harry was also studying. He knew that for a fact. The boy had spent many hours in the dungeons doing homework and reading.

It seemed that he was not as agitated as he used to be. Snape was glad about it, because it meant there wasn't anything wrong with the boy. He wasn't a real mediwizard. All the things he'd done or said were due to his own experiences with fear and pain.

That was the whole point. The reason why Harry had come to him in the first place.

He wasn't ranting anymore. Actually the rants hadn't lasted for long. After a couple of weeks, he'd stopped pouring out his gloomy thoughts and had talked about things rationally.

Not hiding the pain, but processing it. Discussing things that didn't always deal with Voldemort and the upcoming war.

Snape looked up at the boy, laying the quill down next to the bottle of red ink. Harry had been quieter lately. He wasn't babbling anymore. Last time he'd been in the dungeons, he hadn't really talked about anything special, simply spent time there.

It had to mean something.

"Potter." When the boy looked up from his parchment, Snape asked, "How are you doing?" The familiar line that had started most of their discussions.

Harry smiled. "Fine. This isn't all that difficult." He'd managed to cover most of the events in less than an hour.

The words made Snape roll his eyes. "How nice. I'm always pleased to hear about your academic aspirations." Amazing how the acribic tones didn't even make Harry flinch. "Is there a reason you don't want to answer my question?"

"No." There was no way Harry would admit he enjoyed the verbal sparring with his professor. "And I'm doing just fine. I really am." He smiled at that. He wasn't lying, even though he could have said that he was a bit worried about Sirius. There was nothing new in that; he was always worried about him when he went on a mission. It was a wonder no one had caught Sirius yet, considering how Pettigrew must have told Voldemort about his Animagus form.

It was probably because of the man holding the leash. Or the fact that instead of being a ragged and starved -looking cur, Snuffles was actually well groomed these days.

Grunting, Snape turned his attention back to the parchment in front of him. He knew he could read Harry's words by now, separating lies from the truth. This sounded real.

No need for him to push. If Harry didn't have anything to say, they didn't need to talk.

Snape blinked at the thought.

The parchment forgotten, he looked up again, eyes squinting. Why was Harry still here if he didn't have anything to talk about? This whole deal had been based on the boy's need to talk, his need to be with someone who wouldn't judge him because of desperate thoughts. If he was indeed feeling better, why was he still coming here?

One way to find out. Snape never shied from asking blunt questions, especially with someone like
"Why are you here?" Seeing the way Harry blinked at that, he sighed. "I mean today. Why are you here? Surely you could do that homework somewhere else."

It was a bit annoying how his voice didn't hold any of his usual sneer. He didn't sound like he actually minded the boy's presence, but was simply asking.

Harry had hoped Snape wouldn't notice his behavior, or at least mention it. He put the parchment aside, folding his arms over his chest. He really didn't want to be thrown out. "I like it here. It's peaceful." Compared to the common room at least.

"Yes, I know that." After all, peace and quiet were very important to Snape. He reveled in his solitude, choosing a simple, quiet life.

"I... Do you want me to leave? I mean if you do, I will." Feeling his heartbeat elevate, Harry hoped his voice didn't sound as desperate as he felt. He didn't want to leave.

Snape was quiet for a moment, giving the question the thought it deserved. The waves of relief he'd expected were not flooding over him. He wondered what had happened to the resentment he'd always felt towards the boy. The arrogant twerp who had come to Hogwarts to be praised and coddled.

"As long as you don't disturb me, you can stay. For now." Sounding like he didn't really care, Snape shrugged. He didn't mind Harry's presence here.

Harry bit the inside of his lip to prevent himself from smiling brightly. It would be the worst reaction to the sullen words, he was certain of that. "Thank you." Squirming a little, he tried to find a better position on the couch. The essay was finished. Maybe he should read something, like the Arithmancy text. He didn't think Snape would let him stay if he just sat there, not even pretending to be studying.

Concentrating on the grading, Snape went back to muttering dark things about the students. It was actually a good thing for Harry to see how the teachers worked; how much time and effort they wasted on trying to educate brainless children. By the time he was finished with the fourth year Hufflepuffs, his wrist was starting to ache. For once he would like to read an essay that was actually about the potion he'd taught, and not idiotic ramblings.

It made him glance at the clock hanging on the wall. He still had time to do some reading for the afternoon classes before it was lunch time.

Snape stacked the parchments again. Then he grabbed one of his text books and walked to the couch. He'd be spending the whole afternoon sitting on his hard chair behind the desk, or walking around the classroom. Glaring at Harry, he went to sit on the other end of the couch, enjoying the very comfortable seat.

He should probably have the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws work on the Shrinking Solution. Those third years were a bit slow on assuming knowledge, but maybe something that would be useful would motivate them. He knew well that most people used that particular potion instead of shrinking charms to make large things portable.

A hint or two about the possible Hogsmeade weekend in the far future would probably be enough motivation.

Browsing through the book, Snape started reading about the potion, the familiar words making him
relax. He could probably brew the potion in his sleep, but since he had nothing better to do right now, he thought he might as well read.

Harry kept his head bowed down, trying very hard to look like he was reading the Arithmancy book. Instead of reading, he kept his gaze on Snape.

The unstable vectors weren't all that interesting, and his mind had started to wander after the first few paragraphs. He thought about last evening and Sirius' words. He wished the man would stay for a while, but knew he and Remus would probably be leaving in a day or two. The Death Eaters were still busy with smuggling dark creatures here, so they would continue the spying operation.

He would miss those two, especially Sirius. His godfather wasn't always the best with words, but he could do wonders with just one hug. It was a warm welcome, something akin to the feeling of home.

No one else could make him feel quite like that. Sirius didn't try to be a parent to him, but he somehow managed to convey protectiveness and care with his touch. Sometimes Harry wondered where he'd learned that. With Molly Weasley it was clearly because of spending over thirty years being a mother. Maybe with Sirius it was an instinct.

Stretching his left leg, Harry suddenly froze and looked up. He'd completely forgotten that Snape had come to sit next to him. Fortunately there was still space between his outstretched leg and Snape.

Harry couldn't really imagine resting his foot on Snape's lap. The man was definitely not a parenting figure who would take that in stride. It was quite probable such a gesture would get him a one way ticket out of the dungeons.

That was the last thing he wanted right now.

He couldn't help staring at Snape. It was strange how often his thoughts had turned to this man lately. He had no idea why. Was it because he'd spent so much time with him, depending on him? He doubted it. After all, he'd stopped doing the psycho routine a long time ago. Now he was staying with the man because he liked him.

Sirius would probably have a fit if he said something like that out loud in his presence. He'd seen him have trouble with the fact that he trusted Snape. Telling him that he didn't simply come to the dungeons to work with someone he trusted, but to spend time with someone he liked would really make Sirius' day.

Upsetting his godfather wasn't exactly something Harry wanted to do.

"What's so funny?"

Harry realized he'd been staring at Snape, lost in thought with a silly smile on his face. He shook his head slightly. "Nothing special." Snape had listened to him talk about Sirius earlier, but it was clear he didn't really enjoy the subject.

Seeing that Harry wasn't about to start talking about whatever he found amusing, Snape grunted and returned his attention to the book.

This easy way of accepting things was one of the reasons Harry liked it in here. Unlike in class, Snape never pushed him. Didn't ask questions he wasn't ready to answer.

It was a bit confusing, but Harry reasoned it was because Snape thought he would talk about things he needed to. Deciphering the sarcastic words had become quite easy. He was quite sure he got most of the things the man said right.
All his yearmates had been befuddled about their Potions master these past few days. None of them could see how someone taking such pleasure in terrorizing them in class could actually do anything good. Harry hadn't even tried to explain it to them. He was certain no one would ever understand Snape's motivations. He wasn't even certain he understood them himself, and he didn't exactly hate the man like most others did.

Here he was again. He realized this was actually bothering him; not hating Snape, seeing him as a person. Harry wondered why he was thinking this. Was this some kind of a reaction to his strange relationship with the man? Was this what he was supposed to feel?

Did this happen to everyone who depended on another person with dark thoughts? He didn't know.

But he knew someone who did.

Looking at the clock, and seeing there was time before they had to leave to lunch, Harry cleared his throat. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

Snape's dark gaze was turned to him immediately. "Yes?" He wasn't certain what the soft timbre in the boy's voice meant. It could be tiredness. At least the way he slumped on the couch, his feet dangerously close to Snape's clean robes, suggested he hadn't been sleeping well last night.

"You said you went through all of this... confusion. You know. Thinking all the bleak thoughts. And that Dumbledore helped you." Not a question. Groundwork for one.

"Yes." If Potter thought this would be a chance to share, he was dead wrong. Snape had no intention on dwelling in things past.

"Did you..." No. Not a good way to ask it. Harry thought for a moment and said instead, "How did you feel about him when you talked to him? When you'd told him all the things you had done or thought or whatever?"

The question made Snape wish he'd never encouraged Harry to talk. He was quiet for a long moment, wondering if he should lie or not. A lie would be so much easier to tell and for the boy to hear, but he deserved the truth. Probably because he had a feeling Potter might want justification for an emotion. "I was grateful." He paused for a moment. "And I hated him. Hated him more than anyone right then."

The lie slipped out instinctively. There had been someone he'd hated even more than Albus back then; himself. That was none of Potter's business.

"I rather thought you might have." Soft words that were almost inaudible.

Harry could well understand that. He doubted it would have been like that if he'd had to go to Dumbledore. More likely, he'd ended up feeling miserable about his own weakness. Snape was a proud man. Of course he would hate that situation, and anyone helping him.

It was probably more complicated than that, though. He'd seen how Snape did things for the Headmaster, how he seemed to hold the man in a high esteem no matter what he said of his way of treating the students. Called him manipulative, but still obeyed the hints the man dropped every now and then. For Albus Dumbledore rarely commanded. He didn't have to.

Snape was still looking at Harry, not trying to dodge his questioning gaze. "It is perfectly normal to hate someone. Even someone you respect." He hoped the boy would never repeat his words to Albus, cursing himself for even saying them out loud.
But he'd realized quite early that sometimes Harry needed to relate to something. Needed him to say a few curt words about how he had shared some of the negative thoughts, as if the fact that he wasn't alone with the emotions gave him the permission to feel them.

Foolish and naive, really, but then again most teenagers were.

"I know." Did he respect Snape? Harry knew that in some things he did, but it didn't come even close to the way the man obviously felt about Dumbledore. It wasn't like that; he didn't revere Snape. "But you know what? I don't hate you."

"Dear Merlin! That really does make me feel so much better. I am touched, Potter." Hiding any hint of genuine pleasure behind dripping sarcasm, Snape rolled his eyes. He never really knew what to expect from this exasperating young man. Honest declaration of not hating him was about the last thing.

Harry grinned. "I knew you would be." He knew it sounded a bit patronizing, but didn't really care. A glare was all the answer he got.

Not that he'd really expected for anything more. He knew Snape, knew that sometimes you just had to look beyond the glares and sarcasm. To see even more sarcasm, and even darker glares. Snape was definitely not a nice man.

But Harry liked him anyway.

They spent the rest of the morning reading in silence. Harry had things to think about, and he was sure Snape didn't need to hear what he was contemplating. He did smile at him again when leaving for lunch; simply because he knew it would bring out another exasperated sigh.

Snape stayed in his rooms for a few minutes after Harry had left. He needed to compose himself before going to the Great Hall again. Not for the first time, he wished he could simply stay here. The whole world was turning upside down already, and he dreaded what could happen next.

Gryffindors were trying to be nice to him. His own Slytherins were either afraid of him -- well, nothing new there -- or hated him. Unlike Harry Potter, who didn't hate him. Omens of the approaching apocalypse, he was certain.

Gathering his books and the parchment rolls from the table, Snape walked to the Potions classroom to make sure everything was prepared for the classes before heading to lunch.

All his Slytherins were already eating. He felt people stare and met the stares with a cold gaze. It didn't matter what people thought of him. As long as they behaved in class, they could wish him dead for all he cared.

He was concerned about a couple of his students. Gregory Goyle wasn't talking. He just sat there, nibbling his food. His constant shadow seemed worried about him, trying to urge him to drink more of the juice. At least Crabbe could do something right. Instincts probably. He wasn't smart enough to actually think about the situation.

Unlike young Malfoy. Ignoring the hateful glares Parkinson was throwing at him, Snape glanced at the boy. He seemed to be preoccupied by a piece of parchment in front of him, not bothering to even pretend he was eating. It was more worrying than open displays of hatred.

The boy was so much like his father. Cunning and clever. He would not let things rest.
Snape hid his sigh, turning his attention to his food instead. Seeing young people make absolutely wrong choices was always painful. He would never get used to seeing his Slytherins follow the path that led to Voldemort.

Down at the Slytherin table, people were eating in silence. There was no sound of laughter, or even whispered plans.

Some of them simply wanted to eat and then get away from their housemates. The few Muggle-born students would go to the library to study. Even some purebloods would steer away from those who now held murder in their eyes.

None of the House of Salazar were ignorant. Even the stupidest children knew the reality behind the snake-emblems. They knew about You-Know-Who and his cohorts. Could guess where those with powerful parentage went on their holidays. Knew who was the unspoken leader of them all.

The leader, who wasn't talking right now. Wasn't paying any attention to the ones around him.

Draco was staring at the letter in front of him. It had arrived early that day, right when he'd been finishing his breakfast. He'd recognized the eagle owl as soon as it had swept in from the window. It wasn't as if he hadn't been anticipating a letter from his father. Actually, he was surprised it had taken him this long to send him instructions.

Instructions. The word almost brought a smile on his face. Commands was a better word to describe them. Insanity another.

His gaze focused on one phrase. *Our lord demands this from us...* Our lord.

It reminded him of the screams he'd heard not long ago. He'd spent the Yuletide at home, back at Malfoy Mansion. It had been an eye opener, his future unfolding slowly in front of his eyes with his housemates there, all his friends and family gathered under the roof to celebrate... Not Muggle Christmas. Not even the older pagan Solstice. But one man.

One horribly disfigured snake of a man. The man all the masked Death Eaters worshipped. The one his father called Master. Whom he himself would one day call that as well, if things went as planned.

Since he and other Slytherins were still under age of consent, they'd been excluded from the main ceremonies. His birthday had still been almost a Solstice away and it was the only thing that had kept him from receiving the Dark Mark right there and then. He'd stayed awake that night, though. The night his father and some of the other Death Eaters had brought the Muggles to the courtyard.

Draco had watched from his window, as the masked figures had toyed with the hapless Muggles. They had been too far for him to really see anything, but he'd heard the screams.

A female voice repeating words over and over, starting with that phrase. *Our lord.* It was clearly aimed at someone more benign than the Dark Lord. For this one seemed to be up high, forgiving people and giving them things. The Dark Lord never forgot, never forgave. And all his favors came with an awful price to pay.

The words had still echoed inside his head even after her voice had been silenced. It had bothered Draco, and he'd tried to find the whole chant somewhere, looking into Muggle literature when he was certain no one could see him doing that. He'd figured out it was a prayer of some sort.

He'd never found the thing. One had come close, but instead of calling for 'our lord', that one was aimed at 'our father'. It had frozen Draco.
It had filled him with terrible fear.

Because it had made him wonder about his own father. About his real motives, his life. All his life, Draco had seen a proud man with a lot of power. Ever since the return of the Dark Lord, there had been almost nothing of that man left. The glory and the power had simply been a veneer. Inside, Lucius Malfoy was scared.

Now here was this letter. His father writing to him about what their lord -- his lord -- wanted of him. He didn't know about anything anymore, didn't even know if what his father said was true. His father. So wrong like his lord. So wrong in everything.

Draco closed his eyes, unable to look at the letter anymore. What his father wanted him to do was a suicide. To punish professor Snape, and when he was dead, to kill Dumbledore as well. As a grande finale, he was to kidnap Potter after that, as if he’d ever get that far. One try at Dumbledore's life, and he'd be hexed by hundreds of students. His father had to know that, yet he insisted he killed the Headmaster. Right after he dealt with Snape.

It made Draco ill.

His father loved his Master more than he loved his own son. Or feared him. He didn't know. All he did know was he never wanted to become a man like that. He wanted power, wanted to use his pureblood talents to gain a high position in the society. But he wanted to do it with his own name and his own face, not hiding behind a mask like a coward.

Opening his eyes again, he stared at the envelope. A coiled snake was pictured there, the symbol of Slytherin. It made Draco want to cry out in rage. It wasn't supposed to be the sign of all evil. It was supposed to be the sign of loyalty and cunning. Of ties that couldn't be severed.

He stared at the snake, his thoughts repeating inside his head.

There was a way. He had a way to save his hide. Probably even his soul, if he had one. He knew he had no other way out of the dismal mess his life had turned to be. His father had a hold on his life, as pureblood tradition stated. He would be helpless until his eighteenth birthday, and by then, he would either be dead, or standing by his father, wearing a similar mask and a tattoo on his arm.

Draco stared at the snake. The snake seemed to be staring back.

He was moving before he made the conscious decision to get up. Climbing from his seat, he stood there for a moment. The command in the letter had been clear. His father expected him to kill professor Snape and Albus Dumbledore this very day. His father was using him as a tool. His father knew he was sending his only son to his death.

For the glory and gratification of his lord, his Master; whatever the hell Lucius Malfoy wanted to call that sorry excuse of a wizard he groveled in front of. His. Not theirs.

Never Draco's.

Determination filling him, he slipped his hand inside his robes and grabbed his wand. With a fluid motion, he pulled it out. Then he started walking.

The Head Table was so close, he could well see the expressions on the teachers’ faces. None of them were paying him attention. He looked from one familiar face to another, staring at professor Sinistra for a moment. He couldn't trust her, didn't know enough of her. So he turned his attention back to where it belonged.
Black hair, pale face. Professor Snape was talking to professor McGonagall, who looked like she really should still be in the hospital wing.

Draco kept his gaze on Snape. He didn't know what to make of the man. He'd known him to be the friend of his father for as long as he’d lived. Snape was a pureblood like him, from one of the old wizarding families, still honoring the traditions unlike the Weasleys who dallied with mudbloods. He was his teacher and the Head of his House. Always there for the Slytherins. Never treating them like filth simply because they'd been sorted to the House of Salazar.

He had also been a Death Eater. Even now, after his betrayal, the Dark Mark had to still be there on his arm. He had followed Draco's father on that path, but unlike Lucius, he'd not stayed on it.

Did that make him disloyal? It depended on the point of view. But to whom was Draco supposed to be loyal? To the Dark Lord? To Lucius Malfoy, the loving father who was sentencing his only son to death? To his own House? Draco didn't know.

He did, however, know that he and Severus Snape were more alike than neither could ever have imagined.

Some of the teachers saw the approaching Slytherin and silenced, staring at the boy. Draco ignored them, continuing on his way. He could hear students mutter his name, "Malfoy" uttered as if it was a curse. Maybe it was.

He didn't know anymore.

Snape seemed to sense that something was going on. He turned his attention from McGonagall, his gaze instinctively going to where the seventh year Gryffindors sat. Then it focused on Draco.

An eerie silence filled the Great Hall. There were those sitting at the Slytherin table who knew what was to come next. They'd received owls from their parents as well, informing them of the revenge the Malfoy family was bestowing on the traitor. Some of the teachers looked worried; Albus Dumbledore's face an unreadable mask.

Looking from the wand Draco was holding to the clear grey gaze, Snape asked, "What is it, Mr. Malfoy?" It was clear he sensed something wasn't right, but apparently he didn't do anything to protect himself.

Draco could hear clatter from behind him as he raised his wand. Footsteps approaching. He ignored that. "Professor Snape. You are the Head of the Slytherin House of which I am a member." Old words, a tradition not evoked for years.

He didn't know why, but it seemed appropriate.

"I am. What do you need of me?" Snape's words were spoken softly, but loud enough for most people to hear them.

He still had a choice. A way to balance the scale in favor of his father and his quest. He could get his name in history as the one making the greatest sacrifice for lord Voldemort. That would make witches and wizards around the world either praise or curse his name. Or he could leave everything he knew behind.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. His eyes blinked. Twice. His hand lowered his wand on the table in front of Snape slowly, as if air had suddenly become heavy. It made a surprisingly loud sound as it hit the white table cloth.
Behind him, the sound of footsteps stopped.

"The House of Malfoy is no longer able to take care of me. Will you grant me the shelter of the Slytherin House and take responsibility over me until I am of age and need a guardian no longer?" How amazing that Draco managed to get it out without choking.

Snape stared into his eyes, the dark depths almost burning. He could see fear and pain and realization of a betrayal far worse than his in the boy's eyes. It amazed him. Draco's eyes had always reminded him of Lucius, but there had never been such emotions in that cold gaze.

No one in the whole hall said a word. Everyone was too shocked to even move. Harry had got up as soon as he'd realized Malfoy was heading towards Snape, but even he just stood there, in the middle of the aisle, his wand in hand.

Waiting.

Strange, how one could look two different boys in the eyes and see his own past. Snape had to swallow as he contemplated Malfoy's words. This was even more painful than looking at Potter, for this could have been him. Should have been him. There was no way to undo the things he'd done, but he could do this, could make sure at least one of his Slytherins had a future.

If the boy was sincere. If he wasn't working under imperius. He wasn't an idiot. Not even the symbolic gesture of laying down his wand in front of him made Snape trust a Malfoy. He'd never make that mistake again. Keeping his gaze on the boy's, he put his hand on top of the wand.

"I will grant you shelter in the Slytherin House," Snape said quietly. "And offer you the protection of the Snape House as well, if you would have me as your legal guardian."

Relief flooded over Draco. His knees almost buckled as he nodded. Snape did understand, knew what he meant and had responded in the ages old words as only a pureblood could. "Yes. Please. Thank you, sir." It was over.

All the doubts and the self loathing was finally over. Of course his life could well be over soon as well, for he no longer had the protection of his father.

The next owls coming to his housemates would probably carry his death sentence, but he couldn't find the strength to care. For this glorious moment everything was all right. He was going to relish the feeling as long as he could.

Not knowing where to go, Draco stood there, staring at his professor. Even with the protection that had been offered, he couldn't simply walk back to the table and sit there with his housemates. It was ironic. He was more Slytherin than ever, but couldn't stay with the other Slytherins. He knew too much. As soon as his father heard of what he'd done, he'd see to it that he would not reveal anything to anyone who might use the information against the Dark Lord.

"Mr. Malfoy." Placing his utensils on the plate, Snape sighed. He was finished with his meal anyway. The peace he'd felt the whole morning was now gone. He suspected it would not return for some time. "You'd better come with me."

With that, he got up and headed towards the side door. Draco followed him meekly, refusing to pay any attention to the murmurs that had already begun.

Albus Dumbledore watched the two Slytherins walk out of the Great Hall, smiling mysteriously.
The tension filling Harry was a familiar one. It had followed him these last few days, his constant companion.

He'd thought the weekend had been bad; worrying about the people he cared for, not being able to do anything to help had been pure hell. Paling every lonely night spent in the cupboard under the stairs.

Compared to the scare he'd had at dinner, those worries now felt insignificant.

"You think Malfoy was serious?" Panting the words out as he scrambled up the stairs in near run after his friends, Ron voiced the thought filling everyone's mind.

Hermione shrugged. She had no idea. "I really don't know. It seems like an obvious trap, but we must consider the reactions of the other Slytherins as well. They're not that good actors." The horror on Pansy's face hadn't been faked. She'd seemed completely shocked.

Harry didn't say anything, he just hurried up the stairs, heading towards the corridor where the familiar gargoyle was.

The day had started out well, even with just the few hours of sleep he'd caught after Sirius had finished with his stories and ushered him to bed.

Thanks to Ron and Seamus' loud bickering, he'd been woken up even earlier than usual. Since he hadn't really felt sleepy, he'd joined his friends at breakfast. Feeling energized, he'd followed his friends to Hagrid's hut only to hear that the classes were cancelled.

With hours of relatively free time, he'd headed towards the dungeons.

It had been a good decision, and he'd enjoyed his stay with Snape as usual. Going to the dungeons to work on his homework had been the best option for the day; everyone was busy with studying so no one would really miss him. Even Ron had seemed to be immersed in his Arithmancy book.

Harry muttered out the password and then rode up the turning staircase with Ron and Hermione right behind him. Maybe he shouldn't have been so pleased with the way things were going with him and Snape. Seeing Malfoy walk to the man with his wand drawn had definitely felt like every other nasty surprise the universe had thrown at him.

Reminding him of the wonder of hearing he was a part of a world that had nothing to do with wearing torn clothes that didn't fit and being treated like dirt, followed by the explanations of Voldemort. Finding the one person who really loved him and wanted to take him to live with him only to have that yanked away a moment later as the full moon came from behind the clouds and Sirius' chances to have his name cleared disappeared.

Cramming the thoughts of unfairness somewhere to the back of his mind, Harry stepped into the Headmaster's office.

Most of the Order members who had stayed at the castle were already there. The three Gryffindors joined the small crowd around a chair on which Draco Malfoy was sitting facing Dumbledore.

Snape was standing at the boy's side, holding a small vial in his hands. His eyes were a mystery as he watched the scene before him.

The expressions on other Order members ranged from appalled to disgusted. Seeing Harry approach,
Sirius gestured him to join him and Lupin by the wall, looking a bit pale.

"What did we miss?" Whispering the words, Harry leaned closer to his godfather. The commotion on the Great Hall had prevented them from following Dumbledore immediately after lunch.

"Snape gave the boy Veritaserum." Sirius kept his gaze on the Headmaster. "Then everyone started asking questions all at once, and the poor kid looked like his head was going to explode." In their haste, they had forgot how compelling the truth serum could be, forcing the wizard to give all his information at once.

A smile appeared on Ron's face at the thought. "I'm sorry I missed that." He grimaced at the anticipated jab to the ribs, and didn't even bother to look apologetic even though Hermione would expect that.

Harry ignored Ron's muttered words and kept his gaze on Malfoy. There was a blank look on his face as he answered Dumbledore's questions with slow, precise sentences.

"All right." Nodding, Dumbledore leaned forward a little. "Have you told us all you know about Voldemort's plan? All the details. Both those told to you and those you managed to overhear."

That certainly made Harry perk up. What had he missed? What had Malfoy told to the others? He wasn't completely certain he wanted to know.

Draco nodded. "I have told you everything I know about the plans." He paused for a moment and then added, "But I also suspect that Voldemort," the name came out without difficulty, "will use any means necessary to avenge this deception. Mine and professor Snape's. He will not lose his focus on the plan, but will definitely have someone come after us as well."

There were stunned exclamations at that. Sirius and Remus exchanged worried glances, but didn't say anything.

Snape didn't even flinch. He had expected nothing less.

"We must be prepared for anything. Filius, you should go back to the class. Keep an eye on the Slytherins and don't let them go wandering around the castle until the classes are finished. Esme, I believe it's time the rest of the seventh years are brought up to date on the situation. Everyone else, go back to whatever you were doing." His voice holding a dismissal, Dumbledore looked up.

There was steel behind that command, so no one dared to object being sent away. People were still murmuring about the revelation as they filed out of the room.

Speaking softly, Dumbledore added, "Sirius and Remus. Stay." He completely ignored the smirk that flashed on Sirius' face. Nodding at Minerva's questioning look, he turned his attention to the three youngsters standing by the wall. "Harry, you and your friends should stay as well."

Harry hadn't made any move towards the door. He felt Hermione and Ron inch a little closer to him, offering silent support. This was it. He'd finally know what was the great plan the Dark Lord would use to bring him down.

When the door slammed shut behind professor Sprout, leaving only the chosen few in the Headmaster's office, Harry and the others took seats. Snape was the only one remaining standing. He kept his gaze on the blond boy sitting next to him.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Harry, before you arrived, Mr. Malfoy here explained to us all he knows about Voldemort's plans. It seems that we have been wrong all along." He paused to allow
some shocked exclamations to echo in the room. Then he went on. "Apparently, he will not try to kill you at the end of the school year. Or attack Hogwarts."

Harry didn't know whether to be worried or relieved by that. At least the school would be safe now. On the other hand, the Headmaster's expression suggested something bad was still coming.

"Do you know about the ancient cycle of the year?" It was a discreet way to ask the boy if he'd actually been awake in the class the day professor Binns had explained the ages old concept. Seeing Harry nod, Dumbledore said, "Good. It seems Voldemort is holding certain dates important. Your birthday this year is one of those."

"When I'll be eighteen," Harry mused out loud. He didn't know there was a significance with that age. After all, he'd been told all about the two biggest things defining a young wizard's life. His sixteenth birthday that marked the end of his childhood and made him approachable by all the innumerable people who were enthusiastic about getting closer to him. Closer to the famous Harry Potter.

Ron had joked about the whole thing, calling him a lucky bugger.

He hadn't shared the view with his friend. It was hard enough to dodge the ones trying to get his autograph. It was twice that hard to dodge those wanting to get into his pants.

The other big day would be when he'd attend his Leaving Feast. A huge signpost in the life of a wizard or a witch. This was the day he was considered to become an adult.

"Yes. Some wizards still hold the day significant. Mostly the pureblood families." It was the first thing Snape said since he'd led Malfoy here. "Our traditions are about power and who wields it. Those under eighteen are seen to be under the rule of the Head of their family."

It was obvious where he was pointing at with that.

Dumbledore nodded. "It is Voldemort's plan to kill you the next day, when the summer starts to wane. When you're a man in the eyes of the tradition." This time he didn't pause to give anyone a chance to make comments. "I believe his initial plan was to make you do something rash and go looking for trouble by destroying people important to us. And to you personally. That way you would have put yourself to Voldemort's hands. After Minerva's death, the Death Eaters would have targeted Hagrid."

"Fuck!"

Everyone turned to look at Ron, who blushed under the scrutiny. He lowered his gaze to the floor, unable to meet McGonagall's stern glare as he muttered his apologies. "Um... Sorry about that."

Since it was more or less the sentiment everyone shared, no one cared to comment on his choice of words.

"Severus here ruined that plan, though." Hiding the smile that made his eyes twinkle, Dumbledore looked at the Potions master who refused to look back at him. "That brings us to young Mr. Malfoy."

Harry turned to look at the boy he'd spent years hating. "Did they give you some orders?" It was a nice yes or no question a person under the influence of the Veritaserum would find easy to answer. After a nod, he asked, "What were you supposed to do?"

"My father ordered me to kill professor Snape because of his treachery." Draco showed no signs of emotion as he spoke the words out. "Then I was supposed to kill the Headmaster. If possible, you
were to be taken to my father's Master after that. Either by me or some of the other Death Eater children."

That brought a stunned silence to the room. Minerva McGonagall almost hissed with anger at that. She was still sore all over, only her stubbornness keeping her away from the infirmary. Somehow she could understand what had happened to her. She remembered the two familiarly gigantic forms grabbing her outside the Three Broomsticks, knowing well she saw the progeny of those Death Eaters at school every day.

It was different for the adults to wage war. It was insane, but at least most people were able to make their own decisions, even when those decisions were dismal. To force a child to do terrible things was different. It was disgusting.

She was certain the next time she came face to face with Lucius Malfoy, she would happily hex him with the deadliest of curses. Not only for what he had done to her, but for what that arrogant bastard was doing to his own child.

To other children as well.

Hermione frowned. "But they are still here. Crabbe and Goyle and all the others. What will happen next? I mean, you didn't do any of the things you were supposed to do."

"They will undoubtedly be told to kill me." Some of the familiar smirk was on Malfoy's face, as if he found the whole thing amusing. "Then they will do what I was ordered to do. Vince and Greg and Pansy and those black haired Ravenclaw twins and all the others who'll be following Voldemort will obey without hesitation."

"Why didn't you? Why didn't you just kill Snape and professor Dumbledore and then try to take me away?" Harry couldn't help asking that. He'd heard the crap Malfoy had sprouted from day one. Could still remember the exultant crows he made when they'd found the victims of the Basilisk. There were dozens of similar memories.

He didn't know what had brought Snape back from the darkness those years ago. He had theories, but nothing solid. Snape would never answer him if he asked, but Malfoy would. He would tell him everything now.

Resentment shone in Draco's eyes as he said, "Because I do not want to become Voldemort's slave, Potter. He is a madman and anyone who follows him is insane. I never want to become like that. Like my father."

That's noble, Ron thought with a sneer. He didn't say it out loud. Didn't want to be the object of another stern glare.

"He is telling the truth. The serum is still potent and I did brew it myself." Snape cast a brief look at the vial.

"Yes." With a slow nod, Dumbledore surveyed the young Slytherin sitting in front of him. He saw anger and pain and fear in the grey eyes, but none of the desperation. It was a blessing. At least with this one, there would be no years of self flagellation and remorse. "Thank you Mr. Malfoy."

Draco nodded, sitting still. He would wait for Snape to tell him what to do next.

"We seem to have a problem on our hands. Severus, I believe it's best if you and the boy go into hiding somewhere. We can not throw a large number of students out of the school, especially now, but we can't risk having you two here either." Dumbledore raised his hand to silence any objections.
"Just for the rest of the school year. You know it's for the best."

"What about you? This isn't simply about Malfoy and I; they are targeting you and Potter as well."

The Headmaster sighed. "I can take care of myself. No one will be able to harm me inside Hogwarts." He would not explain it more. "But you are right about Harry. We will have to do something about him as well."

Hearing Dumbledore order Snape to leave had frozen Harry. It couldn't happen again! He'd just got over worrying about the man and now he was going to be sent away for who knew how long. It would make the rest of the school term unbearable.

He knew he probably shouldn't worry about Snape, but if the man went away to some unknown place with Death Eaters looking for him, he would spend hours worrying and wondering. He'd have nightmares about Voldemort torturing Snape, about the man dying. And he would miss him terribly. Miss all the times he'd spent in the dungeons talking to him, or just being with him.

Earlier, in the Great Hall, he'd really thought Snape's life had been in danger. He hadn't thought of throwing the good old expelliarmus at Malfoy's back. No. He'd been completely prepared to use whatever means necessary to stop the Slytherin from harming Snape.

It bothered him a little. Using the Unforgivables was not only illegal, it was also immoral. He had been forced to use them two years ago when a friend's life had been in danger, but even when he had actually said the two words he hated above all else, he hadn't experienced such anger as he'd felt today.

After a scare like that, watching Snape leave would be impossible.

Squeezing his hands to fists, he fidgeted in the chair. The truth was, he would miss Snape because he liked the man. There had to be a way to prevent this whole thing. Except he was really in danger, and would be safer away from Hogwarts. Staying would be idiotic, and whatever else Snape might be, that wasn't one of his traits.

Then it hit him. It was so simple it almost made him laugh. "I think I should probably go with them. Into hiding." He even managed to make it sound as if he wasn't all that enthusiastic about the whole thing.

"No way in hell!" The yell came from Ron and Sirius at the same time, both jumping to their feet and glaring at Harry.

"What an excellent suggestion." Ignoring the loud protests, Dumbledore nodded at Harry. He'd been confident the boy would figure it out himself. "I know just the place where you, Severus and Mr. Malfoy can stay." He was already thinking about the small cottage not far from here. Voldemort would never suspect the place; it was too close, too open. Not a real hiding place and as such perfect for the moment.

Sirius muttered dark words that made McGonagall glare again. Ron on the other hand was panicking. He couldn't let Harry go to some dismal dungeon all alone with two damn Slytherins!

He'd been in the dark for so long, never really knowing what was going on with his friend. It would be impossible to abandon Harry now that he probably needed him the most. "Then I'm going with him!" he challenged.

It was probably a good thing Draco was still under the influence of the truth potion. He was feeling a bit sluggish, and didn't get really annoyed by the words or the familiar tone.
"And so am I." Growling it out, Sirius stared at the Headmaster.

The whole scene was making Dumbledore sigh with exasperation. "All right. Everyone sit down." He waited for a moment. Then repeated it, sounding a little miffed. "Sirius. Sit!"

Since he was hardly ever angry, his command was obeyed immediately. Even Snape left his post by Malfoy's side and went to sit on the couch.

"Now, I want you all to listen. I agree with Harry, he has to leave as well. His life is not safe here anymore, and I can not risk all the students. If some of the children try to attack him, there will be a war inside these walls. I will not have that." It had been close a couple of times during the centuries, but no war had ever divided the students of Hogwarts before. Not until this Dark Lord who wasn't hesitating to use children to do his dirty work.

Harry wasn't letting himself feel relief yet.

Dumbledore turned to look at Ron. "I understand your concern for your friend, but are you sure you really want to leave Hogwarts? Your life will be in more danger out there than it is here, for I can not guarantee your complete safety." There was nowhere they'd ever be completely safe until Voldemort was defeated.

"I'm sure. Please, sir! You can't expect me to stay here when he's in danger." Ron didn't often beg; his pride didn't allow it. Now he was ready to do anything to be able to go. "I can make this decision. Weasleys are pureblood as well, and even though we don't give a rat's a.. um... we don't follow the stupid traditions, I am eighteen now, and can decide for myself."

"I don't think your mum would like you to do this." There was doubt in Harry's voice. He didn't know which would be safer, to go away with him or to stay here and face possible Death Eater attacks.

Ron shook his head vigorously. "It doesn't matter." He was damned if he was going to let his friend go through with this all alone.

After a moment of contemplation, Dumbledore nodded. "All right. You can go." He cast a look at Sirius. "You and Remus have a mission."

"But..." Sirius saw the slight shake of the Headmaster's head. "I have to..." He turned to Remus for support. The way his friend looked down made him want to break things.

Remus was quiet as he said, "Albus is right. We have work to do, and we can't just abandon it now. Harry will be safe with Severus." He looked at his old colleague, his amber eyes shining with some disguised emotion.

"I'd like to go as well." Hermione's soft voice drew everyone's attention to her. She hadn't said a word since the whole argument had started. Fingering the badge on her robe, she shrugged. "But I can't leave Hogwarts. Terry can't do the job alone, and people depend on me." She'd always taken her duty as the Head Girl seriously.

Her gaze was apologetic as it met with Harry's. Seeing the understanding in the green eyes made her feel slightly better. Yes. Harry knew all about duty.

Sirius bit his lip hard, his shoulders slumping. He absolutely hated this.

"So... Where will we go and how?" Harry didn't want there to be another silence. "Are we going to leave today?" He was pretty sure that the answer would be yes.
Dumbledore cast one last look at Sirius. "Yes. I believe it's best if no one knows where you'll be going. I will make a suggestion to you Severus, and then you can obliviate me if you think it's prudent." Of course it was probable the charm would not work on him. It was a nice gesture nevertheless. "You'll be staying there for the rest of the school term, so we'd better make it so that no one will be able to contact you, and that you won't be able to leave before the time's up."

That made Minerva, Snape and Remus Lupin raise eyebrows, the identical expressions on their faces almost comical. With those kinds of wards, the place used as a hideaway would be a complete secret, but it was extremely dangerous. What if one of them got sick or injured himself? What if someone did find them? There would be no way for them to go and get help.

"Do we need... Secret Keepers?"

Harry's question made Sirius flinch; reminding him of a similar moment almost twenty years ago. It had been the beginning of the end. He didn't want history to repeat itself.

"No." Dumbledore shook his head. This would be even more complicated. Also easier in a way. After all, there wasn't a small baby to be thought of. All four were grown wizards, they could take care of themselves. "No Secret Keepers."

There were sighs of relief all around the room. Snape didn't make a sound, but was glad anyway. He didn't know he trusted anyone outside this room -- and not everyone inside it either -- with his most rudimentary potions book not to mention his life.

"You should go and pack. Mr. Malfoy, I'll ask professor Sinistra to pack your things for you and bring your trunk here." Then the Headmaster would see to it that there was nothing dangerous in the trunk. Just as a precaution. "We'll meet back here in an hour."

Dumbledore's words sounded final.

Padding down the stairs, Harry kept his gaze on Sirius. He knew how his godfather had to feel right now, knew how big a thing keeping him safe was to him.

The whole thought of having Sirius anywhere near Snape for a long time was ridiculous. It was best this way. Dumbledore would do everything to have him, Ron, Malfoy and Snape safe. Sirius would have to be satisfied with that.

Knowing there was something he had to say, he touched Sirius' arm as they reached the hallway. He waited until the man turned to face him before saying quietly, "You do know that if we had performed the Fidelius, I would have asked for you to be our Secret Keeper." He saw the dark eyes widen with surprise. "I trust you, Sirius. You would have been the right choice."

Sirius let out a sob and hugged his godson tight. To have Harry say it like that washed some of the old pain away, leaving him shaking. "Thank you." He felt Harry hug him back just as tightly. Then, before he could really embarrass himself in front of the others -- especially Snape of all people -- he let go and let the familiar transformation wash over himself.

It was easier to keep intense and complex feelings at bay in the Animagus form. A dog did not know regret or doubts or old wounds that were still festering inside his mind. That simplicity helped now and Snuffles was able to pad towards the Gryffindor tower without falling apart.

"Try to be careful out here." Following the group of Gryffindors to the staircases, Snape looked at Harry, still amused by the idiocy he'd sprouted a moment ago. Well, if that made Black feel better and stop pestering everyone... "I know my Slytherins. They may be in shock now, but sooner or later
they'll regroup and try something stupid. After all, they are all teenagers."

Harry nodded. "I'll be careful. You watch your back too." With that, he jumped on the stairs that were leaving the platform.

It didn't take the whole hour. The dormitory had been empty, everyone was in class. Both Ron and Harry had packed in silence, neither wanting to talk while Sirius and Remus were there, fussing with their belongings. Since they had no idea where they were going, they packed everything. It wasn't much. Harry didn't have a lot of stuff, only his clothes and books and a couple of mementoes. Ron had even less.

When the trunks were packed, they carried them back to the Headmaster's. Harry wasn't sure why they weren't flooing straight to the office until he saw one of the fourth year Hufflepuffs stare at them with her eyes wide open as she rode a staircase leading to the third floor. The whole school would probably hear about them leaving in less than an hour.

This way, everyone at Hogwarts would be safe. No need to start a war if the enemy wasn't even there.

It was probably what Dumbledore wanted with the very pompous farewells too. He and McGonagall escorted the small party outside, lingering in the hallway long enough to get the attention of anyone passing by. Then the doors were opened to show a small carriage waiting.

Snape and Remus loaded the trunks up to the carriage while Snuffles stood by Harry, obviously trying very hard not to whimper or bite anyone. Ron was trying not to stare at Draco Malfoy who was huddled in the corner of the carriage, looking slightly nauseous.

Everything felt miserable. Even the weather was dismal, the air cool and misty. It would probably rain again soon.

All in all, not a very good start for their journey.

"Don't do anything stupid!" Her voice trembling, Hermione hugged Ron. She knew her friend, especially when Malfoy was concerned.

Ron shook his head. "Of course not." He tried to make it sound light, to make this whole thing easier, but he didn't think it worked out all that well. For once, Hermione made no comments about that. She simply hugged him again, and went to hug Harry next.

Looking a bit sheepish, Ron handed professor McGonagall a small piece of parchment. "Would you please send this to my mum? I would contact her now, but... She'd just yell."

"Indeed." Accepting the letter, McGonagall couldn't help thinking how she'd feel to simply receive such a note. "I will floo into the Burrow later today, Mr. Weasley, if you have no objections."

It was clear from the relieved smile that Ron didn't have any objections to that.

Once the carriage was loaded, Ron and Harry joined Malfoy inside. Neither said anything to the Slytherin. Snape lingered with Dumbledore for a moment longer before nodding. He took the reins then and climbed on board as well.

Without words, Snape flexed the reins and the carriage started moving.

Feeling definitely more awkward here than in Mr. Weasley's new green Ford Anglia, Harry kept looking back at the castle. Ron was following his example, waving at the five people standing there.
It looked strange. McGonagall and Dumbledore standing by the door, almost hidden in shadows. The Headmaster was waving back. A few steps farther outside, Remus was looking at the departing carriage, his hand moving slowly down Snuffles' back offering comfort and support.

Hermione stood alone, her robes billowing around her in the wind. She seemed devastated, barely able to conceal her tears as her friends got farther and farther away.

Soon they'd be gone, and she'd go to the Arithmancy class and act like nothing was wrong.

Hopefully later on, she would manage to sneak back to the dormitory before dinner. If she was lucky, she'd get some time alone before someone needed her help.

Inside the carriage, Harry turned to sit properly, sighing as Ron joined him a moment later. "Is it just me, or does this seem really crazy?" Seeing the crooked smile, he added, "I mean, we're supposed to be in the Arithmancy class. Not here, going off on some kind of a deranged field trip." Remembering one of the art books his aunt had kept on the living room table occasionally in case she needed to impress an important guest, he added, "Life just became one huge Dali painting."

"What's a Dali?" Asking absentmindedly, Ron didn't really listen to the explanation. Some Muggle thing of course. There was something bothering him. Everything had happened too soon. Harry was right. They should be in class or studying for the N.E.W.T.s or...

"Oh bugger it!" He hid his face in his hands, moaning out as the small carriage disappeared into the mist. "I can't believe I did all that studying for nothing!"
The Cottage -part One

Part 1

Ron had never minded traveling via portkeys. He'd done it ever since he was a little boy, when people complained about the mess the Weasley family made every time they all traveled through floo. Nine people shooting out of a sooty fireplace was not the best way to keep the host's living room clean.

It was different for Harry.

Sighing, Ron rolled to his side, squinting his eyes in the dark. He could hear Harry's even breathing, but wondered if he was dreaming anyway. Sometimes the *Draught of the Living Death* didn't work well, even if it was brewed by a Potions master.

Like this one had been.

It had been a long day. Ron rolled onto his back, staring at the ceiling. Definitely a long day. It seemed like the morning with Hagrid's announcement that the Jarveys they were supposed to study were suffering from stress related rashes had occurred weeks, and not simply hours ago.

Things had seemed so normal back then. Studying for the N.E.W.T.s, bickering with Hermione. Trying not to stare at professor Pahicna too hard when she entered the Great Hall for lunch. Even though Ron still considered professor Lupin the best DADA teacher they'd had, he definitely thought their current one was the best looking.

Everything had gone downhill from that point. Ron wasn't sure what had triggered it. One moment he'd been talking to Seamus, making comments about Quidditch. The next, Harry was making a big ruckus, clambering to the main aisle. Trying to stop whatever stupid thing that drama queen Malfoy had planned.

Or at least that was what he'd thought at the time.

Malfoy. It all came back to that arrogant bastard. If he wasn't making fun of him and turning his life into a farce, he was destroying the peace and forcing them into an exile.

Ron refused to let himself think about what the blond menace had also done. He definitely didn't want to see anything good in him; mainly because all the seemingly nice things he was doing were a hoax. He just knew it!

And why the hell couldn't he sleep anyway?

He was sure everyone else in the cottage was asleep already. Harry was making a weird wheezing sound as he slept. Nothing new there. Malfoy had been in a drugged haze ever since they'd left Dumbledore's office, so he was probably sleeping somewhere as well. He didn't know about Snape, and frankly, didn't really care.

All he wanted was to get some sleep. Snore away the couple of hours before dawn.

The sleeping potion would have been an excellent solution. Unfortunately, he hadn't thought about it like that when Snape had offered it. He'd been too worried about Harry then; about the way his friend was really pale and shaking after that last trip via portkey.
He'd wanted to talk about it with Harry. Since Ron wasn't completely ignorant, he knew it was probably about something that had happened years ago. Neither he nor Hermione had ever asked about Cedric's death, but they could draw conclusions from what they'd seen and heard from others.

Snape had destroyed that good idea with his potions. Ron had been a bit surprised to see Harry actually look gratefully at the git. There should be no reason for gratitude, none whatsoever! Not when he and Harry were stuck in here with the worst two Slytherins in the history of Hogwarts. Not counting the original one who had kept pet basilisks or the one looking like one these days.

It was truly annoying. Especially now that he was lying awake here in the middle of the night. In the middle of nowhere. Feeling bummed.

Keeping his gaze focused on the ceiling, Ron tried to banish all thoughts from his mind. Wallowing wasn't really helping. It just kept him awake, pushing sleep even farther away.

This whole thing was just stupid.

Ron was still thinking morose thoughts about certain Slytherins and the idiotic mess they'd made later, when the moon was hanging low, and sleep finally claimed him.

The bright rays of the sun made their way slowly across the room, at first illuminating a path on the floor, then reaching the small bed. Unerringly, they shone into the sleeping boy's face.

Blinking, Harry tried to figure out where he was, and why was everything so darn bright.

It was never like this in the dormitory. The sun never shone in during mornings, and even if one was to take a nap during the afternoon, when it would get really bright in there, the beds had heavy curtains that could be drawn to keep out the light. But there were no curtains around this bed.

He stretched, wondering if he should just stay in bed until he figured out exactly where he was. His bladder didn't really approve of that plan, so he sat up. Seeing the plain wooden wall made him blink.

No. He was not at Hogwarts anymore.

Fuzzy memories of the previous day came back slowly. He could remember everything up to the lunch hour, including Malfoy's unbelievable actions. He remembered leaving Hogwarts; the sight of Hermione standing at the door with her robes billowing all around her was etched into his mind. Everything after that was a blur.

There had been hours in a small carriage. Then a small house, where they had flooed somewhere. From there, a walk to another house. Yet another flooing. The secrecy had been a bit annoying, but even Ron had seemed to understand the reason for it. They'd followed Snape and the nearly comatose Malfoy without questions.

Harry remembered the lone beer can in the middle of the road. Yes. Then there had been the portkeys. Three of them, to be exact. The can, a shoe, and a broken umbrella. Three unbelievably hard jumps through distance.

He shuddered. It had been awful. It didn't matter how much he disliked flooing, it was nothing compared to using portkeys. There were so many bad memories around travelling via portkeys. Death and destruction. Always seemed like he was to blame for all the carnage he left behind. Or took with him.

Swallowing against the flood of nightmares that never waited for him to be actually asleep, Harry got
out of the bed. He looked to the left and saw Ron sleeping on the other bed, curled beneath his blankets. Careful not to wake him up, he padded to the door and sneaked out.

The floor felt cold under his bare feet. He didn't really care, the need to go was urging him on.

It was quiet in here. Harry walked to the only other door he could see and pushed it open. Squinting his eyes, he could see a small room with only one bed in it. A platinum blond head rested on the pillow.

Malfoy.

Since he really didn't want to deal with him right now, Harry backed away, and shut the door again. It didn't matter how messed up he'd been last night. Malfoy had been worse. By the time they'd reached their destination, the Slytherin had been as white as a sheet from all the vomiting.

Probably something to do with ingesting *Veritaserum* on an empty stomach. Snape hadn't really explained. He'd just guided him away.

There was a linen closet next to Malfoy's bedroom. Nothing else.

Harry walked down the stairs, looking around in wonder. The small cottage seemed ancient. There were paintings on the wall, mostly landscapes, but also a few portraits. The people in them were asleep. Everything was quiet.

Downstairs, there was a living room with two old, but comfortable looking couches. A huge fireplace was on one wall. No logs could be seen anywhere near it. Next to the living room was a tiny kitchen that was followed by a dining area. Harry walked through it, wondering if there was actually something to eat around here.

There was more pressing business than hunger.

He passed by one more door. Hesitating for only a second, he walked to it. There were no wards set on the door, so he pushed it open slowly.

"You know, it's polite to knock when you go into someone's bedroom." No sign of sleepiness in the sharp voice. Snape was sitting on a chair, fully clothed, with a book on his lap.

Harry smiled apologetically. "Sorry about that. Didn't really know this is your room." He managed not to wince at the snort. Of course this had to be Snape's room. Where else would he be sleeping? "I was actually looking for the loo."

"There are no facilities inside the cottage. There's an outhouse. Go out of the front door, and then to the left." Snape gestured with his hand at that, as if not certain Harry could tell the difference between right and left. With some of his students, it really was a touch and go.

An outhouse? Harry's smile faded a bit. He couldn't remember ever using one. There was no way he would ask for instructions, though. He would draw the line somewhere, and this was it. "Thanks."

Snape raised an eyebrow at that, but decided not to comment. When Harry started to turn away from the door, he said, "Don't go wandering around. No one should go farther than the outhouse alone. None of us."

"Yeah." Harry nodded. There really wasn't such a thing as a safe hideaway for them. Not completely safe anyway.
He put shoes on, grabbed a heavier robe and stepped outside, looking around with curiosity. The trip here had been hellish, and he had no idea where they were. They could be anywhere. It looked a bit familiar out here, so he figured they were still in the northern hemisphere. Other than that, he didn't know.

The outhouse was a small one, but clearly visible due to the fact it was painted red. Harry took care of business, grimacing a little as he couldn't wash his hands right afterwards. There had to be a way to take care of that. Maybe a pail of water or something, so he didn't have to touch his wand with dirty hands. He settled with wiping his hands into grass outside.

Now that he wasn't in a hurry anymore, he stood outside the cottage and looked around. The place looked habitable. There were trees behind the outhouse; not enough to make a real forest, but seemed nice anyway. Some large boulders to one side. Bushes. Some kind of plants that looked suspiciously like heather.

Harry walked around the cottage. On the other side was a small river, flowing by slowly. Someone had molded the shore at some time, creating a place where clothes could be washed. Or people could bathe. There even seemed to be a pier there. He was eager to go and take a closer look, but knew that such disregard of Snape's words would be stupid.

He could go out on an expedition later with the others. No need to go and probably get lost straight away. He wasn't that curious about their surroundings.

Turning back to the rather pretty landscape, he surveyed the cottage for a moment. It looked even older from the outside. Obviously made of logs. Somehow reminding him of the Burrow, even though it was smaller, looking sleepy, frozen. As if no one had lived in here for ages.

No one probably had.

He kind of liked the cottage. It didn't seem intimidating. However, it wouldn't be easy to live here with Ron, Snape and Malfoy under the same roof. He wondered how long it would take until they got into their first fight. Not long, he guessed.

Harry went back inside, opting not to go back to bed. He didn't feel sleepy anymore. That was the upside of the sleep potion; you were always well rested, no matter what. Then if he went upstairs to unpack his trunk, he'd just wake Ron up, and everyone knew how cheery he was in the mornings.

He simply wasn't up to facing that right now.

Harry thought about going to see Snape again and use the quiet moments to talk about this whole thing. The decision to leave Hogwarts had been a sudden one, but he was sure it had been the right one. There were still many things that needed to be discussed.

It would probably be best to have that conversation with everyone present.

The loud growling of his stomach reminded Harry that he hadn't eaten a thing after lunch yesterday. Still wondering if there was anything to eat in the small kitchen, he went to investigate.

He didn't get farther than to the dining area. There was a sound coming from the kitchen, and a moment later a tray hovered towards him, clearly carried by someone who was muttering to themselves.

The small creature seemed to almost vanish under the huge tray. Harry stepped to help, lifting the tray on the table. As a reward, he got an angry glare from clear brown eyes.
Blinking, he stared at the house elf. From the simple dress -- that looked like it had been a table cloth in a previous incarnation -- he deduced that the elf was a female. An old, wrinkly female. Her skin was weathered, almost greenish in color. Her ears were a bit drooped, but she looked determined.

"Eppy will handle the tray." Her voice had a squeak in it, not the most pleasant sound. As an afterthought, she added, "Sir."

A rude house elf who didn't fawn over him? Harry wondered if she'd been Snape's personal assistant at some point.

It wasn't easy to stand back and watch Eppy set the table. Her hands didn't exactly shake, but she managed to make the whole thing look like there would be a pile of porcelain shards on the floor any moment now. She kept muttering to herself quietly as she put the tea cups on the saucers.

When she was finally finished, she stood there for a moment, wheezing. Her ears quivered with every intake of breath. "Is there anything else Eppy can do?" Once again the short pause before the sullen, "Sir."

"No thank you, Eppy." Shaking his head, Harry tried to keep his expression sober.

The only reply he got was a huff. Eppy took the empty tray and started to waddle towards the kitchen. It looked amazing, since house elves usually just vanished after finishing with their business.

As if lured by the scent of the tea, Ron pushed the door open a moment later, earning a baleful glare from the house elf. He stopped still at the doorway, making the two Slytherins following him bump into each other. It caused even more glares.

Harry managed to hide his smile until the house elf was out of the room. Then he grinned. "She acts just like Yoda." Seeing blank looks on everyone's face, he shrugged. "A Muggle thing."

Since his explanation produced one confused nod and two sneers, he sighed, and decided not to waste any of his admittedly few pop culture references on these people. They were hopeless. Instead of trying to explain more, he simply walked to the table. Eating was always a good distraction. At least it could hide a really uncomfortable silence if needed, and it definitely looked like there would indeed be one coming up.

Ron rushed to sit next to Harry. The thought of having to sit next to Snape and Malfoy wasn't really appetizing. Even though having the ferret sit across him wasn't all that great, either. Well, at least he kept his mouth shut, and his gaze on his plate. That way Ron didn't have to waste time glaring at him.

This was beginning to seem like the field trip from hell. Almost two and a half months spent with them would be a nightmare, but Ron was glad he hadn't abandoned Harry. He could handle Malfoy and Snape. He wasn't so sure his friend could.

"Pass me the butter please."

Frowning at the cold command, Ron looked up at Snape. Then he focused his gaze on the small bowl of butter. No one made a move. Surely they didn't expect him to give Snape the butter? Not even though technically he was the closest person to him.

Snape raised an eyebrow at the bewildered expression on Ron Weasley's face. The fact that Harry was so obviously trying not to laugh wasn't really helping. Sighing, Snape repeated, "The butter. Please pass me the butter, Mr. Weasley. I'm certain such a task isn't beyond your capabilities."
"I... Sure." Feeling heat rise to his face, Ron grabbed the butter and then handed it over to Snape. Damn it!

"Mmh." The curt nod and the sound could be interpreted as a thank you.

Harry got up and reached for the teapot. He definitely didn't want to see what would happen if Snape asked Ron for tea as well.

He poured the tea, filling Ron's cup half way, leaving enough room for milk. After filling Malfoy's cup and his own as well, he placed the pot back on the table. Snape always wanted his tea dark, brewed so strong it made people spit. He didn't use sugar either, enjoying the tar in his cup unsweetened.

"Thanks." It was the first thing Draco had said since yesterday. He didn't look up from his cup.

The extremely unusual word made Harry blink. He could see how Snape looked pleased with the courtesies and wondered if that was why Malfoy had said it. "Oh... Well. You're welcome."

Ron waited for Malfoy to add something nasty. When he said nothing, he glared at him anyway. Sooner or later there would come the punch line, some kind of a cruel joke or a curse.

Keeping his gaze fixed on the table, Malfoy didn't say anything else.

"All right, then." Pushing his plate away from him, Snape glared at the three teenagers in front of him.

This wasn't exactly the way he'd envisioned his life; forced to play a nursemaid to students. He'd agreed with Albus' assessment of the situation, though. Staying at Hogwarts would have been foolish.

He didn't want to fight his own students, mainly because he knew his Slytherins. They would do anything to make sure the people who they were supposed to destroy would indeed suffer an agonizing death. He had known that when he'd seen young Malfoy get up and walk to him across the Great Hall. The sight had made him squeeze his wand hard, pointing it at the boy under the table.

On the outside, he'd appeared as cool as ever. On the inside, he'd felt sick. It had been the beginning of the end.

Then the impossible had happened. Draco Malfoy had turned his back on everything he knew.

Snape's dark gaze bore into the boy, wondering what he was thinking right now. He had no idea, for he had never had the courage to do anything like this. Spending weeks with him here in the middle of nowhere wouldn't be exactly hard. He was smart enough not to bother him with trivial chatter and would know to stay out of his way.

There would be things they needed to discuss, new guidelines to draw. For all of them.

He turned his gaze to the two Gryffindors, and allowed the sneer spread to his face. "We are going to spend the next several months here, but this is not exactly a vacation, gentlemen. This is not a hotel, and I am not here to make sure you're all entertained." Unless of course, they considered being left alone as entertainment.

Before Ron could stick his foot into his mouth by making a comment on that, Harry nodded and said, "Do you think we'll be safe here?" He had no idea if the others knew where they were. The landscape outside had looked familiar. Watching the sparse trees and the hillside covered in small
bushes and heather had reminded him of home. Hogwarts.

Either they were still in Scotland, or they'd been transported somewhere in Siberia. He doubted the latter. Dumbledore wouldn't try to sneak them that close to Durmstrang.

"Of course not." What a foolish question.

"Huh?" This time Ron managed to get the sound out before anyone else had the chance to say anything.

"There is no place that will be completely safe for us, Mr. Weasley. Vo..." The familiar suffocating sensation prevented Snape from finishing the name. "The Dark Lord and his followers will do everything they can to kill us. Mr. Malfoy and I are traitors to their cause and we all know how much they want to see Potter dead."

What a strange thing to actually have anger raise at the thought. Snape had always been dispassionate about rescuing the hope of the wizarding world. He'd only done it because Albus wished it and because even though he didn't want to, he had felt he was in debt to the idiot child's father. That had been simply because of duty; it was different with this young man with the haunted eyes and the unexpectedly sharp wit.

No one said anything to that.

"Because of that, we can not drop our guard outside the house. There are wards around here, as there would be in every wizard home, but they do not reach very far. If you go anywhere beyond the outhouse, you should have someone to accompany you."

Draco blinked at the words. He didn't think he could really ask Snape to be his tourguide around the place, and he'd be damned if he gave the two Gryffindors the satisfaction of having to beg them for protection. That meant he'd probably have to stay at the cottage for the next months.

And what was an outhouse anyway?

"Keep your wands with you all the time. You should practice drawing them in haste and then aiming." Since there were no objections, Snape added, "Later on, we should probably train at dueling as well."

He knew that the Order had trained Weasley and Potter and that the young Malfoy was adept with both Dark Arts and the defense against them. Still, one was never too prepared.

Harry nodded at that. "Good idea." He couldn't be there to protect Ron all the time.

"Yes, sir." Draco didn't really know what good practicing would do. He was living on borrowed time, knowing he would be targeted as soon as they left here. No amount of training would make him strong enough to face the Death Eaters. Especially when he knew exactly who would be sent after him.

The only answer Ron gave was a grunt.

"Good." Reaching out for the teapot, Snape poured himself a cup of tea. Then he leaned back on the chair slightly. "There are also things we need to consider about our living arrangements."

He didn't wait for anyone to say anything. This wasn't exactly a conversation.

"You can do whatever you wish in your rooms. However, I will not tolerate any ruckus after dinner"
time. Is that clear?" The question was a threat, answered by three nods. "Good. If you need me, I will be in my room downstairs."

Ron didn't think he'd ever be desperate enough to actually go knocking there. Spending time alone with the greasy Potions master sounded about as fun as having Hagrid cook for him for the rest of his life.

Sipping from his cup, Snape avoided Harry's gaze. The relief shining there was not only annoying, it was also disturbing. He put the cup back down. There was one more thing. "We are all going to share the chores here. Eppy will take care of the cooking, but that's it."

It was clear that the house elf wouldn't really like that, but Harry had to agree with Snape. Eppy was by far the oldest house elf he'd ever seen. It would feel really stupid to allow an old person to wait on them.

"No one's going to weasel their way out of working simply because they don't know how. It's not an excuse." Snape cast a knowing look at Draco. He doubted the boy had never washed his own clothes or even made his own bed in his life.

Ron was bristling at the comment, wondering if Snape had just insulted him, or him and Harry. Weasel his way out indeed. Did the git really think Harry had been pampered his whole life?

"That sounds good." Lifting his gaze from his tea cup, Harry smiled. He was used to doing chores, a thing he'd shared with Snape during their talks. His life with the Dursleys wasn't a thing he liked talking about, but he had mentioned the basics of his life amongst the Muggles. The way he hadn't exactly liked his relatives. The holidays spent mostly studying for the school year.

He hadn't spoken of the cupboard. Or the bars on his window. Or the way Uncle Vernon still found it necessary to berate the world he lived in, how Dudley had used everything he'd found in his room as a weapon against him. He didn't want Snape's pity.

No real relationship between two people -- any real contact -- was based on pity. Or worship. Two things he would never, ever get from the man, that was certain.

Snape knew it would take some time for their routines to go smoothly. It was annoying, really, but it couldn't be helped. He couldn't teach Malfoy about chores now. They had more important things to discuss.

"Good. Potter, you'll wash the dishes, then."

"Okay." This was like back in the Potions class. At least washing cups and saucers was much easier than scrubbing cauldrons clean.

Ron wondered if the scowl would become permanent on his face. He should have known Snape would order Harry around and then get up and head for the door. Some things never changed.

He was going to make sure his friend wouldn't be treated like scum. His mum had made him do chores often enough. Helping Harry wouldn't be a big thing. Ron just wished the two Slytherins would go away, so he could talk alone with Harry. Maybe after finishing with the dishes, they could go out for a walk or something.

"Mr. Malfoy. Follow me." Without other words, Snape left the room, Draco in tow.

Ron let out a deep breath. This was going to be hell.
Hell was actually not as bad as he'd thought it would be.

Ron was full of energy the next morning. He'd slept well after a long day, feeling really refreshed as he woke up. Ready to face another day in the countryside.

The fact that the cottage and its surroundings closely resembled his home helped, just like Malfoy's stay in Snape's room did. As long as he didn't have to stare into his smug face, everything was all right.

Padding downstairs with Harry following right behind him, Ron was already planning the day. Strange, how busy their first day hiding had been. He'd helped Harry with various chores, silently cursing Snape while going through the cupboards.

The house elf, Eppy, had followed them around, whining and wheezing all the time. Apparently their working was an insult to her ability to do her duty.

It had definitely not made things easy.

Cleaning and unpacking finished, Harry had collapsed on his bunk and pulled a book from his nightstand. It had been a clear message. Apparently he wasn't interested in talking yet.

Ron could understand that. He was also willing to give his friend time. At least some time.

A day or so sounded perfect.

Lunchtime had gone smoothly, as Ron had kept his attention on his food the whole time. Malfoy hadn't come to eat. He'd stayed in Snape's room for Merlin knew what purpose. It wasn't as if he was going to actually ask the greasy git. He hadn't completely lost his mind. The silence had felt really uncomfortable, even though neither Snape or Harry had seemed to mind it, both eating with a healthy appetite.

More time to do nothing in the afternoon. It rained outside, a cold hard rain that discouraged anyone from going out. Conversation was kept at minimum. Harry was obviously lost in thoughts. There was nothing new about that.

Ron simply allowed him to think, keeping his own attention in a Quidditch review he'd packed with him. It felt a little weird to simply lie in bed and browse through magazines. He kept flinching at every loud sound coming from downstairs, as if expecting Hermione to suddenly arrive and yell at him for not studying. It had to be his guilty conscience mixed with the annoyance he still felt for wasting his time studying for exams that were now postponed.

After dinner, Ron and Harry had headed to the small living room to read. The fireplace had been inviting, the flames flickering there making the whole place seem more like a home. To their surprise, Snape had ushered a tired looking Malfoy to the room as well.

It had not been the most comfortable of evenings.

Ron had kept waiting for something to happen. For the nasty Potions master to start making comments about them. For Malfoy to sneer at them. Instead, Snape had simply sat there on a comfortable looking couch, reading a thick book. About potions, of course. Malfoy had just drowsed off next to him. The slightly greenish tinge of his skin suggested he had been used as a guinea pig for various concoctions brewed in a cauldron. Ron didn't really sympathize.
It was no wonder he'd gone to bed early. Harry had followed him a moment later.

Sitting now in his familiar place at the table, Ron glared at the two Slytherins. He was certain it would be his turn to do the chores today. Snape would never lower himself to wash dishes, and honestly, would anyone want him to? Greasy plates and slimy residue of various potions on the utensils? No thank you.

"Mr. Weasley. Please clean the table after you finish your tea. Mr. Malfoy, with me."

Ron's glare was poisonous. He stared after Snape and Malfoy, wondering what on earth the two of them were doing in the small room. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Planting his cup on the table, Harry took a deep breath. Then he smiled at Ron. "Hey, after we finish with the dishes, let's go out and explore." There was honest excitement in his voice, something that hadn't been heard for some time.

"Huh?" Ron knew he had to look silly with his mouth open like this, but he couldn't really school his features. "Really?" He'd expected another day spent reading -- it seemed the way Harry kept hiding from him and Hermione these days. He'd been ready to force Harry to come out of his shell by the end of the day.

Now it seemed like it wouldn't be necessary after all.

Grabbing their thick outer robes, Ron followed Harry outside. It was chilly, his breath almost steaming in the cool air. It didn't really matter for it had been just as bad at Hogwarts.

"Let's check out the garden first, and then we could go to see what's over there." Gesturing at the river, Harry waited for Ron to nod before walking around the house.

It was clear that the witch or wizard living here previously hadn't really been interested in gardening. Ron had seen the damage gnomes could do on an organized garden, but the small vegetable patch behind the small cottage reminded him of a battleground.

There were a couple of shrubs trying to show some signs of life, but most of the greenery was clearly torn this way and that by the small pests.

Definitely not a place he wanted to dwell on for long. He was really glad his mum wasn't there. She would have smiled at him sweetly, and then ordered him to start working.

Not really looking at the wreck next to him, Harry hunched his shoulders, trying to wrap his robes better around him. Damn it was cold out here! He stood there in silence for a moment, and then said, "I think we need to talk." He was grateful to Ron for not pushing it. It had allowed him to collect his thoughts in peace yesterday. He hadn't really come to any conclusion, but at least now he knew that when he opened his mouth, his thoughts would have some semblance of clarity instead of just an incoherent babble.

Ron didn't need to hear about his worries, the memories their long journey had brought up. Running away was familiar to him, the only way he'd survived through serious fights; Voldemort returning, the attack at the Burrow. Even flooing was all right by now; he'd done it often enough these past few months. However, traveling through portkeys would never be easy. He'd always feel a ghost of a weight in his arms, as if a lifeless body was still lying in his grasp.

"Yeah. We do." It was silly how the simple words could make Ron smile that bright.

They walked away from the cottage, following the small river. It was easier to talk while they
walked. Of course, moving around also helped to keep warm.

Since Harry seemed to be a bit hesitant to start the conversation, Ron asked, "Everything okay?" It sounded a bit silly, considering everything that had happened, but it was better than nothing.

Harry seemed to agree with him. He nodded. "Yeah." At least he could be honest with this. Funny. Everything really did feel all right now. "What about you?"

"Just fine. Am still a bit pissed at the whole thing with the N.E.W.T.s, but other than that, I'm cool." Kicking a small shrub, Ron added, "Even though I'd feel better if we didn't have those two creeps with us here."

"Mmh." The grunt didn't really sound agreeing. Harry couldn't help it. He wasn't going to tell Ron how he didn't actually mind Snape being here, but he wasn't going to lie either.

They would have to figure a way to live together. At least for the next few months. It didn't sound probable, but one could always hope. Harry was going to do everything in his power to see to it that they would all be alive and well when they returned to Hogwarts. Even Malfoy.

Ron was thinking along the same line.

"Do you think Malfoy's story holds? I mean, isn't it a bit too convenient that he just happened to come to his senses the moment we really needed information about Voldemort's plans?" It had nothing to do with the fact that he hated the blond like no one else. No, it didn't. Ron was simply using his common sense.

Harry shrugged. "I have no idea. Snape did give him Veritaserum, and I think he's been giving him some other potions as well. So maybe we should trust him." He'd seen the glazed look in Malfoy's eyes earlier. Reminded him of the way Uncle Vernon had looked on Christmas Eves after emptying almost the whole bowl of punch by himself.

Since he was certain Snape wasn't getting Malfoy drunk, he had to be drugging him somehow.

Ron kicked a small pebble on his way, keeping his gaze on the ground. "Maybe." He walked a bit longer before adding, "How do you know what Snape is doing?" For some reason the offhand comment was really bothering him.

"I know Snape. That's what he'd do. Make sure everything is all right." Voice quiet, Harry remembered about all the times he'd attended a meeting with the Order's inner circle. There had been a lot of talk about Voldemort's plans and the ways he tried to control everything. Snape had made vague comments about potions. Dark potions that were definitely not described in their Potions manuals.

It had been almost overwhelming. Harry had listened in awe when his professor had listed potions that could kill, maim, or gain complete control over someone. It went beyond the simplicity of truth serums or stealth potions. An imperius in liquid form was just as unforgivable as the curse was.

"They probably gave Malfoy some stuff." Harry knew that most of the 'stuff' Voldemort had was probably brewed by Snape himself. At least this way he knew exactly what to look for. "I'm no expert with dark potions, but I think there could be things that would hurt him later on. Or make him hurt us."

That definitely caught Ron's attention. "You mean he could like snap and curse us all?" The thought of Malfoy being a puppet was somehow wrong. The bastard was an eager accomplice, he was sure of that.
"I have no idea. Maybe. Or maybe there's something else. Snape will tell us in time." Or then Harry would just go to him and badger the answers out of him. Harry knew Snape would tell him if he needed to know. It didn't matter how painful the news might some day be, Snape wouldn't keep him in the dark.

An unbelieving snort escaped Ron, but he didn't comment otherwise. He didn't care if Snape was one of the good guys. He'd never believe he was anything but a mean and sadistic teacher.

They'd reached the riverside. It was actually more a stream than a real river. The water seemed clear and inviting, like a good place to have a swim. Of course it was too chilly to go splashing there now, but maybe later. It would probably be warm enough in about a month or so.

On the other side of the river, the ground seemed to be covered in heather. It reminded them both of home.

Thinking about the time they'd spend at the cottage, Ron stopped. He raised his gaze to Harry's face before asking, "Are you really all right with this?"

"With what exactly?"

"The war. This is the beginning of it, right?" They had known it all along. The Order had been preparing for a confrontation for ages. There had been small skirmishes during the years; Voldemort trying to kill Harry every spring and the Death Eaters attacking every time his plan had been foiled. It was actually a miracle there had been no casualties amongst those dear to him.

Ron shivered at that. He'd seen some of the houses that had been destroyed. Remembered the dark robed figures running towards the Burrow. It had been different. This felt like the great war everyone was always talking about was finally upon them.

Things would change. People would have to stop living in an illusion of safety. Fudge would finally have to recognize the truth and commit the Aurors to preventing Voldemort from conquering their world.

"No, Ron. It's not. I don't know when exactly the war started. Maybe when we went to save the Philosopher's Stone. Or when Voldemort returned. It's just getting more visible now."

The cold tone of the usually so calm voice made Ron shiver.

Harry went on, not paying any attention to his friend. "I've known this would happen some day. Well, not this exactly, but it's been clear Voldemort is ready to strike. Again." He remembered Sirius' grave expression from the last meeting they'd had. Dark creatures and potions ingredients. It meant something big was coming.

"Okay." What else could Ron say? 'It's cool you're all right with having a maniac trying to kill you for like seven years. Oh, and let's not forget when you were just a baby.'

Not likely.

They stood there for a moment, watching the river flow by. Ron wanted desperately to change the subject. He didn't have any idea of where this would lead. "Um... So, what about this thing? With this place and all."

"Us being here?" Now there was a smile flickering on Harry's lips. He was a bit sad he couldn't tell Ron just how all right he was. Hiding here gave him time to think about what he wanted. Privacy. Time off from the meetings that didn't seem to lead into anything.
"Yeah."

Harry slowed down and then stood there, kicking the gravel a little, keeping his gaze on Ron. He waited till his friend joined him before saying, "I'm fine." It was time to be open about some things. "I don't really care about Malfoy. He's all talk. It's not like he can do anything to us except make nasty comments and I'm used to those. And Snape..."

The way the hated name was said made Ron blink. He'd never heard it just said before. Usually people spat it out.

"He's one of us. Of the Order. He's..." How on earth could Harry explain this? "He's not all bad." Seeing the grin, he repeated, "I said, not all bad."

"Yeah, right," Ron teased. It'd take a miracle to convince him. Something more than rescuing McGonagall, or becoming a fugitive. It was the beginning, but not enough. Not nearly enough after seven years of humiliation.

Harry smirked. He knew exactly what his friend was thinking about.

Ron acknowledged the smirk with one of his own. "You know, I still think Malfoy's a creep. He can spend all his time drinking Snape's potions for all I care. It keeps him from getting into my hair." He wouldn't mind Snape being there, either. He'd just ignore the man. "As long as they don't bother us, I'm cool."

It was the nicest thing Ron had ever said about the Slytherins. "Sure." Harry grinned, knowing things would be a lot more relaxed now.

Seeing the genuinely happy expression on his friend, Ron couldn't help saying, "Seems to me you're cool too." It had been a long time since it had felt like that.

"Ron..." For a moment Harry thought of swallowing the rest of the sentence. Then he went on, knowing that sooner or later he'd have to start talking about the really heavy things with Ron anyway. "Back at Hogwarts, it's like everyone wants a piece of me." It was difficult to say that out loud, even though everyone knew that much.

He'd stopped reading the Daily Prophet because of it. The expectations, the hunger the public had for news and details of his life had been too much to bear. The open Order meetings had become a torment as well. Dozens of people waiting for him to lead them when he had no idea how.

"I know," Ron said quietly. He'd had his share of the looks, of people trying to get to Harry through him.

"That's why... Now that we're here, I don't want to think about it all the time. The war, the chaos, the Order. Anything." It was not even hiding anymore. Harry was trying to escape. Not forever, but just for these few months. He wanted a small amount of peace and quiet.

Ron understood that perfectly. He for one didn't have any need to babble about strategy. He'd be just happy to have the old Harry back. They could talk about important things like girls and Quidditch or play some chess. "Okay." Just like old times.

"Thank you." Harry was relieved. There would be time for serious business later. Just not now. Feeling the wind blow through the relatively thin fabric of his robe, he gestured at Ron. "You wanna explore more, or should we go inside?"

There wasn't really anything else here. Behind the stream and some trees opened a hillside, and
beyond that another. It would be stupid to stray too far from the cottage, even if the weather allowed it.

"Let's go back inside. I'm freezing my arse off here."

Part 3

Freedom was truly an amazing thing.

Draco Malfoy had never really thought about his life in terms of freedom and imprisonment. It had never occurred to him like that, not before the Yuletide.

When he'd realized what reality behind the masks and Dark Marks was like, his whole world had come crumbling down. Everything familiar to him had become a prison; his heritage, all the grand plans he had for his future. Even his position in Hogwarts, being the unchallenged leader of the young Slytherins.

He'd wanted to become the Head Boy. Just out of spite for Potter and his idiot goons, to show that he could do something others couldn't. But his father had said no. It was more important to guide everything from behind the scenes. It was too early to be so visibly in charge of everything. Better to sneak around in the shadows and wait for the perfect opportunity to stab his enemies. In the back of course.

Duty was something he was familiar with. It had been his whole life. It had been the first abstract concept he'd ever understood. Even before things like love and friendship.

Now everything was different.

Looking up from his cup of tea, Draco was still amazed by the ludicrous sight in front of him. They were all gathered in the dining room of the small cottage, Potter and Weasley on the other side of the table. Him alone on this side. Professor Snape sitting at the head of the table.

The deranged little family. Or maybe a gathering of the doomed, a few minutes before execution.

Draco smiled a little at the thought. No, they were definitely not a family. Not exactly prisoners either, for he had never in his life felt so free.

These past days had been wonderful. Different from anything he'd ever experienced. After the potions Snape had told him to take had worn off, and the nausea had passed, he'd felt strangely light inside.

It was actually quite disgusting how good he felt.

Staying in a small cottage with professor Snape and his two arch enemies hadn't really made him feel anything at first. He'd tossed away his destiny, and had been glad to have someone to guide him. As long as it was in the right direction. Even while being under the influence of Veritaserum he'd listened closely to what Snape had said, glad that he was making the decisions and not the Headmaster.

Quite frankly, he didn't trust the old man. He was too absolute in his so called goodness. People who had such convictions in their own morality were usually the worst kinds of monsters.

Like the man worshipped by his father and his friends. Former friends, actually.
Life seemed to be full of quiet moments, and during some of those moments, Draco allowed himself
to wonder just what exactly was going on in that shady world he'd left behind. Was Millicent or
Pansy taking his place? Or did Voldemort stand behind his misogynous convictions and promoted
only male progeny of his most trusted pureblood Death Eaters? The thought was always amusing,
considering that with Marcus Flint's questionable parentage the only real options were Vince and
Greg.

They would undoubtedly mess up everything. Dumbledore's people wouldn't have anything to
worry about.

Snape excused himself after finishing his tea, casting a warning glance at the Gryffindors. His
gesture at Draco was quite easily deciphered. It made the boy follow Eppy silently to the kitchen.

Things had really changed. From the professor's pet into just one of the students. And now this.

Since there was no one to see -- Eppy was dozing off in the corner and Potter and Weasley were in
the living room -- Draco grimaced as he put his hands into the soapy water. He didn't like the idea of
working like a common Muggle. They had the power of magic, so why not use it? There had to be a
charm for this. He should be reading through his books to find one, not wasting time with soap and
water.

He wasn't going to disobey Snape's orders. Some things hadn't changed. The professor's authority
was definitely one of those things.

Once Snape had finished testing him for various curses, triggers and other things he had no idea of,
the professor had told him to sit down and listen.

It had been a weird conversation, unlike any he'd ever had with Snape. He'd sat there, listening to the
man make quite accurate comments about how he felt right now. About his options in life. He'd
simply nodded, saying 'yes, sir' every once in a while.

Then, after a moment of scrutiny, Snape had told him to get out of his room and stay out of trouble.

So here he was.

Instead of staying in his room for the whole day, he remained downstairs after finishing with the
chores. Ignoring Ron Weasley's glare, he curled on the couch with a book. He'd just continue with
the way things had been, not paying attention to the others and not cursing them to the next century
even if they deserved it.

The sound of raindrops tapping the windows was a soothing sound, and pretty soon he was lost in
the world of the novel, completely forgetting about his surroundings.

There was a silence in the small living room. Harry had already sprawled on the couch, looking a bit
bored. Ron had followed him, looking equally bored.

He'd brought a Quidditch magazine with him from their room, but wasn't really interested in reading
it now. Wasn't in the mood for reading. After spending the past weeks doing nothing but reading, he
needed to do something else. Anything else.

It had taken a few days for Ron to realize that this was going to be really tedious.

At first, he'd been really happy to have the old Harry back. The one eager to explore. They'd
searched through the whole house -- except for that one room downstairs and the place where
Malfoy hid -- and then walked around the grounds a couple of more times. There wasn't much to see,
and soon they were both just spending most of the time in the living room, trying not to look as bored as they felt.

It had been nice and quiet inside the cottage. Malfoy had stayed upstairs for most of the time. That was always a good thing. He couldn't really stand seeing his smug face. Snape had spent his time in his room, undoubtedly turning the small and probably cozy place into something dank and dismal. The only time they'd all been forced to spend together had been during meals. Usually no words beyond common courtesies had been exchanged while they ate.

Glares at the blond boy sitting by the window, Ron wished things had stayed that way.

He was beginning to wonder about the wisdom of his decision to come here. He didn't regret it, but to be quite honest, he hadn't thought about what it would be like to spend months in close quarters with two Slytherins. Especially these two. He'd spent years trying to avoid Malfoy and his goons. Hated Snape both inside the classroom and outside it.

Things were probably going on as usual in Hogwarts. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he wondered what people were doing right now. It was too late for dinner, so they were probably studying in the library or relaxing in the common rooms. He could see it now; Hermione sitting in the library with a big pile of books, casting dirty glances at Lavender who was undoubtedly sitting by Wayne Hopkins from Hufflepuff, kissing him and giggling.

It was strange. These past seven years, Hogwarts had become a second home to him, and he realized he missed it. He'd made plans for his future, dreaming of following his father's footsteps in the Ministry or maybe even becoming an Auror, but before all that, there would be dreaded exams, and then the Leaving Feast.

Simply leaving on one hour's notice wasn't exactly in his plans. Leaving behind everything he knew, and disappearing from the wizarding world completely.

He wondered if Harry missed his Quidditch practices right now. It was better than wondering if his parents were worrying about him. Because that was the one thing he couldn't talk with Harry. About relatives who might be worried sick. Or who wouldn't care at all.

Ron decided not to think about that.

Now it was raining again. Not the gentle dribble that didn't really bother anyone, but a cold hard rain. There was nowhere to go, really, all trips to the outhouse made in haste as the short journey there left them shivering even in their robes. They were cooped up inside.

It reminded him of springtime at Hogwarts. Weather up in Scotland was not unlike it was here, which made him kind of suspicious. The fact that the shrubs outside looked very much like the heather and thistle lining the Quidditch pitch only added to his suspicions. It was dreary. And it rained. Constantly.

"Two months of this." Ron shook his head in disgust. "Nothing to do out here. Well, we can go out and try to de-gnome the garden, but even that will become really annoying after two or three hours. Especially if it continues raining."

Running around the Weasleys' garden chasing the gnomes was a happy memory, always making Harry smile a little. He could remember it becoming real work when repeated every day for a week. "Yeah. We'd better think of something else."

The problem was, there wasn't much to do. He hadn't brought his Firebolt with him. They had a
board of wizard's chess here, but he wasn't going to spend months playing. Going to spend time with Snape would have been nice, but he couldn't justify that now. Not to Snape, and certainly not to Ron.

Ron squirmed a little, his gaze unfocused. He tried to think of something. Anything. "Well, there are always chores." The grimace on his face already told what he thought of that. Washing dishes and stuff like that wasn't all that bad, really, but suffering through Eppy's sighs and bitter ramblings was.

"We can only clean this place like once a day. So no. What else?" Harry couldn't believe he was actually missing the studying. What an insane notion.

"Let me think."

A long silence followed Ron's words. All three boys were lost in thoughts, trying to think of a way -- any way -- to end the boredom.

There was a rustling sound from the couch, and then Draco Malfoy said quietly, "We could ask professor Snape to tutor us in Potions." He sounded uncharacteristically subdued.

Harry raised an eyebrow. He was a bit surprised to have the Slytherin actually talk to them. Malfoy had been locked inside his own glum thoughts for the past few days. Not that it was really a wonder.

"Yeah, right. Why would we want that, Malfoy?"

Ignoring the hostility in Weasley's voice, Draco shrugged. "Just a thought. It seems stupid to waste all the time I spent studying for the N.E.W.T.s. I bet Snape could give us the exam here, and when we go back to Hogwarts, we'd have one less thing to worry about."

He didn't really need to take the exam right now. Years of studying for the class held by the Head of his House had been enough for him to accumulate enough knowledge to pass any test.

Studying would be better than spending all his time trying to evade Potter and Weasley. It would also take his mind off the dark thoughts that seemed to accompany him everywhere no matter how hard he tried to escape them.

"Well it's a stupid idea." Declaring his opinion quite clearly with both words and tone, Ron turned his back on Malfoy. "Just shut up."

Harry didn't say anything, knowing that it would just make it worse. Once, he'd hated Malfoy just as much as Ron so obviously still did, but it didn't matter anymore. Malfoy had been a threat, now he was only a nuisance. As long as he didn't get in his way, he didn't care.

As if he'd expected that answer, Draco shrugged. A moment later he collected his book and sneaked back upstairs without even looking at the two Gryffindors.

Waiting until Malfoy was clearly out of hearing range, Harry looked at Ron who was still looking angry. "Actually, Ron, he has a point." He was agreeing with Malfoy. What a strange thing. "I know you read the Potions stuff as well as the Arithmancy." All the hours spent at the library were still making him shudder.

Hermione would make a fine teacher one day. If she chose not to become one, she could find work as a drill sergeant at a boot camp.

There was an angry silence. Then Ron nodded. "Yeah." The word was squeezed from behind clenched teeth.
Nothing had changed. Turning his back on Voldemort didn't erase years of being a complete bastard. Some people might go soft on Malfoy, but Ron was definitely not one of them. He would not comment on Malfoy's stupid attire or the way his gel free hair seemed to curl stupidly, or punch him in the face for simply breathing. But he was not going to forgive him either. And he was definitely not going to admit him he was agreeing with him about anything.

"So we should ask Snape to teach us?" Harry could have probably just asked if he should ask Snape. From Ron's expression it was clear that he wasn't going to do it.

Ron nodded, looking a little hesitant. It would be best if Harry talked to Snape. At least that way Malfoy couldn't take credit for the whole thing, even if it was his idea. But asking Harry do it wasn't really fair to his friend. After all, they all knew how Snape usually reacted to anything they said.

"Are you sure you don't want Malfoy to ask him?"

"No, I'll go," Harry hurried to answer. He'd been waiting for such an opportunity for days now, and wasn't going to let it go.

Besides, he'd seen how Malfoy acted with Snape. It was clear that things had changed. Snape had agreed to protect Malfoy, but Malfoy obviously had no idea how to behave with Snape.

Harry smiled a little. Yes, everything had been so simple when they'd still believed in the roles they had played in school. Especially Malfoy's role. Now they knew it was a lie. He would never again get away with his supremacist attitude or cutting jibes. At least with Snape around.

"Well, it's your funeral." Even though he meant it as a joke, Ron still shook his head. He still couldn't understand Harry's attitude towards Snape. Being a member of the Order didn't really change things all that much. "I wouldn't go to him even if you paid me."

A genuine smile followed the comment. It was not all that often he made jokes about money, but this time there was a hint of honesty in the words.

"Ron... He's not a total monster." Seeing that the words didn't have any impact on his friend, Harry shrugged. It was really weird. He could barely remember how it was to be scared of going to see the man.

Rolling his eyes, Ron nodded. "Yeah. Right. I believe you. And maybe Malfoy's not a twit either. We've just misunderstood them all along."

Harry didn't even bother to say anything to that.

"So you'll ask him if he'd... er..." Wondering just how could anyone ask Snape about anything, Ron just went with, "Teach us. Right?" He wondered if he could get away with calling Snape a nasty git to his face after passing the exam. After he'd passed, the man wasn't going to be able to flunk him. Of course it didn't mean he wouldn't be able to throw a curse or five at him.

"Yeah. I think he'll agree. It's not like he has anything better to do here." Boredom would be a common enemy. Snape had said something about DADA, but he'd probably be overjoyed to teach Potions.

Ron blinked as he saw Harry get up. "You're going there now?" He'd thought Harry would approach Snape after breakfast the next morning or something.

"Why not?" No need to stall. Harry padded to the door, trying to ignore the look on Ron's face. "I'll be right back." Realizing he didn't really want to hurry with this, he hesitated. "Actually, there are some things I need to talk with him. So you shouldn't worry if this takes me a while."
He hurried out of the room before Ron could say anything.

Knowing Harry couldn't see it, Ron nodded anyway. His expression was dark. He knew he'd worry as long as Harry was there with the sadistic bastard. It didn't matter he was a member of the Order.

It'd be best if he waited here.

Harry walked across the small entrance hall towards Snape's door. Malfoy's suggestion was a good one, and he was sure Snape would agree with that. He didn't mind sitting back and enjoying the peace and quiet, but this didn't sound bad either. Besides, they'd have weeks and weeks to just be after the exam. He doubted their studying would take all that long.

Instead of simply touching the door, like he always did back at Hogwarts, he rapped his knuckles against it.

"What is it, Potter?" The voice called out even before the door was opened.

"How did you know it was me?" Harry stepped through the doorway, closing the door after him. "It could have been..." The words faded away as he remembered the strangely identical looks of apprehension on Ron and Malfoy. "Oh."

Snape didn't comment, but there was a faint smirk ghosting over his features. "Oh indeed. Well. Come on in, then." He gestured at the chair across from where he was standing.

Since it was the only place to sit on -- if one didn't sit on Snape's bed, and Harry was certain that wouldn't go well --, Harry slumped down on the chair.

He didn't even try to hide his curiosity as he looked around the room. There were jars and bundles of various potions ingredients everywhere, books piled on the table. A cauldron was simmering not far from them. He wondered where on earth had the man packed all this. After all, he'd brought just one trunk with him, like the rest of them.

The scent of herbs was already thick in the air, making the small room smell very familiar. Harry couldn't help smiling at that. In just a couple of days Snape had managed to make this place feel like home.

It was funny how they'd seemed to have brought the sense of home with them. In the room he shared with Ron, the familiarity of his friend's messy habits and the soft sound of his breathing in the dark lulled him into safety. Here, it was the scents surrounding him, like in the dungeons at Hogwarts. Not only the herbs that soothed him, but also the less pleasant smells.

Potion ingredients that had always been an annoyance were now building memories of peace and calm.

"So, to what do I owe this honor?" Snape asked as he realized Harry was just going to gawk at his room. "Or are you just on a sightseeing tour?"

"I like what you've done to this place."

He didn't expect for an answer. None was offered. Snape just stood there, waiting for more as he looked around the room once again.

Seeing Harry in such informal surroundings was a bit strange. It had been easy at Hogwarts. There the boy had been a student inside the classroom, a fellow member of the Order in his rooms. Everywhere else, it depended on the situation. If he was running around and screaming with his
friends, a student. If he was not breaking any rules, an ally. Simple.

It wasn't that simple anymore.

Then again, nothing in the world was really simple. At least not in the world Snape lived in. Where friends could be enemies, and annoying brats could turn out to be human beings after all.

Harry returned his gaze to the man. "Actually, we have a favor to ask." Seeing the encouraging nod, he said, "Since we're going to be here for a while, and all of us spent a lot of time studying for the N.E.W.T.s, we'd like to take the exams here. The Potions exams. And we kind of thought it'd be great if you tutored us before it. If it's all right with you."

He felt a bit light headed after saying that.

The surprised expression on Snape's face was a genuine one. Harry Potter asking him if he could actually teach? And he'd said 'we'. Weasley was eager to study?

"Shocking, isn't it?" Harry grinned. Somehow it felt as if Snape was not laughing at him. With him, maybe. Even though Snape was just standing there. Not really laughing at all.

"To be quite honest, yes." The sarcasm in the deep voice was definitely not cutting this time. "You want me to finish teaching you this year's course and then give you the exams?"

The astonishment on Snape's usually guarded face was so blatantly obvious, Harry kept grinning while nodding. "Yes. Ron is bored out of his mind, and quite frankly so am I. Besides, it might help to defuse the tension a bit." He wasn't stupid. Malfoy was acting meek, and Ron was doing his best to ignore him, but that wasn't going to last forever. Even in the silence, there were all kinds of angry feelings floating around those two.

That certainly got Snape's attention. "So you think of classes as a diversion?" More scathing this time.

"No. I didn't say that." Harry rolled his eyes. "I think of them as a good way not to waste all the hours we've already spent studying for the N.E.W.T.s. The fact that they'll help us all live here together is a bonus."

Snape brushed his fingers over the freshly cut clover leaves on the table, thinking about it. It did make sense. More than he had earlier credited Harry with.

He'd wondered how long it would take for those three to get bored of simply being. It was a bit surprising how quickly they had come to him. Still, he was glad he hadn't suggested this himself. He'd had some time to think and now he could teach without being resented for it.

What a novel idea.

Teaching Potions hadn't really crossed his mind. He'd thought about defense and teaching how to survive. He didn't want to be a part of any delusion of safety.

They would have time for DADA classes as well. Snape gave in to the temptation to be a simple Potions master. It had been such a long time since he'd had time to only teach.

"All right." Ignoring the smile on Harry's face, he added, "We'll meet in the living room after breakfast. Classes for two hours then and four more before dinner. You can spend the extra time studied."
It sounded exactly the way Harry had imagined. Hard work. "Sure." He was also sure Ron would skin him.

"I expect you all to behave yourselves during the classes. No talking during the lecture, no sleeping. I will treat you as students, but due to our special circumstances, I do not feel comfortable in handing out House points out here. It would feel like favoritism."

Harry waited for a moment, unsure if it was a joke or not. Since Snape's expression didn't waver, he just nodded, "Yes. Of course."

"Good." It would be interesting to teach such a small group. Snape's most recent experience of tutoring was with two of his own students who were mentally equivalent to house elves. Really stupid house elves. Even though he had no illusions about Weasley's or Harry's intelligence -- especially in Potions class -- this would be better than just sitting here.

Of course it would also keep the youngsters in line. Having too much time in their hands would be dangerous.

"So... When will we start? Tomorrow?" Harry asked. It was probably best to start right away. That way Ron wouldn't have the chance to kill Malfoy.

Since there was nothing more important to do, Snape nodded. He'd probably manage to finish with the potion he was brewing in an hour or so, and then he'd have time to plan for the classes. "Yes." He was already thinking about what he would have to teach before the exams. To young Malfoy, probably nothing. To Weasley... Well, they did have only a couple of months here.

He would do his best. It would be up to the annoying teenagers to pass or fail.

Harry had never felt this happy about the possibility of actually going to a Potions class. It was making him a bit giddy. "Thank you!" He might regret this later, but right this moment he didn't mind that.

Snape waited for a moment. When Harry didn't say anything or make a move to get up, he asked, "Was there something else you wanted?" His voice indicated there's better not be. He had work to do.

"Well... No. Not really." Disappointed, Harry shook his head.

A grunt was the only reply he got. Snape turned his attention back to the salve he was brewing. It had simmered in peace for long enough. It was time to add more ingredients.

For a moment, Harry wondered if he should ask for a permission to stay. Seeing Snape concentrate on the potion made him decide against it. Asking would be stupid.

Instead of leaving, he sat there, waiting for a curt order to get out. When none came, a small smile appeared on his lips. It was a bit weird how he'd missed spending time alone with Snape. He hadn't really thought about why.

Didn't want to think about it now either. He was just happy to be here.

He knew that studying would keep them busy and drive the boredom away for a while. Hopefully, it would be warmer when they finally passed their exams, and they could then spend more time outside.

It would be weird to be finally free of the Potions class. Ron for one would be happy to be rid of it.
Harry smiled a little. Yes. His friend would probably feel relief after the exam. He knew Ron worried about Snape's presence, and at least a bit of that worry would be erased when it was sure nothing they did could postpone leaving school.

Snape wouldn't be their teacher anymore. Of course he was still a professor and an adult, but he wouldn't hold enormous power over them. For some reason that was important to Harry, even though he couldn't really say why.

Trying not to look too deep into the whole thing, he curled on the chair, simply enjoying the moment of peace.

Snape added the ingredients slowly to the potion. He didn't even need to check out the order from the book. He'd only brewed this particular potion once before, but he'd memorized it long ago, knowing it could well save his life some day.

His mind was wandering while he stirred the thickening liquid. The potion was a perfect example of how his life had changed, and he wasn't certain if it was a good thing or not.

This was reality now. Hiding. There was no place on earth where he'd be completely safe. There would be people after him and nothing would change that, except the death of his former Master. He had no idea what would happen after that.

Life would go on. He'd return to his quiet life in Hogwarts, finally able to stop thinking about the past. Even if the mark he had of his teenage folly would probably never let him completely forget.

Brewing a potion was always calming. Even this potion. Snape enjoyed the silence and peace of his room, glad that the youngsters were staying away from here. He was willing to spend some evenings in the living room, to act as a buffer between young Malfoy and Weasley but it was far from an ideal way to spend the evening.

He'd accepted the duty to protect the boy. That meant he'd even suffer through tedious evenings with idiots.

The potion was almost done, the liquid turning into the deep green salve-like subject it was supposed to be. Snape pulled the ladle out of the cauldron, careful not to drip any of the potion on the books that were open on the table.

Now he had to wait before adding the rest of the ingredients.

A movement on the other side of the room caught his attention just as he was reaching out for a jar of Plimpy livers. Trying to remember if he'd heard the door open, Snape abandoned his movement towards the jar and spun around, his wand ready. Seeing Harry sit there was definitely a shock. He'd thought he'd already left.

"What? Is something wrong?" Harry made a move towards his own wand as he saw Snape twirl around. "Is someone coming?"

Snape just stared. Then he put his wand back on the table. His expression was poisonous. "I thought you'd already left." He was more angry at himself than at Harry. He'd got so used to the boy's presence, he didn't even register it anymore and that wasn't exactly wise.

It was probably the first time he'd ever relaxed like that in someone's presence. He'd never dropped his guard like this before. Not even with Albus Dumbledore.

"Oh." Harry felt something shrivel inside of him. He did his best not to show his disappointment.
"Sorry." There was even some sarcasm in that one word. It was the best he could muster.

With a withering glare, Snape turned back to his potion. Not saying a word.

He didn't know why he wasn't just throwing Harry out of his room. It was obvious the Gryffindor didn't need him. That illusion had been shattered a while back. There was no trace of desperation in him anymore.

He still thought Harry Potter was annoying. What else could he think? He certainly didn't worship him like most of their world seemed to do. He would never again worship anyone, not even if they deserved it. And Harry didn't deserve being worshipped. He was too human for that.

Annoying! Snape slammed the ladle back into the cauldron. He did not want to think about an idiot child as a human being. Students weren't humans. They were irritating twerps who never listened, never paid attention to what adults told them.

Stirring the potion, Snape reached out for the Plimpy livers again. He grimaced as he felt his sleeve get even wetter as his fingers finally found one small liver in the jar. He was going to finish the potion now, not caring he wasn't alone. Starting from the beginning the next day would be stupid.

He could deal with slight discomfort. It was nothing compared to most of the things he'd been through. Soggy clothing would be better than pity or horror from the boy.

Almost anything would be better than that.

Harry couldn't keep his attention away from Snape for long. He could sense something was wrong with him, but had no idea why. Feeling the heat from the fire make perspiration run down his face, he wiped his forehead. Suddenly he realized Snape must feel the heat even worse than he did. But still, he didn't take off his frock coat. He squinted. Snape's sleeves seemed to be all soggy as well.

It hit him hard. Of course Snape wouldn't want anyone to see him take the robes off. Even professor Sprout used light summer robes at the end of school year, but no one had ever seen Snape in anything but his heavy robes.

He had a flash of image from the dueling club five years ago. Snape had left his outer robes off then. Still, he'd been hidden neck down in black cloth. He was always like that. Never relaxing. Always looking forbidding in his clothes, covering his skin.

Covering his left arm.

The small chair clattered back as Harry stood up in a hurry. He hadn't even thought that he was probably intruding, that Snape would want to do things in private. Sense of duty would probably keep him from asking him to leave.

That didn't mean he should stay and ignore the fact that Snape didn't want him there.

"Stop making a mess, Potter!" Snape glanced over his shoulder, looking pointedly at the chair until Harry raised it up again. He was still holding the jar. Fortunately he hadn't spilled any of the liquid. "What is it?"

Harry opened and closed his mouth a couple of times.

"Just when you almost had me convinced of some trace of intelligence, you contradict it with idiotic behavior." Never mind the fact that he had actually said something nice. Snape's voice was definitely not kind.
"I... I..." Hand still on the back of the chair, Harry stuttered, feeling like an idiot. His movement had been spurred by surprise, and now he had no idea what to do.

If this was about anything else, he would just say what he had thought but Snape's past was not something he could comment on.

He swallowed, and closed his mouth. Better not say anything. But it was clear some kind of an explanation was needed right now.

"Maybe I should go." It was clear Snape was angry. Maybe not at him, but he wouldn't bet on it. "I have things to tell Ron, and you need some..." Harry bit his tongue as he almost said something they'd both regret later.

He moved quickly towards the door. He'd better get out of here right now.

"Stop!"

Harry froze at the sound of Snape's voice. It had rarely sounded like that before; full of barely contained fury. Somehow it was worse than malice or rage. "Y...Yes?" He was sure he was insane, because he still couldn't feel real fear. Only strange churning in his stomach.

"Pray tell me what do I need, Potter." Realizing he was squeezing the jar so tight his fingers ached, Snape stared at Harry. This was good. The idiot would probably stutter something inane, and then leave; exactly what he needed right now, to be reminded of how he hadn't lost his touch.

"Privacy." Amazingly, it came out without a stutter. Harry met Snape's stare with a calm expression. He didn't make a move towards the door.

Snape hadn't really expected that. "What do you mean?" He'd never needed privacy while brewing a potion. He was a Potions master, a teacher. It wasn't as if he had a performance anxiety. Especially not with this young man. "Why would I need that?"

"Er..."

The hesitation made Snape squint his eyes. Something was going on. It didn't take a genius to know what Harry was thinking about. He could see the furtive looks at his arm.

It was amazing how it made him burn inside. He'd been through all the pain and anger years ago, so why did it still hurt when this happened? He accepted the consequences of his actions, but he would never accept this. Not the condescending comments, not questions or carefully phrased remarks.

Still, when Harry didn't say anything, he raised an eyebrow and prompted, "Yes?" He wasn't going to stand here and wait for whatever the boy had to say.

"You know. You could. I mean, I have... I know..." Harry hated the way Snape's lips curled into a sneer. Taking a deep breath, he blurted out, "Look. I know you have the damn Dark Mark. Okay? It's hot as hell in here, and you shouldn't need to..."

He didn't know how to form the feeling into words. What had begun as a thought about hiding had turned into something else.

Needing to finish the sentence, he muttered, "You shouldn't need to hide it. Not because of me." It
sounded stupid.

There was a horrible silence in the room.

It was awkward. Undercurrents of anger and pain and rage were palpable in the oppressing silence. It was as if everything had stopped moving, the whole world waiting for an explosion. Snape stood as still as a statue.

After a moment, Harry said, "I didn't mean to make things all uncomfortable again. I apologize for that. I just wanted to say that I know and that I don't care." Care was probably not the right word here. Not at all. "I mean... Crap! I don't know what I mean." He gave up, spreading his arms.

Snape kept his gaze on him for a long time. His expression was unreadable, probably meaning he was boiling with rage. The potion in the cauldron was bubbling, and he absentmindedly placed the jar back on the table and stirred the liquid. Still staring at Harry.

It made Harry squirm, but he didn't even think about leaving right now. If he ran away, things would never be the same again.

"Stop hovering there. If you want to leave, leave. If you're going to stay, make yourself useful." Slowly pulling the ladle out of the potion, Snape made sure the liquid was steaming before adding, "Open the window."

Harry blinked. "Huh?" Then a grin spread to his face. "Sure." He practically ran to the small window.

"Oh, and Potter." Glancing at his houseguest, Snape looked actually amused. "If we were still at Hogwarts, you would lose five points for the use of profanities." With that he concentrated on the potion again.

Snape considered 'crap' to be a profanity? Harry was definitely not surprised.

Fresh, cool air replaced the stagnant stench of burned clover. Harry stood by the window for a moment, breathing in the scent of spring. He didn't want to turn back to Snape just yet. Didn't know what to say to him.

He'd been certain he'd be thrown out. Hexed. Probably beaten with a cauldron. Even with all the evenings spent at Snape's quarters, there was a line he'd never crossed. Not until now. For some unimaginable reason, he'd felt it necessary to actually make a personal comment to the man.

A comment that should have ruined it all. It hadn't. He didn't know exactly what had happened.

Harry turned to see Snape still working on the potion. The task seemed to actually make the man happy. As if brewing was to Snape like flying was to him. A deep passion.

He was still wearing the frock coat, but it seemed like he'd rolled the sleeves up just a little. Not enough to actually reveal anything, but it was something. He didn't look tense anymore.

Deciding not to try to break the silence with inane babbling, Harry went quietly to get a broom from one corner, and then swept some of the leaves off the floor, staying out of Snape's way. "I will not scrub any cauldrons, though. I may be nice, but I'm not a complete idiot," he muttered softly so that Snape could decide whether to comment or not.

Snape snorted, but didn't say anything.
They didn't really talk after that. Harry kept sweeping the floor, a bit wistful as he held the broomstick in the unfamiliar position. It didn't matter that the floor wasn't all that dirty. He enjoyed the soothing motion of the broom.

When Snape had poured all of the salve into small jars and finished cleaning, it was already dark outside. Knowing he couldn't stay, Harry still cast a longing look at the chair. Then he muttered good night to Snape.

He wasn't at all surprised when the words were muttered right back.

Tiptoeing across the hall, Harry peeked into the living room before heading upstairs. Seeing Ron asleep on the couch made him smile a little. It was clear his friend had waited for him and then dozed off right there. He decided not to wake him up.

Ron would definitely need the sleep before tomorrow's class.

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Part 4

"It seems that the change of scenery hasn't really changed the fact that Gryffindors simply cannot follow orders."

Snape's scathing words made both Harry and Ron cringe.

They were all gathered in the living room, the already small room feeling even smaller with the makeshift tables and the cauldrons there. A fire was burning in the fireplace, spreading warmth all around the room. The heat was almost nauseating, throbbing with the scent of mint.

Not exactly like the Potions classroom back at Hogwarts. Still, Snape's presence made it feel like the familiar room in the dungeons.

Ron for one wasn't at all surprised by the way they were treated. He'd never had any illusions about Snape. The hours they'd spent every day chopping ingredients and talking about potions had been a break in a boring routine. A hellish break. He was quite certain he'd rather be bored to death than spend another day like this.

Of course, having nothing better to do than study was making everything easier. They had been making notes. Choosing ingredients, preparing them. That had been the so called class. During the evening, they'd lounged on the couches -- or even on the floor on one occasion, when Snape and Malfoy had sat on different couches and Ron had had to choose between sitting next to either Slytherin or on the floor -- reading books about potions.

They were sure to pass the exam.

Ron couldn't help thinking about his original thought of this being like his personal hell. Especially not now.

Today, not even a full week since they'd started this impromptu tutoring, they'd started to actually brew a potion that was on the N.E.W.T.s list. It had made everyone's stomach flutter. It truly seemed like Snape wanted them to test their new skills.

Resulting in three cauldrons blowing up, covering them in deep purple and magenta goo.

"But... Wasn't this supposed to blow up?" Harry looked up at Snape, wondering if he'd misunderstood the meaning of the potion. "Adding garlic into a mix of bubotuber pus and..." He saw
the impatient way Snape was gesturing with his hand for him to get to the point. "Well, it was going to blow up no matter what."

"In order to... Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco didn't even blink at that. He was used to this now. The questions Snape asked him weren't the ones with blatantly obvious answers anymore. "In order to release the essence of the potion into the air, sir, so that a large number of patients can be cured at once."

"Correct." This was new as well. No praise. Simply acknowledgement. "But you, Potter and you, Mr. Weasley did not add enough garlic. The text clearly says that if the garlic is a small one, then you have to..."

"... measure the cloves instead of simply counting them." Harry finished the sentence with resignation. No wonder the goo both he and Ron had managed to blow up had been so light in color.

Snape nodded. "Yes. That means your potion was not as potent as Mr. Malfoy's. It would still work, even though not with a large amount of people." He said it grudgingly.

"So we pass?" There was hope in Ron's voice. He was so enthusiastic about the prospect he almost didn't realize what he'd left out the sentence before seeing Snape glare at him. "Sir."

"Thank you for your amazingly accurate interpretation of Eppy. And yes. You did pass. Congratulations, Mr. Weasley. Potter. It seems the two of you have indeed passed the most rudimentary of exams that are a part of your N.E.W.T.s. I may yet die of the sheer shock." He simply nodded at Draco. They both knew he was excellent in Potions.

Ron glanced at Harry, smiling broadly.

"Now, I suggest that after cleaning up the mess, you go out and bathe. Use a lot of soap." Seeing the confused looks, Snape sighed. "Read the last paragraph out loud, Potter."

"'All patients should be properly covered, since the potion is somewhat magic resistant. You can not remove it from skin or hair by using any of the cleaning charms.' Oh, great." The last part was a groan.

There was quite a lot of the goo on all their faces and arms. Due to the heat in the room, all teenagers had removed their robes, brewing the potion clothed in trousers and T-shirts. Only Snape had remained in his dark frock coat, looking as forbidding as ever. There was an amazing amount of bright magenta potion dripping down to his collar from his hair.

No one was laughing. Ron had to bite the inside of his mouth, and Harry's eyes were twinkling, but there was absolutely no sounds of laughter in the room.

The cleaning was relatively easy. While Ron, Harry and Draco scrubbed their cauldrons clean, Snape cast a cleaning charm on the floor, the ceiling and the windows. He was certain that if he left that task to anyone else, there'd be algeo-aegerserum dripping down from the ceiling for days.

It wouldn't really matter if he wasn't about to spend yet another evening in the room with his students.

Finishing with their cauldrons, they cleaned most of their clothes, and then hurried upstairs for towels and soap. Draco trailed the two Gryffindors back downstairs, uncertain if he was supposed to go with them or not.
These past few days had almost returned him back to his old self. He wasn't really happy about interacting with people like Potter and Weasley, knowing exactly what they thought about him -- and knowing they knew exactly what he thought about them -- but he wasn't shying away from conversations anymore. Snape's presence in the living room helped somewhat. Even Weasley couldn't really be uncivil to him in front of Snape.

Ron was chuckling slightly as he rushed down the stairs behind Harry. "You know, Snape wasn't all that better with the instructions. Can you believe he'd deliberately have this shit on his hair? As if it isn't greasy... Oh, hello professor!"

It was amazing how quickly he could actually change a subject.

"Mr. Weasley." The tone indicated that Snape had many other names he simply chose not to call the boy with. "Remember not to let your guard down outside. Since there are three of you, I assume you can handle bathing and standing guard at the same time." He glanced at all three, looking doubtful. "Unless you want me to come and..."

"Not necessary, sir!" Ron almost blushed at his quick denial.

Thinking about stripping naked and then bathing while Snape stood there and watched was even more mortifying. He could handle glares or even sneers in a classroom. He was quite certain his ego couldn't survive bathing like that. He'd probably be scarred for life.

Snape didn't comment. He raised an eyebrow. That was enough.

It was quite surprising how quickly seventh year students could move if the occasion called for it. Ron and Draco almost collided by the doorway, both feeling urgent need to simply run.

Harry followed them on a slower pace, casting an amused look at Snape as he passed him by.

It was approaching dinner time. The day had been relatively beautiful, and it wasn't too cold out yet. Draco was still shivering in his T-shirt. There was no use putting on clean robes that would only get messy. He saw Ron was dressed similarly, and the comment about the famous Weasley poverty -- he probably had just one set of robes -- was immediately on his lips. He decided against it.

No need to start fighting now.

He noticed Potter was wearing an oversized pullover, wrapped warmly in the worn shirt. How wonderful it had to be to own clothes that were so disgusting that even a gooey potion couldn't make a difference.

Harry tried not to pay any attention to the looks both Ron and Malfoy seemed to cast at him. Malfoy was clearly thinking about something, his gaze gleaming with mirth. It was a good thing he was keeping his mouth shut. Harry didn't want to see Ron in a fight; his friend looked angry enough as it was. Snape's comment had completely confused him, so that he hadn't even objected Malfoy's presence.

Ron knew better than to argue now. The Slytherin would go to Snape and then there'd be hell to pay.

In all the time they'd now spent in the small cottage, there had been no sign of people in the area. No planes or brooms flying low in the sky. No sound of cars. Nothing. Still, it felt a bit weird to undress out in the open. The Burrow had a small pond near by, so Ron and even Harry weren't exactly new to skinny dipping. Both had visited beaches as well, especially that one summer they'd been invited to the Grangers. The invitation had almost resulted in Arthur Weasley having an apoplexy from all the excitement.
To Draco this was the first time he was doing anything like this, but it was proving to be a lot easier than using the outhouse. Even if running around in what was considered their front lawn in the buff was new to him, he had been in the company of lots of naked people before. Not all the tales about the Slytherin orgies were exaggerated.

He was the first to start taking his clothes off. Since he didn't have anyone to chatter nervously to, he simply stripped, not paying attention to the others.

Harry and Ron followed his example.

Ron was torn between the need to keep an eye on Malfoy and the desire to turn his back on him. Holding onto his towel, he tried not to look like he was feeling embarrassed, even though he kind of thought the blush creeping up his neck already betrayed him.

He envied Harry his ease in walking around wrapped in a towel. Had to be because of all the Quidditch practices and the communal showers in the locker rooms. There was little privacy in the Gryffindor showers but there were stalls there. Ron could handle splashing around naked with his brothers or Harry, but Malfoy was a completely different thing.

The bastard would probably make some comment about his freckles. Or compare. He'd definitely compare. Not that Ron had anything to be worried about.

Keeping his head up high, Ron dropped the towel and waded into the stream. He had to bite his lip to keep the horrified gasp inside. Damn, the water was cold. Still, he couldn't stop now.

"Damn this water is freezing!" Harry cringed as he followed Ron, holding his wand high. He was definitely not enjoying this. After a quick dunk, he'd just soap himself and be on his way. A little smell wouldn't matter. Not when he was freezing his dangly bits off.

Draco Malfoy was still standing on the riverbank, staring at the two Gryffindors. He was trying very hard not to laugh out loud. This was just too hilarious; the hope of the wizarding world and his sidekick behaving like two frightened Muggles.

"Caleoaquam!" Pointing his wand at the water, Draco said the charm out, and then smiled sweetly as the other two yelped. Still smiling, he walked into the warm water, sighing with happiness. This was something.


Draco looked at him and nodded. He wasn't sure if it was meant as a compliment or not, so he decided not to comment. Taking a deep breath, he dunked himself, feeling wonderfully refreshed as he came up for air.

He waded deeper in, and then went completely under again. And again. He enjoyed the strange non-silence of the underwater world. It was as if there was nothing and everything there, only the odd echo of the sounds around him, and his own heartbeat.

Ron was staring at Malfoy when the Slytherin came up for air again. His gaze was fixed on the pale skin of Malfoy's left arm. There was no black tattoo of a skull and a snake there. How surprising.

He'd tried to get a good look on him earlier, while they'd brewed the potion but he dark fire in Snape's gaze had made him stop his attempts.

Damn the professor. Still favoring his own house.
Hair slicked back, looking darker when wet, Draco swum around a little, his movements hindered slightly by his wand that he was holding tight. He noticed even Potter and Weasley hadn't gone far from their wands. There was a top of a large rock peeking from the depths, a convenient table of sorts to place a wand while you were soaping up.

There was some splashing and even laughter as Ron and Harry washed themselves. They didn't linger in the water for long. Harry had a nagging feeling between his shoulderblades, and didn't want to stay away from the cottage for too long. Ron on the other hand didn't want to stay here long enough for Snape to come and fetch them. That would certainly be embarrassing.

Even more embarrassing than climbing out of the water, just knowing that Malfoy was watching.

Toweling himself dry, Ron couldn't help casting furtive looks at Malfoy. If the creep was going to stare, then so was he. It was really a pity that Snape was there in the cottage with them, otherwise he would have definitely made all the comments springing to his mind. He decided to use the natural blond one later. Maybe someday it would come handy.

Harry blinked a little as he saw his friend check out Malfoy and then mutter something to himself. He was definitely not going to say anything about that. Ron was behaving strangely towards Malfoy anyway. With a simple joke, he might explode and attack the Slytherin again.

Sometimes he wondered if the Weasleys and the Blacks were distant relatives.

The sun was lower in the sky, making its way towards the horizon. After drying up, all three teenagers dressed in clean clothes and then headed towards the cottage. Eppy probably had the dinner served already, and she'd be pissed if they were late.

Feeling wonderful, Harry headed to the kitchen area as soon as he'd hung his robe in the coat rack. He wasn't exactly hungry, but knew that as soon as Eppy brought the tray in, his stomach would probably start growling, like Ron's was already. "Swimming always did make you hungry." It reminded him of Fred and George, who always seemed to love teasing their little brother about his healthy appetite.

"Yep." Ron grinned. "It's good Eppy's not as good a cook as my mum is." If they spent more days working on potions like that, he'd munch way too much food every evening after baths.

He really hoped there wouldn't be any more evenings like this. Bathing with a git like Malfoy wasn't exactly his idea of fun. Shivering at the disgusting thought, he glanced to his left.

Unfortunately Draco was still smiling at the homely comment. It was a bit wistful smile, his mind in the one person he couldn't bear to think about right now. He had no idea if his mother could even cook. Narcissa Malfoy had probably never even been in the kitchen of the vast mansion.

"And what are you grinning at?"

The smile disappeared from Malfoy's face. He shrugged, "Nothing." Once again, he lowered his gaze to the tabletop. It seemed to be a trend these days, he simply didn't think he was supposed to yell at Weasley anymore. There was a hint of the old anger and annoyance inside him, though. One day Weasley would push him at the wrong moment, and he'd find out that this new veneer of congeniality wouldn't cover all occasions.

Ron was still glaring at Malfoy. He hated the way the git could make him uncomfortable with just one look or word.

The tension in the small room was palpable.
"I trust you three can manage spending a little more time on your own." His voice a bit skeptical, Snape appeared at the doorway. He was carrying a large towel and a small bag that obviously held glass jars and vials.

He could well read the atmosphere and glared at Weasley. It was amazing how some things never changed. It was probable that there was no shared heritage with him and a certain other stubborn Gryffindor -- and Snape sneered at the thought of Ron Weasley even trying to become an Animagus, since whatever he'd become, it would undoubtedly be ginger in coloration, thusly an easy prey for any predator -- but it seemed some traits were indeed House bound.

"Are you going to take a bath?" Even though it was obvious, Harry asked anyway. He ignored the way his friend snorted at that, knowing Ron wasn't suicidal enough to make comments about Snape and bathing.

Snape turned his attention to Harry. "What a brilliant deduction, Potter. It's a shame I'm no longer in position to reward your House for your astonishing intelligence."

Ignoring both the way Ron bristled and Malfoy smirked, Harry raised an eyebrow. "You're going out there alone?" The weird feeling between his shoulderblades was back.

"Yes. Amazingly enough, I can manage bathing alone."

"Well you said yourself that no one should go wandering alone. I thought we agreed on it." Harry should have known Snape would exclude himself from the rule. The man was the most stubborn person he knew.

The quietly spoken words made Snape glare.

Ron nudged his friend and whispered, "Are you insane?" He was certainly not going to insist that one of them should follow Snape. No way! He'd rather go back to Hogwarts and move into the small cave in the Forbidden Forest. Acromantulas weren't that bad compared to their Potions master; he'd get along with Aragog just fine.

"No." It wasn't clear to whom Harry was speaking, but his gaze was firmly fixed on Snape. "We're all in danger here. You can't bathe and guard your back at the same time."

"Fine." Without other words, Snape turned around, and disappeared from sight. The others could well hear him mutter, "Gryffindors and their idiotic interpretations of rules."

There was a short silence, as the three young men looked at each other. Ron's expression was sullen. He was definitely not going to volunteer. Actually, he would fight till death if they told him he had to go. Looking a bit hesitant, Draco wondered if the others thought he should go. It didn't really feel right.

He might trust Snape, but he was also hesitant of pushing the man. It didn't matter that he'd always favored him in class; that had probably been a ruse to placate his father anyway. He didn't really know Snape, and certainly had no idea where he stood with him.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I'd better go after him." He was on his feet before anyone could say a word. "Save us some dinner, and please try not to kill each other, okay?"

He didn't stay to wait for any replies to that.

It was still crisp outside. Harry was glad he'd remembered to grab his thicker robes as he jogged to catch up with Snape. It was quite obvious the man wasn't expecting anyone to actually follow him.
Too bad. He wasn't going to risk anyone's life now.

Reaching Snape, Harry slowed down, and walked alongside him to the riverbank. He knew better than to start an argument right now. Any words -- and probably even breathing too hard -- would quite likely be considered as a prelude to one.

Snape headed to the same spot they'd left their clothes at. He cast a warning glance at Harry before arranging his vials and bottles down on the ground. The glance turned into a glare a moment later as he realized the boy hadn't taken the hint.

"Oh. Sorry." Not sounding at all apologetic, Harry turned his back on Snape, keeping a firm hold on his wand as he scanned the surroundings. He knew it was highly unlikely anyone would actually attack them now, but he wanted to be sure. It didn't feel right to actually leave Snape alone here.

Even if it was exactly what the man wanted.

Still glaring at Harry's turned back, Snape removed his clothing, piling them neatly on the ground. He crouched down to cast the same charm as Draco had just half an hour ago before stepping into the water. Knowing that Harry could probably manage to actually watch his back -- not literally of course -- he left his wand on a rock rising up from the shallow water.

The warm water felt divine. Snape enjoyed the currents caressing his skin for a long moment before reaching for the soap. The small bowl of water and occasional charms had been enough until now, but this was the first time he truly felt clean for days.

Trying not to think about the annoying brat standing only a couple of steps away, he started to wash himself clean.

Running his fingers through his still damp hair, Harry stared off into the distance.

He liked it in here. It was peaceful. There was no one in sight, the small movement near the bushes just a bird seeking for food. The only sound the splashing of water as Snape bathed in the stream behind him.

The water was just as cold as one might have thought it would be this time of year. With that little charm from Malfoy, it had just been refreshing. Bathing hadn't been an ordeal, even though Ron had looked really flustered as he'd stood in the water.

Had to be because of Malfoy. Harry smiled slightly at that. He didn't like the Slytherin, and doubted he ever would, but he did seem to have a funny effect on Ron.

He'd have to remember to tease his best friend about Malfoy later. About the sudden bout of modesty he seemed to have around the blond.

After years of using the big shower in the locker room and the smaller one adjoining the dormitory, Harry didn't have any problems being naked around other men. Especially ones he considered as friends. However, there were those who brought confusing thoughts. He doubted he could really keep his cool if he tried to bathe right now.

Being naked with Snape standing right there, equally naked was definitely a confusing thought. Harry could feel heat rise to his face and frowned. There shouldn't be anything weird about the thought of a naked Snape.

He was a human being like all the rest of them. It wasn't as if the robes he always wore were a part of him.
Naked Snape.

Something he couldn't really imagine; Snape without clothes on not all that far from him. Splashing in the stream, just like he had a moment earlier.

Harry tried to push the thought away from his mind, but his curiosity was already peaked.

To many in Hogwarts Snape probably resembled a boogie man more than a person and it was just the image he so obviously wanted everyone to have. It had been a long process to start seeing the professor as a human being. Right now wondering about him as a person who could well be without clothes didn't seem like such a big thing.

Harry stood there, frozen in place. It was a fascinating idea, really. Naked people without any masks or covers. Naked Snape.

Slowly, he turned around to face the stream, feeling his heart pound in his chest. This was probably the most idiotic thing he'd ever done, but he couldn't help it. He just had to see.

Snape was standing in the stream with his back to Harry. He'd already soaked completely, his black hair hanging wet and limp.

The sight made Harry swallow hard. Snape was washing his arm, the wash cloth leaving a trail of white suds on the pale skin. The movement was making the muscles on his back flex.

It was almost hypnotic. Strong, even strokes of the cloth. A pause, and then the same thing on his other arm, soap blurring the Dark Mark, almost hiding it from sight. The touch didn't linger there, it went on as if there was nothing remarkable about the symbol.

Harry didn't know what he'd expected. He knew Snape's skin was pale, almost sallow, but it was still strange to see that he was like that all over. Not exactly muscled, more... average in form.

Lean figure. Snape's arms looked firm and strong, even though his shoulders weren't broad; a proof of years of stirring potions and chopping up ingredients. Finishing with his arms, the wash cloth was now making circling movements on the man's sides, making Harry focus his gaze there. More skin. Naked skin. Soapy water oozing down, trailing over his hip before trickling to the pond.

There were thin scars covering his back, some running down to his buttocks. Harry didn't even want to think of what might have caused them. It was apparent they weren't recent ones.

Scars and skin. Harry stared. Surprisingly firm skin, the curve of Snape's arse barely visible above the water level. He swallowed. The sight was alluring, making him wish Snape hadn't waded so deep into the stream.

More splashing, and now there was water running down Snape's back. He was rinsing the suds off.

Still, Harry couldn't turn his gaze away. He was fascinated.

Pale skin, faint silvery lines on it. Then with a blur it turned into something smoother, planed. It took Harry a moment to realize Snape had turned around and that he was now staring at his chest.

While Snape was very obviously now staring at him.

"Mr. Potter." Voice icy, Snape glared at him, not saying anything else. It was clear what he meant.

Closing his eyes, Harry quickly spun around. "Sorry." He knew he sounded like a toad with that
croak, but it was the only thing he could really squeeze out. He wished he was about Trevor's size too. Small enough to disappear into the grass and hop away, never to face Snape again.

He couldn't banish the image of Snape's body from his mind. His surprisingly hairless chest, the skin that looked soft. A few burn marks on his left side, looking like something hot had splattered on him. Probably from a bubbling cauldron.

Snape didn't look anything like Harry's fellow Gryffindors did. He wasn't a teenager with his body still shaping. There were signs of a harsh life on him. Body showing his age.

But damn he looked good. It was something Harry definitely didn't want to think about. Not like that.

The more he tried not to think about Snape, the more his stupid mind concentrated on what he'd just seen. Typical.

His fingers brushed against the small wrinkly scar on his wrist; a memento of an attack a few years back. The Death Eaters had come after him, one holding a long dagger instead of a wand. The blade had cut him deep enough to leave a scar, but not deep enough to threaten his life.

The old wound didn't look anything like the marks on Snape's back. Not a silvery and smooth-looking scar.

He wondered what they would feel like under his touch. The thought made him feel really uncomfortable suddenly. It was weird to think about Snape like this. He knew the nasty professor was really a human being, but thinking about him as a person, and then imagining pawing him were two different things.

Harry kept his gaze firmly fixed on a bush in the distance, trying not to listen to the sounds coming from behind him. The splashing was getting louder, indicating that Snape was climbing out of the stream.

Naked Snape, dripping water. Probably glaring at his back, eyes gleaming with anger.

The shivers running down his spine were definitely a weird reaction to that thought. He should have been terrified. Instead, he was more...

"Damn it!"

The words were growled out with a pained voice. There was more splashing.

Harry turned around, his wand ready to fight any attacker. Instead of seeing dark robed men rushing to them, he could only see Snape. The man had managed to get out of the water, his robe loosely wrapped around his waist as he staggered towards a jar he'd left on the bank.

"What is it? What's going on?" Harry could see the agony on Snape's face. It was clear the man was in pain, but he had no idea what was causing it.

The word escaping Snape was quite probably 'idiot'. It was hard to tell, because of the harsh grunt surrounding it. Gaze burning with impotent rage, he took one more step, and then swayed, trying to stay on his feet. He didn't quite manage, falling flat on his face a moment later.

"Snape!" There was definitely something wrong with the man. "What is it? Let me help you."

Knowing the words were simply going to gain him yet another deadly glower, Harry rushed closer to Snape.
Whose whole world was spinning, turning into a hazy nightmare. "The salve. Hurry!"

Harry didn't see the small jar at first. It was conveniently hiding under Snape's outer robes on the ground. He grabbed it as soon as he spotted it, wrenching the jar open and then handing it out to Snape. His gaze was full of worry as he watched Snape reach out with a trembling hand.

"Keep it steady." Grounding the words out from between clenched teeth, Snape tried again, this time managing to get a gob of the green salve on his fingers. He ignored the fact that his robe was slipping. Nothing mattered but the burn on his forearm, the pulsating agony that would only intensify until his whole being burned.

He slapped the salve on his skin, hissing as it made the pain only grow. Warm fingers came to hold his arm, keeping it in place. With quick, precise movements, he spread the potion all over the Dark Mark, covering the tattoo completely under the protective barrier of the potion.

The relief that flooded over him a moment later almost made him groan. Head bowed, he stayed where he knelt, breathing heavily. It was always a bliss, the absence of pain. For many years it had been the only ecstasy he'd felt.

Shivers were starting to run down his spine after a moment. The evening air was cooler than the water had been. He realized that the robe he'd wrapped around his waist in haste had slipped almost completely off, leaving him nearly naked.

And Harry Potter was still steadying his arm.

"Don't! Don't touch... it." The growl was instinctive. Snape could only remember two times he'd voluntarily shown anyone his arm like this. First to Dumbledore years and years ago. Then to that idiot Fudge after the disastrous Triwizard tournament.

His dark secret that wasn't so much of a secret anymore. The symbol of evil right there for everyone to see. How strange that he would now shy from having Harry see it, for the boy had already seen it once and had even made something akin to a casual comment about it.

"I won't touch it. I promise!" Harry didn't let go of the arm. His grip wasn't strong, Snape could yank his hand away whenever he wanted to. The fact that he hadn't already done so was amazing. "What happened? Was he calling you? Can he hurt you through it? Track you somehow? Are you all right?"

The questions all tumbled out, uncensored.

Snape raised his gaze, his eyes blank. He couldn't understand the absence of disgust and pity in Harry's voice. There had been signs of those emotions in Albus' eyes as he'd watched him roll up his sleeve. Horror in Fudge's gaze as he'd seen the mark. No one had ever seemed truly worried about him before.

"I'm perfectly fine, Potter." Slowly pulling his arm from the surprisingly gentle grip, Snape stood up. He remembered to get a hold of his robe the last moment.

It made Harry blush, and turn away.

Pulling on his clothes, Snape gathered his thoughts for a moment. His personal business was just that. Personal. Still, this could have effects on them all. It was Order business as well, in a way, and he would share it with this one person who might one day need it. "That was Vo.. You-Know-Who reminding me of his existence." As if he could ever forget.
"He made the Dark Mark hurt you." Not really a question.

"Yes. It burns when he wants his Death Eaters to come to him. It also burns if he concentrates on one of us; a way to either summon or... punish." An almost fool proof way to ensure peoples' loyalty.

It had taken Snape years to find the small book containing the instructions how to brew this particular potion. Even when everyone had thought the Dark Lord had perished, he'd been obsessed with the idea of a barrier potion. He was now glad of his persistence.

Harry nodded, even though he wasn't facing Snape. The gesture was automatic. "And track you?" He knew it was a stupid question even as it escaped him. If Voldemort could track Snape through the damn mark, he would have done so a long ago.

"No." Pulling on his outer robe, Snape looked up to the boy who was still standing there, with his back turned to him. His ears were visibly red. "You may turn around if you wish to."

There was a glint in Harry's eyes as he turned around. "All decent."

Neither even tried to pretend that Snape's glare was anything but amused. "Of course." He wanted to make some nasty comments about Harry's peeking earlier, but couldn't really find the energy.

"So... Will you be all right now? Will that potion keep Voldemort from hurting you?" Harry hated the way his voice cracked, but he didn't turn his gaze away. It seemed that he wasn't too worried to be embarrassed.

He didn't see any real anger or malice in Snape's eyes. He was simply looking at him. Assessing him somehow. Harry didn't know what that meant.

"Yes." Something changed in Snape's gaze. It was as if shutters had come down, hiding any true emotion. "We should go. We're already late for dinner, Potter." Snatching up his jars and vials, Snape gestured towards the cottage.

There were dozens of questions in Harry's mind. He wanted to know more about the mark and the potion dampening it, wanted to ask Snape about the scars. Was really curious about things he didn't want to even admit to himself.

He just nodded, leading the way back to their small hideaway. Snape didn't look like he was going to offer any more information tonight, and he really was hungry. There would be time to think about this later, maybe even find some answers.

Now it was time for dinner.

Part 5

Bathing had indeed made all the teenagers hungry. When Harry and Snape arrived back at the cottage, dinner had already been served. Seeing the bowls full of food made Harry forget about his questions for the moment. It was enough to just eat.

There was a weird silence surrounding them all.

Ron was still bristling with annoyance. He didn't like being left alone in this place with Malfoy. Especially when they were both in the same room.

The Slytherin didn't even have to say anything to irritate him. Somehow just seeing the blond made
his skin crawl.

Seeing Harry go after Snape all alone didn't really help. It simply made him worry about his friend while scowling at Malfoy. He didn't trust the Slytherins. Snape might be a teacher, but that didn't really mean a thing here. There could be all kinds of possibilities for an accident. Like drowning. No one would suspect the good spy Snape if something happened to Harry.

He'd been relieved to see Harry walk back into the dining area, even with Snape following him a moment later. He'd thought Harry looked a bit weird, but then again who wouldn't after an ordeal like that?

They ate dinner in silence, concentrating on the food.

"The weekend is coming up. I think we should take a break from the classes for now." Snape placed his napkin on the empty plate. He didn't have much of an appetite right now.

The uncharacteristic words made even Ron stare. Had he heard right? Snape was giving them days off?

"There are chores to be done. Cleaning. Doing laundry. You should also study on your own. I do believe you're ready to take the written exam on Monday."

Even though they had all studied for the Potions exam, Ron, Harry and Draco all gasped at that.

Snape hid the rather evil grin by sipping from his cup, enjoying the heat that spread through him as he swallowed the hot liquid. There was nothing that made him feel better than strong tea and the look of utter panic on the faces of his students.

It was good to slip into the routine he knew well. He enjoyed the certainty it brought, driving away the momentary lapse in his concentration. It also made sure Harry didn't have the time to pester him with intimate questions.

"But... But... Sir, we... " Realizing that he'd just sound like Lavender, stuttering and staring like an idiot, Ron shut his mouth. He looked down at his plate, glad that he'd already finished. The thought of actually eating now that his stomach was clenching with total panic was nauseating.

It seemed Snape was the only one willing to linger with a cup of tea.

Harry was the first to get up. He collected all the dishes on the tray, shaking his head as Ron tried to help him. "No, I'm all right. You go and read or something." He needed to be alone with his thoughts, and didn't mind spending some time in front of a sink while thinking.

"Okay."

Washing the dirty dishes was actually calming. It had always been a sort of a refuge back at Privet Drive. His own way of hiding in plain sight. Harry smiled a bit as Eppy tried to stay awake to supervise his work. She was not really fooling anyone, sitting next to the wall, her head lolling to the side.

The snoring kind of gave her away.

Harry kept his mind occupied by thinking about the Potions exam. He'd been reading for it for weeks now. Unless Snape decided to torment them with the most difficult potions in the books, he would probably pass.
Maybe.

If he spent the next days working hard, and reading every waking moment.

He could do it. Studying would be a good thing. The thick and boring Potions books would be a good distraction, taking his thoughts away from what had just happened.

Not that anything had happened. Not really. Harry rinsed the plate he was holding, trying to convince himself of that. It didn't exactly work. He'd stopped lying to himself about the obvious things some time ago.

He decided not to think about that now. Snape had made it painfully obvious that he wasn't going to talk about the thing with him, so brooding about nonsense was futile.

It was already getting dark outside as he finally stepped into the small living room. It was cozy to sit here with the others, enjoying the fire blazing in the fireplace. The evenings were still chilly, and unlike earlier that day, the heat was pleasurable.

The room was well illuminated by dozens of candles. They had to be magical candles, because their tiny flames didn't flicker as he brushed by a few of them on his way to the couch where Ron was sprawling.

Reading.

Harry smiled a little. He could see Ron was concentrating on what he was reading, barely acknowledging him as he sat down next to him. Pushing Ron's legs out of his way, he took a good position himself, opening one of the books he'd carried with him.

It was actually nice to just sit here and read. Ron wasn't glaring at Malfoy, who was definitely not cringing. Snape was looking a bit relaxed sitting there with a scroll and a quill. Probably writing down the questions that would haunt their nightmares.

A small group of people spending a nice quiet evening studying. Hermione would be so proud of them.

Opening his book, Harry suppressed a sigh, and started reading. With luck, he'd even understand some of the things he read.

There was no real silence in the room, the sound of pages being turned and Snape's quill scraping the parchment surprisingly loud. Fear of flunking even a part of the exam was keeping everyone alert when the mellow atmosphere would have otherwise lulled at least Ron into a stupor.

Draco finished a chapter of memory potions and then closed the book, stretching a little. He didn't really need to read through everything again. Duty and discipline had been drilled into him from early childhood. His father had always told him to do his best in all things.

When he'd gone to Hogwarts, he'd been informed that he should be the top of his class, especially in Charms and Potions. He'd never really wondered why it was so important to excel in Potions until he'd seen the subtle tension between his father and professor Snape.

It had been clear then. No son of Lucius Malfoy would be a disappointment in something that was taught by the Head of the Slytherin House. It was a fortune Draco had actually liked Potions. The small speech Snape had given in the beginning of the first year had really made an impression on him.
Potions meant power. Therefore he would do his best to learn everything.

He didn't feel like reading now, but didn't know what else to do. Chores? Snape would probably tell him to do something. He just wished it would be something simple. How amazing that the most complex potions were easier to understand than the basics of cleaning.

Draco smiled a little. He'd had no idea of how dismal this kind of a life could be. One house elf and the dreaded outhouse were definitely not what he'd used to.

The fire in the fireplace was slowly dying. It took Draco a moment to realize that there wouldn't be any rush of small creatures carrying logs in a hurry. He wasn't ready to go to bed yet, so he'd better do something about the fire.

Before he could actually do anything about it, there was a sound of a scroll being placed on the small table. Snape got to his feet without words and headed to the doorway to get more wood.

Ron raised his gaze from his book, staring at Snape with his mouth slightly open. He nudged at Harry, who barely cast a look at the professor before turning his attention back on the text.

"It will probably rain tonight." Adding more wood to the fire, Snape mused out loud. It was a safe guess, since it had rained almost every day. He stood up, his gaze still on the merrily burning logs. "Close the shutters before going to bed, gentlemen. And Mr. Malfoy. If you've finished with your book, you could go and fetch some more wood."

Since Draco had planned on visiting the outhouse anyway, he nodded immediately. "Of course, sir." As he got up, he could see Ron glare at him.

"Arse-kisser!"

It was muttered barely loud enough for him to hear. He didn't show any signs of hearing it, simply walking out of the room as if nothing had happened.

The visit to the outhouse was brief as always. Draco hated the place, especially when it was dark outside. The small light inside always seemed to draw in all sorts of crawling little creatures. He didn't mind chopping up various insects and arachnids into potions, but having a large multitude of them jump or fly around his head was always a bit disgusting.

Finishing with his business, he hurried to the small wood pile behind the house. He didn't know why they had to bother with the firewood. There was always a small neat pile of logs back here. If someone had bothered to charm them here, why not make them appear right next to the fireplace?

He knew that asking would only get him glares from various people, so he probably shouldn't bother. He didn't mind if it was Snape glaring at him. It was his job after all, now more than ever. But he was quite sure if he saw Ron Weasley make a face at him, he would probably snap and commit murder.

The first drops of rain started to fall down right as Draco shut the door behind him. He was glad he'd actually managed to get inside before the downpour began.

After piling the logs into the basket by the door, he wondered whether to go upstairs, or stay here for a while longer. He noticed Weasley had already gone to bed. Seeing that as a sign, he decided not to go up just yet.

It was nice and quiet here, especially now that no one was glaring at him whenever he dared to make a move. Draco leaned back on the couch, wondering if he should just relax and maybe doze off here.
"May I ask you something, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco's eyes widened as he heard Snape's almost-question. Sitting up straight, he nodded instinctively. "Of course, sir." The professor hadn't really talked to him since those first days.

"Do you enjoy playing the role of the redeemed villain, or are you perhaps going through some phase where you need to act as a doormat?" This time it sounded more like a real question.

He was sure he was asleep. Dreaming. Draco could only stare at his professor.

Seeing that the boy had no idea of what he was talking about, Snape added, "You seem to have the notion that you should mope around in silence, brooding about all the evil things you have or might have done in your life. That you deserve every jibe thrown at you. I must admit that it was entertaining in the beginning, but it's getting old very fast."

"I... I... But..." Wondering if he'd heard it correctly, Draco glanced at Potter, who was now sprawled on the other couch. No. Potter seemed as poleaxed as he was. "Excuse me, sir?"

Snape was quiet for a moment, staring at him with a strange expression on his face. Then he said, "This thing you're doing, it doesn't really suit you. You never used to be meek around Gryffindors, especially around Mr. Weasley, and you most certainly didn't use to suffer idiots."

"No, sir." Draco shook his head.

"I understand your decision not to join the Dark Lord, but I don't understand this need for self-flagellation." Cruel amusement seeped into Snape's voice. He sounded quite convincing even in his own ears. Bored and mocking. "I do wonder if there were some Hufflepuffs in your ancestry."

He knew where to aim to get the response he wanted. Some things never changed.

Draco couldn't hide the anger in his gaze as he replied, "You know better than that, sir." He noticed the deliberate baiting, but couldn't really keep his mouth shut.

"Good. Then stop acting like an idiot." Snape had watched the new routine long enough. It was time his ward tried to find some kind of a balance. This timid house elf-thing he was doing was just as bad as the haughtiness and the scathing comments about his father and pureblood supremacy had been.

It was a complete shock to Draco. He'd thought this was what was expected of him now. After all, he'd done everything in his power to torment Potter and his little friends. Shouldn't he try not to do anything like that anymore?

He stared at Snape, and suddenly realized it didn't matter what people might expect of him. The thought left him empty inside. All his life, he'd tried to follow the path his father had shown him. He'd been a good son, a good Slytherin. A good carbon copy of Lucius Malfoy.

That was all over now.

Hiding and cowering had been somehow logical. He'd done his best not to be anything like he had been. To be quite honest, wallowing in self-pity had even been enjoyable at moments.

It couldn't continue. He knew that now. It would just make people annoyed, or worse, they would pity him. His pride would never allow that.

"Yes, sir." It was only a whisper.
Snape heard it and nodded. He wasn't sure if it was the right time, but somehow seeing young Malfoy cringe at Weasley's comments was too much for him right now. His arm was tingling as the potion worked, but the pale ghost of unbearable pain was still haunting his mind. It reminded him of all the things he'd failed in. Things this boy could avoid, but only if he was strong enough.

Most of the wizarding world might never accept Draco Malfoy. His father would be hated for a long time after the Dark Lord fell. If he fell. It would affect the way everyone saw him. It was unfair, but it was life.

At least now Malfoy wouldn't simply accept all the sneers and nasty comments he would hear. Wouldn't think he really was inferior somehow because of the things taught to him from early childhood.

Harry didn't even try to hide his staring behind the book. He'd been stunned of Snape's words at first, but then he'd been intrigued to see just exactly how Malfoy would react.

The brief flicker of anger in the grey eyes had reminded him of the arrogant bastard who'd offered him his hand years ago. That Malfoy had been lost ever since he'd laid his wand in front of Snape in the Great Hall. Now it seemed he was coming back. Probably not all at once, considering the thoughtful expression on Malfoy's face.

But he was coming back.

He didn't really know what to think about it. Having the old Malfoy back would definitely be annoying. Especially if he started sprouting his pureblood propaganda. But in a way it would be good to see him answer to Ron's jibes. Harry didn't like the way his friend acted with Malfoy, even though he did have a damn good reason for it.

Having Malfoy fight back would make things lot more equal between those two. It wouldn't really hurt anyone.

Harry turned his gaze to Snape only to see that the man was looking at him with cold amusement plainly on his face. He didn't say anything, but did raise an eyebrow.

Deciding not to comment on that, Harry smiled a little and then returned to his book.

The hard patter of rain against the windows was somehow soothing. Harry tried to concentrate on the Potions text, but found it impossible to actually remember anything he'd read. The steady sound was lulling him into a daze, and eventually he just lay there on the couch, listening to the rain.

After a while, he realized he would probably fall asleep right here if he didn't get up immediately. It was tempting, reminding him of the nights he'd spent in Snape's rooms.

He doubted he'd feel all that refreshed in the morning if he spent the night here. Besides, Snape would go to his own bedroom for the night. Sleeping all alone with only the few portraits as his company didn't sound inviting.

"I'm going to bed." Clambering to his feet, Harry collected his books. He cast a careful look at Snape. "Good night."

The reply was quiet. "Good night, Potter." Snape's voice was calm, toneless.

Harry wished Malfoy was up in his room. Wished he'd insisted on finishing the conversation he and Snape had started at the river instead of hiding from it.
He wanted to talk to Snape and yet at the same time, he had no idea of what to say to him. Maybe all his thoughts would come out as an incoherent ramble. Of course Snape probably wouldn't mind. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done something like that.

This time, Harry would mind. He didn't want to just babble about things without thinking about them first.

It seemed he was forced to have some time to think about things. Snape was sitting there, his long nose buried into the book he was reading. As if he was hiding from Harry. Showing him he was definitely not going to have any kind of a conversation with him tonight.

Feeling a bit annoyed about leaving Malfoy and Snape in the living room, Harry walked across the hallway and then went upstairs.

Ron was already asleep as he got to their room. He walked around softly, even though he knew from experience nothing short of a minor earthquake would wake his friend up. Placing his books on the table, he started removing his clothes. He even managed not to throw them on the floor, unlike Ron.

Harry pulled the covers to the side. He stared at the sheets for a moment, and then sighed. Apparently Eppy didn't change bedsheets either. And they were getting a bit rancid.

At least there was no one in the corridor as he sneaked out of his room. The last thing he needed was to bump into Malfoy.

The whole trip to the linen closet and then back to his room went without incident. Harry worked quickly, not really bothering to get the corners straight. The sheets would be rumpled in a couple of minutes anyway. He remembered to close the shutters -- since Ron so obviously hadn't -- and got ready for bed.

The sheets were wonderfully clean. They even smelled clean and not like something that had been on a shelf in a small dusty closet for months, like they had probably been.

Harry buried his face in his pillow, inhaling the scent. He liked it. Clean sheets against his clean skin.

On the other side of the room, Ron was snoring slightly. Harry didn't even have to look at him to know that he was lying on his back, his left leg bent into a weird angle. Ron always slept like that when he snored.

It was one of the things Harry just knew. Something seven years of living together had burned into his mind. Unlike real schoolwork, this was something he never had to think about. Never had to question, or struggle to remember. It was constant.

Not many things in his life were. Those with a clear pattern were usually ones that induced nightmares. Hot summer nights spent staring at the ceiling that was covered with spider webs and small cracks that would send a rain of sawdust falling on his face in the morning, if by some chance Dudley would be up before he was. Weekly predictions of doom that always seemed only a little ludicrous when professor Trelawney said them in the well lit but smokey chambers of hers, and worrying in the middle of the night, when Harry was once again thinking about the monster who had killed his parents. Losing everyone who was dear to him.

There were good things too. He couldn't deny it. Hermione's mind, that seemed always as sharp. The friendship that had grown between him and Ron. The love Sirius was never embarrassed about showing to him. All constant things. Things that he never took for granted, even when he knew that maybe he should. Maybe he should stop worrying about it all ending some day.
Ron rolled over to his side, his face squashed against the pillow, and the snoring ended.

The silence made Harry feel slightly uncomfortable. As if there should be other sounds echoing in the room. Deep breathing. Neville talking in sleep. Floorboards creaking as Seamus padded to get a glass of water.

That was what his world had been about. Not exactly a constant thing. Yuletide and summer were different, with him alone in the dormitory or back at Privet Drive. Then there were the short periods of bliss when he was surrounded by creaking old walls and the sound of the ghoul banging around in the attic was simply background noise he didn’t even register but would miss if it was gone.

Sensations had always been meaningful to Harry, before he’d found people he could trust. Even now, with friends and something resembling a real family unlike his blood relatives who were a bad joke, he relied in familiar scents and sounds.

Home was not the cold house with a very convenient cupboard under the stairs. Home was the dark silhouette of the old castle painting against the blue sky. It was the sound of people coming and going, the scent of sulfur and chocolate and herbs.

Harry had known that from the beginning. From the first weeks he'd lived in Hogwarts.

His family had nothing to do with blood relatives. Family members shared the dormitory with him. Family was a group of redheads, who seemed to care about him for himself and not because he was supposed to be a hero. It was the strong wiry arms coming around him, the earthy scent of Sirius' hair surrounding him.

It was family and it was love. The kind of love that everyone needed to survive. There was other kind of love as well. The sweet innocent infatuation he'd known when he'd been younger. Hot pulsating desire that could fill his whole being. Lust when seeing the curve of a breast or strong muscles. Or like Ron said, seeing a nice round arse.

Wonderful emotions and sensations, but ones he wouldn't crave too much even when he had to live without. Unlike with the feeling of family.

He missed it. Missed Hogwarts, even with all the pressure he'd felt being surrounded by his classmates and the Order of the Phoenix. Missed Sirius and Hermione. But it was a dull ache, something he could deal with. After all, Ron was here with him; the first person in the whole wide world who'd ever called him a friend.

And Snape was here as well. Not exactly as a reminder of Hogwarts, of home, not acting in Sirius’ place as a surrogate parent. Harry smiled a little. Snape was more a friend than anything, no matter how disgusted he'd be of the use of such a word.

There was that weird feeling in his belly again; the one that had fluttered there back in Hogwarts when he'd watched Snape stagger from the shower all exhausted. That had only intensified ever since, almost exploding into heat as he'd stood at the river bank earlier today.

Punching his pillow, Harry rolled over. He didn't want to spend the night thinking about crazy things, like naked Snape. Definitely not naked Snape. He'd already wasted so many evenings contemplating the man. He did know he was a human by now; not a monster, and not just a teacher.

There was no reason to wallow in that anymore. He knew himself, and knew that in no time he'd start to worry about things and then brood on them. Snape was one of the good things in his life. Nothing to brood about.
Harry squeezed his eyes shut, trying to empty his head of all weird thoughts.

Still, as he drifted off to sleep, his mind was filled with images of droplets of water running down pale skin

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**Part 6**

Harry felt like crap the next morning.

He'd slept poorly, dreaming about things that made him jolt awake in the middle of the night. He had no memory of what he'd dreamed of, but he was willing to bet that they'd been nightmares. Why else would his heart race when he sat up, the sheets twisted around his legs?

It had taken him some time to fall asleep again, and even then he hadn't slept well.

Casting annoyed looks at Ron, he stomped downstairs. Sometimes he really couldn't handle cheery people this early in the morning.

Eppy served them breakfast, looking as grouchy as always. She muttered to herself as she left them to eat, banging the empty tray against the door as she wobbled to the kitchen. The usual sight made Harry feel an odd kinship to the old house elf. At least she wasn't overly eager to work and be happy about it.

He ate in silence, not paying attention to the others. Ron was way too perky. He didn't care about Malfoy. And Snape... Somehow he felt uncomfortable under the dark gaze, so he kept his gaze on his cup, mumbling monosyllables every time Ron asked him something.

It was probably the most awkward meal they'd shared.

The sun was making its way high in the sky by the time Harry walked out to use the outhouse. It was a relief to get out, to leave the tension behind.

He spent a few minutes staring at the stream, his gaze going to the exact spot they had bathed in yesterday. There was something about that memory nagging at his mind. Probably the terror he'd felt when he'd spun around and thought he was going to see Death Eaters barging at them. He was certain it had been that terror that had haunted his dreams as well.

Shivering with cold, he finally went to take care of more pressing business.

After he finished, he stood there, tucking himself in. Returning back to the cottage felt somehow impossible. There were chores to do and things to study, but he simply couldn't go there yet.

Harry slammed the wooden lid down and then sat down on the seat.

This was ridiculous. He had no idea why he was feeling so annoyed all of a sudden. No, it wasn't simple annoyance. Frustration, the need to do something. Still, he sat here, not wanting to actually do anything about that restless feeling right now.

The Potions exam was probably the biggest reason for his odd feeling of unease. He wished they'd just get on with it. Spending a lot of time in the dungeons reading had to be enough. He wasn't a complete idiot. If he concentrated and tried not to ramble in his answers, he could pass the test.

Snape would probably make it really difficult and ask about some weird footnote on page four hundred on the most boring textbook. It was just like the man. In class, he was absolutely ruthless.
Outside of it he was... Occasionally naked.

Harry groaned at the thought. He was wrong. Maybe he was a complete idiot. Sitting here in the smelly loo and thinking about Potions and nasty Potions masters. Yes. He was an idiot. A moron. A cretinous half-wit.

He would have to ask Snape for more useful terms to label himself with.

"Hey did you die in there?" Ron banged the side of the outhouse. He'd waited for Harry inside, but when he hadn't come back in ten minutes, he'd started to worry.

Of course the fact that Malfoy was bustling around the living room was making him irritated. Since Snape was there supervising his attempts to clean the windows, Ron had decided to just leave instead of making a few nasty but accurate comments about the bastard.

Harry jumped at the sound and then sighed. He should have known he couldn't have privacy anywhere. "No. Just a moment." He didn't want Ron to know he'd just been sitting there, thinking. He'd probably think he was insane. Hiding in a loo.

"Sure." Ron kicked the moss on the ground, trying not to seem too annoyed. "No hurry."

He'd felt so great this morning. There had been no dreams, so he'd woken up refreshed. He'd refused to think about Malfoy, happy to see that Snape wasn't forcing them to work together.

Everything was going to be all right.

"So. What are we supposed to do today?" Stepping out of the outhouse as if nothing special was going on, Harry looked at his friend. He was ready to start working. At least it would take his mind off everything else.

Ron shrugged. "Take out the rugs. There's supposed to be some clothes lines between the trees over there." He made a wide arch with his arm, ending up pointing at the small grove.

"Is that for just the two of us, or..." Seeing the answer in Ron's eyes, Harry smiled a little too. At least he didn't have to listen to the constant griping and bickering. He didn't mind Malfoy growing back his backbone, but he didn't want to listen to him and Ron fight. "And the others are doing something else?"

"Yeah. Malfoy's cleaning windows and Snape's doing something about the loo." Ron was actually not all that unhappy about the way things had turned out. There was no way he could have made any kind of a potion that would take care of all the problems an outhouse caused. With him, it would have probably meant a shovel and a scented rag over his nose.

For once, he was not griping about Snape and his potions.

Harry nodded. "Okay, so we just take out the rugs?" That sounded a bit odd, considering all the work Malfoy was doing.

"Of course not. You think Snape would ever actually give someone a break?" Ron was certain that would be the day when pigs would fly and professor McGonagall danced on the Head Table. With the Headmaster. Wearing pink dress robes.

The mental image was rather sickening.

Deciding against repeating that their dreaded professor was really not all that bad -- certain it
wouldn't have any effect this time either -- Harry just shrugged. "Okay. So what do we do?"

"Well, after dusting the rugs, we'll make lunch, since apparently Eppy has other things to do." It had sounded like a very lame excuse, but Ron wasn't sure what it could be hiding. After all, Snape wasn't likely to force a house elf to have a day off. Not even one as old as Eppy. "Then clean our room and make dinner."

"Doesn't sound too bad." It could have been worse. Much worse.

Ron grunted. It wasn't as bad as he'd expected, but then again, Snape was a bastard. He'd probably have them scrub the floor with their toothbrushes tomorrow or something as pleasant as that.

"You know, if we'll have to cook today, we can eat whatever we want to." Eppy didn't seem to be interested in little things like desserts. Harry had actually missed the dinners at the Great Hall. The thought had brought a smile to his face. "How about some baked chicken for dinner and then maybe something for dessert?"

That made Ron grin broadly. "Sure!" All thoughts about a certain nasty Potions master using them as a slave labor vanished from his head as he walked back to the cottage with his friend.

"Okay, let's get to work."

There were surprisingly many rugs in the cottage. Ron scurried upstairs to gather the ones up there. He didn't think he could handle with the small room near the doorway. Even if Snape weren't in there, he wouldn't want to go anywhere near that place. The whole thought gave him the creeps.

Harry worked silently, trying to stay out of Malfoy's way while rolling up the huge living room rug. He watched the way one muttered word made a small film of soapy water cover the window before Malfoy raised the rag he was holding, wondering if it was really that simple. He'd washed windows back at Dursleys' and it had been hard work, carrying bails of water around and wiping all the suds off, polishing the glass until it shone.

Considering the look on Malfoy's face, this wasn't exactly easy either. Still, he never complained.

Finishing with the striped green and pale yellow rug in the hallway, Harry straightened himself and then looked at Snape's door. He was feeling strange. Nervous. As if going in there was somehow difficult.

He stood there for a moment, wondering why he was suddenly skittish about Snape. After all, they hadn't spoken about what had happened at the river after coming back to the cottage. He doubted they'd talk about it now. Snape wasn't the kind of man who'd want to talk about his past or Voldemort. It was actually a wonder he'd said as much as he had.

Harry hated the feeling of unease. This whole thing felt stupid -- no, he felt stupid. Following Snape to the riverside had been important to him. It didn't matter that the man was probably more than capable of taking care of himself, he simply didn't want to risk anything. It had been a logical decision to go with him.

Ogling at him while he bathed, well that had been foolish.

Seeing him without clothes wasn't the point. Harry wasn't sure what was. It couldn't be the fact he'd helped Snape with the potion, couldn't be the companionable silence they'd shared on their way back. Something was making him feel weird.

Pushing the uncomfortable feeling away, he knocked on Snape's door. "It's me. I'm here to take your
rug out." The words made him grimace a little. Of course Snape already knew that.

"Come on in, Potter."

Harry walked in, looking a little sheepish. "Hi." He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this nervous around someone. Even his teenage crush to Cho hadn't really made him act this foolishly.

"Watch out for the books, they're rare." Gesturing with his hands at the heavy volumes piled on the floor, Snape nodded at Harry. "Try not to break anything."

The words made Harry smile. As if he hadn't heard that before. "I've never broken anything in your rooms yet, Snape." Seeing the challenging look, he amended, "Well, you know. The Potions classroom doesn't count."

"I'm glad to hear about your upmost respect towards Hogwarts property, Potter."

Since Harry was pretty sure he couldn't really say anything about that, he just snorted and then went to roll up the rug. He did make a show of moving the books out of way one at the time, careful not to even jostle the thin layer of dust from the one on top of the pile.

He didn't exactly hurry out of the room, but didn't feel the urge to linger either.

The morning passed quickly as he and Ron dusted the rugs. It wasn't hard to guess of whom Ron was thinking while he used the carpet beater on the rug. It was better than hitting the blond Slytherin, so Harry didn't say anything.

It was actually fun to dust the rugs. There weren't so many of them to make it feel like a real job. Also, the vigorous work out seemed to be just the thing they needed. Harry was definitely feeling better as they walked back to the cottage.

Preparing the lunch wasn't a big ordeal. Eppy kept the storage area clean and well stocked, probably using some house elf magic. There were plenty of things to choose from. Ron seemed to be in gastronomical heaven, making plans for the dinner already.

He kept babbling about it when they made simple sandwiches for lunch. Elaborated as they cleaned their room. Painted pictures of mounds of hot and greasy food as they brought the rugs back in. By the time they actually got to make dinner, Harry was ready to hex his friend.

Mostly because of the excessive plans would inevitably fall to him to fulfill.

Ron was a surprisingly bad cook. He didn't seem to have any idea on the basics of cooking. The thick sandwiches they'd made earlier were probably the extent of his skills.

It didn't really matter. As Harry went to work on the chicken, Ron chopped onions and carrots. He was pretty good at boiling water as well as carrying a heavy sack full of potatoes around the kitchen.

For a brief moment Harry could sympathize Snape. It wasn't easy to suffer people who had no idea what they were supposed to do.

He could understand Ron's ineptitude, though. His mother was an excellent cook, but since she had seven children to tend to, it was no wonder she didn't have time to teach them all how to cook as well. Harry couldn't really imagine Ron being enthusiastic about spending time in the kitchen and learning either. He'd probably spent all his childhood running around with his brothers, dreaming of Quidditch.
Smiling crookedly, Harry went on grinding the spices.

The dinner was served a bit late that day, but it was worth the wait. Eppy was nowhere to be seen, probably resenting their invasion on her domain. It was probably a good thing, since everyone dug in with enthusiasm. She would have been even grumpier after seeing that.

Harry smiled at the thought, wondering if Dobby knew Eppy. If not, he'd have to introduce those two to each other.

Having finished with the windows a few hours earlier, Draco had spent the rest of the day assisting Snape with his potion. He was exhausted as he sat at the dinner table, keeping his gaze on the food.

This was definitely not the kind of life he wanted. Remembering all the boring old tales professor Binns had told them, he wondered if this was supposed to teach him about the values of honest work. If so, it was a waste of time.

Not paying any attention to the people around him, he kept shoveling food into his mouth, barely tasting anything. He was definitely not going to spend the evening reading. As soon as he finished eating, he'd drag himself upstairs and try to collapse in bed. If he missed, he was sure the floor would be a comfortable place to sleep in.

Harry kept his eyes on Malfoy, looking for any signs of the old arrogance. He didn't really know what to think about him. The burning hatred had evaporated some time ago. After facing Voldemort and his Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy had just seemed to be a pathetic jerk, who was happily strolling towards his own doom.

That was no longer an option for him. Harry wondered if there'd be some kind of a change in Malfoy. If he'd become a real person instead of being a cliched bully.

Remembering how much fun he'd seemed to have all the time he'd humiliated and insulted others, he rather doubted Malfoy would ever be a person he'd like. But he would have to live with him.

That would be all right. He'd lived with worse.

It didn't look like he was going to go back to his old ways. At least not now. Malfoy seemed completely happy eating, not even making offensive comments about the chicken.

Harry cleared off the larger dishes when everyone seemed to be almost finished with their food. Then he brought back the tray they'd laden with delicacies found at the back of the cupboard. Placing it down on a table, he couldn't resist grinning at Ron. This was indeed a good deal, and if every dinner could end like this, he'd be willing to spend more time working in the kitchen.

The small tray full of desserts made Snape raise an eyebrow. Eppy had never served them sweets with meals, so now that the two Gryffindors had had the kitchen for themselves, he wasn't at all surprised they'd indulged in every sort of craving a growing boy might have. There were some of those foolishly named sweets people always seemed to spend their money on in that ghastly shop in Hogsmeade. A chunk of good old chocolate. And even a small bowl of...

Snape couldn't resist it. Grabbing the bowl, he offered, "Sherbet Lemon?" the sneer audible in his voice.

"Gwaaaah?" Trying to squeal out the question, Ron dropped his fork and promptly started choking on the last piece of bread he'd stuffed into his mouth. It took some serious heaving until he cleared his airways.
"Well, thank you Snape. Awfully kind of you." Harry smiled sweetly as he accepted the bowl. "How about you Malfoy? Care for some?"

Draco was having some problems with breathing as well. Shaking his head vigorously, he reached out for a glass of water, his hand trembling slightly. He was determined not to splutter like Weasley.

Placing the bowl back on the table, Harry couldn't help looking at Snape. The flash of an evil grin on his face brought one on Harry's as well. Sometimes it was fun to shake people's convictions.

For the first time since the previous day, Harry felt the tension slip completely away.

The sweets disappeared quite quickly from the tray. All three teenagers looked happy as they munched various delicacies. Snape ate a bit of chocolate as he sipped his tea, not entirely pleased with the combined taste.

A true wizard, he had still missed the soothing taste of chocolate, always connecting it with healing.

Funny how he'd never thought about it before, but in all the years he'd spent with the Death Eaters, he'd never seen anyone eat chocolate there. They had indulged in every vice from drinking to illegal substances, but that simple pleasure had been missing.

He didn't have to think of a reason. It was quite obvious to him why none of them had wanted to think about Hogwarts or home or healing while serving the Dark Lord.

The thought lingered as he finished his tea and then walked back to the living room. Staying here was almost lulling them all into a false feeling of security. None of the threats of the real world had followed them here. Even he had pushed the memories of the masked figures to the back of his mind, not wishing to think about them now.

Ignorance could mean death to him. To all of them.

It was good that Harry had asked him to tutor them, this way he could do something useful. But after his students passed the exam -- and what a surprise it was to realize that they were all moderately well read -- they should start preparing for the reality waiting for them back at Hogwarts.

This was no real vacation, no matter how nice it had been to pretend for a while that it was.

Ignoring the clatter coming from the kitchen, and the tight expression on Malfoy as he came to sit by the fire, Snape wondered if they could ever actually sit and talk about the war. He knew Harry was able to think about their situation with a clear mind, aware of the cold facts of life.

With Malfoy and Weasley, it would be different. He doubted Weasley could let go of his anger. All of the redheaded Gryffindors had been stubborn, but this one seemed to take the trait to extremes. Not that he really blamed him. Young Malfoy could be a real bastard if he wanted to. Just like his father.

There lay the problem with Malfoy. He could be anything he wanted, but would he want to choose the hard way and start acting like a real human being or would he simply fall back into arrogance? Not that there was anything wrong with a healthy amount of arrogance, but like with Weasley and his stubbornness, sometimes there seemed to be no end to Malfoy's ego.

It would definitely be a problem. Instead of holding relatively quiet and reasonable meetings like the ones they'd had in Hogwarts, there would probably be shouting matches and signs of petty jealousies here.
Not something he was looking forward to.

Having finished with the dishes, Ron and Harry walked out of the kitchen, both looking exhausted. Harry curled on the other couch immediately, while Ron cast a suspicious look on Malfoy. He'd never seen him sit on the floor before, and wondered if he was up to something.

Trying to act as if he didn't notice the cold stare, Draco kept staring at the flames.

Snape's gaze was sharp as he watched the two boys. It was easy to understand the enmity between them. After all, it had been somewhat similar between him and certain Gryffindors when he'd been a teenager himself. He doubted things would have gone like this if he hadn't joined the Dark Lord, though. Fighting on the same side might have changed things between him and Black and Potter.

It would have taken a small miracle, but he was sure they would have survived working together, even if most teenagers were incompetent idiots who allowed their hormones control their behavior.

He glanced at Harry. How amusing that the one person he'd always considered as the most irresponsible of them all would actually be more mature than others his age. He could remember the things young Malfoy had done to him. If anyone had the reason to be mad at him, it was Harry. But he didn't hold a grudge.

Probably because he had more dangerous enemies than Draco Malfoy.

Weasley was not like that. He seemed to seethe with anger every time he saw Malfoy. Made angry comments even when not provoked. That could be a problem.

Snape was definitely not going to watch the rage simmer just below the surface for long. If these boys were both Slytherins, he'd order them to work things out. They wouldn't like it, but they would obey him no matter how much they hated each other. Weasley wouldn't obey his orders. Things would just get worse.

"I think you'd better spend Sunday reading. You'll need it, all of you." He knew how good Malfoy was in Potions, but even he could study more. "So we finish the cleaning tomorrow."

"Thank Merlin!"

Astonishingly, it was Malfoy muttering that out loud. Harry smiled a little and nodded. For once he completely agreed with him.

Ron felt the relief himself but didn't allow himself to nod. There was no way he would ever admit he shared a feeling with Malfoy.

Pretending not to hear the sigh, Snape went on, "So tomorrow, Potter, you'll sweep the floors. You should be familiar with the broom by now." Self control prevented his face from revealing actual amusement as he could see from the glint in the green eyes that Harry thought his comment was hilarious. "Mr. Weasley and Mr. Malfoy. You'll do the laundry."

The silence that followed his words was shocked.

Snape simply stared at the two horrified boys. No, he wasn't going to order them to work things out, but he was going to force them to work together. They might get into a fistfight or two, but eventually, they would have to deal with their anger.

"Sir! We... Him..." Ron was getting really tired of not being able to finish a sentence. He stared at Snape. No, he was not joking. He really wanted him and Malfoy do the laundry. Together.
Gritting his teeth, he glanced at Malfoy, feeling the familiar irritation as he saw the blond nod. Of course he would nod. That stupid arse-kisser would never question Snape.

"Mr. Malfoy has probably never done laundry." It was definitely not a question. Snape knew for a fact that Lucius' precious boy had been shielded from this side of life. "I'm certain you will show him how to do it, Mr. Weasley."

He could feel the tension grow in the room.

It was so much like back in the Potions class, he couldn't help a malevolent smirk. Those two would probably try to kill each other when they were out of sight. He wasn't really worried. Young Malfoy knew better than to really harm Weasley.

Ron was almost shaking with anger. Did Snape really think he could handle spending the day at the riverside with Malfoy? He'd probably drown him before lunch time.

He didn't want to say anything, certain he couldn't get past the splutters before Snape made a comment about Gryffindor intelligence. Nothing he could think of would change his mind. Snape was like that. Always predictable in his sadism.

"Remember to keep constant vigilance while you're out there." Sometimes even old crackpots like Moody got things right.

Harry cast a worried look at Ron. He didn't think he'd be able to pay attention to his surroundings while he was out there with Malfoy. The two of them would be too busy bickering.

He tried very hard not to think about the fact that he was going to spend the whole day alone with Snape in the cottage. It was making him feel weird, as if he should say something to make things better. He had no idea what that would be.

"It will be a busy day tomorrow. I suggest you all go to bed." From Snape, the suggestion sounded more like a command.

"Yes, sir." Malfoy rose to his feet immediately. He padded across the hall to the door and slipped out, heading for the outhouse.

Ron was grumbling silently, but didn't actually let out any words. It would be futile to complain anyway. His opinions never seemed to matter. If he protested about the plans for tomorrow, Snape would probably just think of more chores he could do together with Malfoy.

"Okay." Stretching a bit before getting up, Harry added, "Good night, Snape. Come on, Ron. Let's go upstairs." It was best to go before Malfoy returned.

Still grumbling a bit, Ron ignored Snape's nod and quiet 'good night Potter', and followed Harry. He wondered what made Harry be so damn polite to the professor all the time. He wasn't as bad as Malfoy who was obeying the man's every word, never talking back to him but it was starting to annoy him anyway.

Something nagged at the back of his mind, but he couldn't really put it into coherent thoughts. Probably just the tingling feeling running down his spine, warning him not to turn his back on the Slytherins.

He hated it. Absolutely hated being thrown together with Malfoy, hated having to do whatever Snape told him to do.
Mind filled with annoyance, Ron watched Harry walk into their room. Instead of following him, he stood still, waiting for Malfoy. He had something to say to him and it couldn't wait till tomorrow.

Soft footsteps echoed in the staircase and then Malfoy stepped to the hallway. He didn't look at all surprised to see Ron waiting. "Weasley."

Even the name sounded like an insult. "Shut up, Malfoy, and listen." Ron wanted to make something absolutely clear. "You're not going to spend tomorrow ordering me around. Or napping while I work. I don't care if you've never done laundry before. Try to make me do all the nasty work and I'll drown you. Get it?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Of course." He bit back the nasty comment coming to his mind, but didn't moderate his tone. Snape was right. Acting like some repentant soul of darkness wouldn't change anything.

It suddenly hit him that Snape did actually speak out of experience. He'd done things he could only have nightmares of and everybody knew that. Still, he didn't crawl in front of anyone. Most people in the wizarding world probably loathed him anyway, but at least he had some self respect left.

"Well, just make sure you remember it tomorrow!" Ron couldn't help saying that.

Something inside Draco snapped. He raised his gaze to Weasley's eyes, knowing well that he was expected to scurry away. He was not going to listen to this anymore. "You don't have to repeat things to me like I'm one of your housemates, Weasley. I'm neither deaf or dumb." Hearing the venom in his voice made him feel good.

Ron's eyes widened in shock. It had been weeks since he last heard Malfoy actually talk back to him like that. "Shut the hell up, Malfoy," he growled.

"I don't think so. If you want to act like an ass, go ahead. Just don't expect me to listen to your piss poor insults."

It was so familiar; the sneer in Malfoy's voice, the superior attitude. He'd always been like that, saying that he was so much better than anyone else because of his money and his father, making fun of him and his friends. Sucking up to Snape. Ron was sick of it. "Fuck off, Malfoy." He couldn't help it. His hand squeezed into a fist and he stepped closer to Malfoy.

This time, Draco didn't walk away. Staring at Ron, he stated coolly, "Don't push me, Weasley."

"Don't tell me what I can do!" Life would be so much easier if Malfoy just didn't exist. There was something in him that made Ron's blood boil. He hated the sensation, knowing he was losing control every time he thought about the git. There was just something in Malfoy that made him see red.

He moved even closer.

Draco stared at him flatly. He'd had enough of being Ron Weasley's punching bag. No amount of self hatred and guilt would make him run away, or stand here and take the blow. "Don't. You hit me and I..."

"You what?" Contempt clear in his voice, Ron taunted, "You go and tell Snape that the big bad Gryffindor is harassing poor innocent you?"

"No. The next time you hit me, I will hit you back." It was said softly, but the words were still menacing.
Ron froze. There had been no anger in Malfoy's voice. It had been calm, stating a fact.

The air was full of unleashed violence. All the anger both of them had inside was going to explode in pain and blood any second now.

Downstairs, a door was banged closed. The loud sound seemed to jolt Draco out of the haze. He snorted and then turned around and walked to his room. It didn't look as if he was running away. He was deliberately turning his back on Ron as if to show he wasn't afraid.

Ron stood there for a moment. He wanted to scream, but was certain that wouldn't be a good idea. He wouldn't show his frustration to anyone, especially Malfoy.

Still almost shaking with rage, he tried to calm his breath. It took him a few moments to feel like facing anyone. With a nasty glare at the stairs, he turned around and walked to the room he shared with Harry. If only Snape hadn't banged the door downstairs... He would have probably smashed his fist into Malfoy's face.

Even if it would have lead into a fight, he would have the satisfaction of seeing the sneer wiped off his face.

Harry was already sitting in bed under covers as Ron stepped to their room. He watched Ron walk to his bed, wondering what the angry voices coming from the hallway had meant.

"What was that all about?"

Pulling off his trousers, Ron said, "Nothing. Just Malfoy bugging the hell out of me." He tossed his socks on the floor. It wasn't as cold as usual, so he could sleep without them.

"Oh." Not that Harry was surprised. He'd thought the two of them would be arguing again, remembering what Snape had told Malfoy earlier.

"Yeah. I can't believe I have to spend tomorrow with the bastard."

"Try not to kill him, Ron." Harry was only half joking. He knew how much his friend hated Malfoy. "I bet he's trying not to be a complete bastard. He's not a bad guy. Not one of Voldemort's people. Just leave him alone, okay?"

It was sad how much the words hurt Ron. "Can you honestly say you don't hate him? That you don't want to get back to him about all the things he did to you?"

Harry thought for a moment, remembering everything Malfoy had done to him during the years. The baiting, the mocking. Scaring him half to death by dressing up as a Dementor. Causing Gryffindor to almost lose the House Cup the previous year with his lies.

That was all in the past. There were worse things in life than petty insults. At least Malfoy had never tried to kill him, unlike his father and his goons. Malfoy had walked away from something he'd probably seen as the fulfillment of his whole life. That took guts.

"Yes." Feeling sorry for Ron, Harry nodded. "I can say that. He's annoying and childish at times, but he's not a Death Eater. I can't waste my time hating idiots, you know. I have enough problems with Voldemort and his people."

Ron tensed. He couldn't believe this. Seeing Harry talk to Snape as if the professor was just... just a guy was bad enough. This was so much worse. He was almost starting to sound like him.
"I can't hate him anymore, not after all that's happened." Harry knew that Malfoy would probably prefer him hating him than the twinge of pity he felt. "But I'm not saying you can't. Go ahead and do, if it makes you feel better."

"It does!" It was just a growl.

Harry doubted that, but didn't say anything. He just nodded. "All right. I still mean it, Ron. Try not to kill him." A small smile appeared to his lips. "If you do, then you'll have to do all the laundering by yourself."

"Yeah. Will have to wait till we finish with the laundry." Muttering to himself, Ron lay down. He didn't want to fight with Harry. He'd much rather fight with someone he hated. One blond haired pest came to mind immediately.

A soft chuckle echoed in the room. "Good idea. Night, Ron." With a mumbled 'nox' the room became a playground of shadows, the only light coming from the almost full moon shining through the window.

"Night, Harry."

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Part 7

Hanging the sheets and robes to dry was definitely more difficult than washing windows.

Holding a couple of clothespins in his mouth, Draco fought to get one of the sheets straight on the line before pinning it in place. It was the last one. The other sheets were already swaying in the gentle wind.

At least it wasn't raining. That would have been annoying after all the work they'd done.

Draco had dreaded this day. After the scene in the hallway last evening, he'd been sure either he or Weasley would end up hurt or dead. And to be honest, there had been moments when drowning Weasley had sounded like a perfect solution to all his problems.

They had managed to work together. Probably because of the ten steps of distance they'd kept constantly. Or the fact that they hadn't said a word to each other.

He'd noticed all the glares, but had chosen to ignore them. It actually made him proud of himself and his self-control.

It had been a long day. After breakfast, Snape had instructed them on the various ways wizards could use magic to help them do the laundry. They had chosen to use the stream. Draco wasn't completely convinced there wasn't a charm to clean clothes more thoroughly than the ones they had used, but he knew better than to question his professor. So he had followed Ron, carrying armloads of dirty clothes, and then spent hours at the riverside.

Using the simple charms to warm the water and make it swirl hadn't been enough. They'd had to actually stir the clothes and then pour several potions into the stream. Hard work.

Draco was sure even Muggles didn't do it like this anymore. They probably had some kinds of machines to do the heavy work.

He really missed the house elves from Hogwarts. All he had to do was to put the clothes into a basket. The next time he saw them, they were neatly folded into his closet. No scrubbing, no
sweating. Just nice clean robes.

There was an unbelievable amount of laundry. Sheets. Robes. Socks. Shirts. Strangely similar underwear. Apparently they all shopped at Malkin's. He'd thought it'd take a couple of hours to finish with their task. He'd been wrong. It was almost dinner time, and they were still at it.

While Snape was making dinner and Potter was washing the floors.

Life was so unfair.

Finishing with the sheets, Draco grabbed a robe and started to hang it. It wasn't as easy as hanging the sheets had been. The robes weren't symmetrical, and at least one part seemed to be hanging to the ground no matter how he turned them. He worked on the robe patiently, even though all he wanted was to turn his wand on it and yell, 'incendio'. Since it was his best robe, he decided against such stupidity.

He managed to hang the robe to his satisfaction and then went to get more clothespins from the small bag. He glared at Weasley while crouching there. It was obvious the redhead had done this before.

Draco was glad to see there were only a few robes and T-shirts left. When this ordeal was over, he never wanted to see wet laundry again, even if it meant walking around in dirty clothes. Someone else could handle this work the next time.

"Watch it, Malfoy!"

The growl came so suddenly, Draco spun around, one hand squeezing the wet shirt he was holding, the other reaching for his wand.

Ron was glaring at him from the other end of the clothesline. "Be careful with that shirt." He swallowed the rest of the sentence, knowing that the bastard would just make fun of him and his family if he told him how important the garment was to him.

It didn't really matter what Malfoy thought. His dad had bought him that shirt for his birthday last year, and maybe it was a bit too small to him now, but he still loved it. Not everyone had a real Chudley Cannons T-shirt that was licensed by the team. A must have thing for all true fans.

Malfoy couldn't appreciate such things. It was obvious from the way he was squeezing the shirt in his hand, not even realizing that the hem was trailing on the ground, getting dirty.

"Just give me the shirt and everything's all right again." Since Harry had asked him to -- asked nicely, cajoled and finally begged him -- he could behave. So he didn't even call Malfoy names. But he wanted to hang the shirt himself.

Draco lowered his gaze to the shirt he was holding. The orange cloth with the black cannon ball and the double Cs embroidered there made it quite obvious why Weasley would hold the thing dear. "Fine." He didn't care.

"Good. Now give it to me." Holding his hand out, Ron stared at Malfoy.

It was a stupid thing. Both had work to do before they could go back inside and spend the rest of the evening either reading or panicking. Arguing over who got to hang out a damn shirt would be stupid. Still, Draco didn't really want to give in that easily. He wasn't going to let Weasley order him around anymore.

He wasn't a complete idiot either. "Whatever." He tossed the shirt at Weasley, not wanting to argue
about something as stupid as that. There would undoubtedly be other things to argue about.

Ron barely managed to grab the shirt. He glared at Malfoy again, just knowing he'd thrown it like that on purpose. "Damn sneaky snake loving..." Using most of his colorful vocabulary that would make his mother threaten to wash his mouth with Bubotuber pus, he threw the shirt at the line, missing it.

Cursing, he went to pick the wet garment from the bush, hoping he wouldn't have to wash it again. It would be just his luck to have mud on the shirt now.

He should have known something like this would happen. Malfoy had been quiet all morning. Too quiet.

Laundering hadn't been as bad as he'd feared. At least he'd been able to work in peace. Everything had been going on so well before he'd noticed Malfoy holding his shirt.

It was a small thing, but somehow it seemed too much. He had heard the taunts about his family's poverty for years now. Suffered through hours of innuendo about his friendship with the 'Boy Who Lived' and the very clever plan he must have to climb up the ladder of success. Kept his mouth shut as Slytherins tittered about his looks or commented the freckles and the red hair.

He wasn't going to punch Malfoy. Or even scream at him. But he was definitely going to deal with his own laundry.

Something was stirring in the bush. Still too busy calling Malfoy names, Ron ignored the movement, scooping up the shirt and shaking it. Stupid Snape forcing him to work with Malfoy. Of course the professor couldn't see anything wrong with his Slytherin. Always pampering him, boosting his overblown ego.

There was something on the shirt. Ron shook it again, disgusted by the cool wetness of it. He kicked the bush, needing to do something about his anger before he wrung someone's neck. That someone standing by the laundry basket with a suffering expression on his face.

"Stupid, lying, hateful... Ow!"

Ron looked down at his stinging left foot. His eyes widened as he saw the small form slither away from him and back into the bush. Blinking, he tried to understand what had just happened.

It was a damn snake. He'd just been bitten by a snake. Possibly a poisonous one.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost from him. Staring at the bushes, he let out a giggle. This was just too much. He'd survived almost seven years of being the best friend of the famous Harry Potter. Had been forced to face his worst fears in the form of giant spiders, lived through a Death Eater attack at the Burrow. And now, he was bitten by a damn snake, a slithering green snake that reminded him of the one embroidered into the small badge on every Slytherin's robe.

To think that just a couple of days earlier he'd thought things were getting boring and he wanted some excitement in his life.

Laughing so hard tears fell down his face, Ron held his stomach. He was getting dizzy with all the laughter but the whole thing was so silly! He needed to share the joke with someone who would understand.

That meant Harry.
Ron turned around, letting the shirt slip through his fingers. It didn't really matter if it got dirty again. He could wash it again later. Lurching from side to side, he headed back to the cottage. He had to find Harry right now. And maybe lie down too. His foot was hurting a lot more than it should after such a small bite.

Damn snakes. You couldn't trust them. Always haunting him and taunting him about things. Slimy and sneaky.

"Where do you think you're going, Weasley?"

The question jolted Ron out of his thoughts and he looked up to see Draco Malfoy standing in his way. He blinked at him owlishly. When had Malfoy turned so fuzzy? "Need to see Harry. Get out of my way, Malfoy." When the other boy just stared at him, he shoved at him hard and then went on towards the cottage.

Draco slumped against a tree, desperately flailing with his hands to get a hold on the trunk. The anger that flared in his mind was welcome. This was going too far. He was not going to let Ron Weasley walk over him again. Pushing himself up, he followed the Gryffindor.

Who hadn't got really far yet. Draco frowned as he saw the way the redhead swayed and staggered onwards. It almost looked like he was drunk. A cold feeling filled Draco's stomach. Had something happened? Was this a first sign of an attack on them?

"Wait up Weasley." Hurrying to Ron's side, Draco grabbed his arm. Something was wrong. Even through the pullover he could feel that Ron's skin was burning. "Let me help you to Potter."

A sweet smile appeared on Ron's face, his gaze unfocused. "Maybe you're not a complete bastard after all." His words came out slurred.

That was it! Draco realized he was delirious. He had to get Weasley to Snape at once.

"You know, this is really poetic. I mean, if there was justice, you'd be bitten by a lion in a minute or two." Ron couldn't keep the words inside. He allowed himself to be dragged towards the cottage, rambling on. "But there are no lions in Scotland, you know, if we really still are in Scotland. Not real ones or magical ones. But there are snakes. Yeah. And spiders. You know. I'm really glad they didn't choose the spider as the Gryffindor crest animal. Would have rather become a Hufflepuff than a Gryffindor then. Or even a Slytherin. Even though I don't really like snakes that much. They bite you and you die, you know?"

Draco swallowed hard. A snake had bit Weasley? "Can you tell me what kind of a snake it was? What color?" He tried to rack his brains, to figure out if there were any magical snakes living here. He had no idea. He couldn't remember anything about non-magical ones either.

"Blond. Almost white." Ron stared at the other boy. "Did you know your hair looks really funny up close? Is it like this naturally or do you dye it? I mean, we all know you're a natural blond, but that shade of white is just weird."

"Focus, Weasel! The snake. What color was the snake?" It was a good thing the cottage wasn't all that far, otherwise Draco would have been tempted to simply toss Weasley to the ground and let him die.

But Ron couldn't say anything. His face was reddening, his lips turning into an ominous shade of blue. The only sound coming from his throat was a faint gurgle.

"Oh, bugger!" Grabbing a better hold of Weasley, Draco hollered, "Help! Somebody help me!"
Professor Snape! He started walking faster, feeling the body next to him start to get heavier.

Ron was starting to lose consciousness. He was vaguely aware of someone screaming into his ear, calling out for the professor. Snape. That almost rhymed with snake. But he didn't want to be bitten by either one of them. Too late with the snake. The idea of the Potions professor biting him was hilarious, but he didn't really feel like laughing. He was tired. So damn tired.

It would be really nice to just fall down and get some sleep.

"Professor Snape! Professor Snape!" His voice getting shrilly, Draco tried to keep Weasley from collapsing. Since the Gryffindor was bigger than he was, it was a losing battle. "Help!"

Knowing from the sound of the call that it was urgent, Snape abandoned the half-set dinner table and rushed outside. Harry followed right behind him, holding his wand ready.

"What happened?" Snape reached the two boys just as Ron slumped on the grass completely boneless. He knelt down next to him immediately, his hand going to feel the pulse. Frowning, he looked up at Draco. "Did something bite him? A snake or an insect?"

Draco nodded. "Yes. He said something had bit him and then started babbling about things. Said our crest animal was going to kill him." He was out of breath after dragging Weasley all this way and then screaming for help.

"We have to get him inside immediately. Potter, grab his legs." Without even looking to see if Harry obeyed him, he grabbed Ron beneath his armpits and dragged him up. He couldn't risk levitating the boy now, not when he wasn't sure what had happened.

It was fortunate they were close to the cottage. Ron had grown tall these past two years and he wasn't exactly what one might call wiry. Harry was breathing hard as they reached their destination, his heart racing from both the exertion and fear. He could see from Snape's expression that this was serious.

"Put him down on the couch. Malfoy, go and get me a glass of water. Potter, stay with him." As soon as the boy was lying still, Snape hurried to his room.

Harry crouched next to his best friend, grabbing his hand. He could feel heat pulsating under the clammy skin, wondering about how weird it felt. Ron was shivering as if he was freezing cold, though he felt hot all over. "It's okay. Snape'll fix you." It was the only thing he could say to Ron.

"He's good with these things." Appearing behind the couch with a glass of water in his hand, Malfoy looked down at Ron. His expression was surprisingly blank. "The professor will know what to do with him."

"Yeah." That was a blessing. Harry knew Snape had brought lots of potions ingredients and vials with him. There had to be something that would cure Ron there.

Heavy footsteps heralded Snape's return. A moment later he walked to the room, carrying a small bag with him. "Did you bring the water?" Not wasting any time, he glanced at Malfoy. He saw the glass, and nodded. "Good." Taking a small vial from the bag, he dropped seven drops of pink liquid into the water and then motioned at Harry. "Get him to sit up, he needs to drink this immediately."

Harry levered Ron up. It wasn't easy. He felt like a limp puppet, his body completely relaxed.

"Come on, Weasley. Drink this." Knowing it was probable that the boy couldn't hear him, Snape raised the glass to Ron's lax lips. Some of the liquid ran down his chin, but he did manage to
swallow some.

"Is it going to cure him?" Fear evident in his voice, Harry looked up at Snape.

"Of course not. There is no such thing as an universal antidote to snake bites, Potter. You should know, we went through this last year in class." It only proved that Gryffindors slept through most of the Potions classes. "We need to find the animal who did this and get a sample of its venom before I can mix a potion that will cure Weasley here. I have given him something that should slow the effects of the venom."

Draco nodded. It was weird how everything Snape had taught them about venoms and poisonous animals had simply fled his head. "We were hanging the laundry. Near the small hill. To the left of the stream. Weasley was standing next to a couple of bushes when he started to act weird."

"Good. You stay here and keep an eye on Mr. Weasley. Try to find out where he was bitten."

That made Draco blink. How was he supposed to do that now that Weasley was lying almost unconscious? Surely Snape didn't mean he was supposed to strip him and go looking for fangmarks! He opened his mouth to protest, and then snapped it shut again when he saw the glare.

"Potter, you're with me." Snape put the glass on the small table. Seeing Harry was not obeying him, he repeated the command. "Potter. If you don't want to sit there and watch him die, you're coming with me. Now."

That made Harry flinch. With one last look at Ron, he followed Snape out.

The cottage seemed suddenly very quiet. Draco inched closer to Ron to hear his labored breaths. He hated not being able to do anything. It didn't matter it was Weasel who was lying there, dying; he hated the helplessness anyway. Steeling himself, he started pulling the redhead's clothes off. At least he could try to find out where the snake had bit him.

Harry was running after Snape, trying to catch him. "Wait up! Where are we going?" He wondered why Snape had told him to follow. That had left Ron alone with Malfoy. He couldn't really picture Malfoy taking care of anyone.

"It should be obvious. We need to get some of the snake's venom, and your friend doesn't have the time to wait for me to hunt the creature down." Casting a look over his shoulder, Snape was relieved to see comprehension dawn on Harry. The boy was good in tight situations, but wasn't always able to think clearly when his friends were in danger.

"You want me to talk to the snake." It wasn't a question, just a statement.

Snape had thought it was obvious. "Yes. Unless you want to spend an hour or so running after it." He didn't have to say that it would be too late for Weasley then.

Not bothering to even reply to that, Harry jogged towards the place Ron and Malfoy had been working at.

The baskets were still there, as if waiting for someone to come and pick them up. Black robes and white sheets were swinging on the clothes line. It all looked so homey it was hard to imagine that the place could actually be dangerous.

"Now what?" Harry looked around him, trying to figure out just exactly where Ron had been when the snake had bitten him. There was a shirt crumpled on the ground near some bushes. Malfoy had said something about bushes. And the shirt looked really familiar.
Gaze scanning their surroundings, Snape said, "Call out for the snake." He sounded a bit hesitant. "You can call for it without seeing it, can't you?"

Harry wasn't sure. He'd never really tried this before. There had always been something he could focus on. A picture or a statue. Or simply a live snake he could talk to. "I don't know." He'd try his best.

If it took parseltongue to save Ron's life, he'd hiss until his tongue bled.

Clearing his throat, he muttered, "Sssnake?" It sounded a bit silly to his own ears. He wasn't even certain if it had been in English or not. He never could tell the difference.

Nothing happened.

"Keep going!" Gesturing at Harry to go on, Snape stared at the bushes. He hoped this would work, that the snake was still around. He was definitely not going to lose a student. Not even someone as Gryffindor as Ron Weasley.

More hisses came out of Harry's mouth, sounding strangely pleading. Almost desperate. Somehow the pain and fear in those soft sounds were more aching than in any words he'd ever heard.

A rustling sound came from their left. Snape turned around, holding his breath as he saw a small green snake peek out from the bush.

The coloration of the snake wasn't at all familiar to him. It didn't seem magical, but somehow he wasn't certain it was something that should live around here either.

Seeing the snake seemed to trigger awareness in Harry. All hesitation left him as he focused his attention to the small snake who had probably found Ron's presence as a threat just moments ago.

Fascinated, Snape leaned a bit closer to hear better. He took in the half vacant look in Harry's eyes. The first time he'd heard Harry speak parseltongue, he'd been too stunned to actually appreciate the experience.

Strange, how graceful the hypnotic hissing was. There didn't seem to be any real words there, at least not ones Snape could identify. For a single moment, he wondered if it could be taught to someone. No one knew, really, for Salazar Slytherin had been secretive about his talent, as had every other parselmouth after him.

The snake swayed a little, focusing its small eyes on Snape. A forked tongue flickered out of its mouth as it tasted the air.

Harry hissed more words, his voice holding a warning note. His body language was screaming with tension. A moment later he relaxed as the snake swayed to focus its attention back to him.

It seemed to last for a long time; sibilant whispers pouring from Harry's lips, the snake hissing back. The odd swaying seemed to be a part of the speech, as the young man shifted his weight from one foot to another, his movement almost involuntary. Finally the snake stilled, coiling in the soft grass.

Almost as if waiting for something.

Snape raised an eyebrow as Harry left the snake and walked around the bush. "What are you doing?"

"The snake isn't going to just give us her venom." Explaining quietly Harry crouched down and took
a hold of a large rock that was leaning against a bundle of roots. "She wants me to move this thing so that she can get a better doorway to her nest. Then she'll give us the thing we want."

It made Snape roll his eyes. Snakes wanted quid pro quo? Salazar had indeed picked the right animal to represent his House.

After Harry had carried the rock to the side, he arranged some of the smaller ones to shade a small hole in the ground. The snake slithered closer to watch him work. She seemed to be satisfied with the results, her tongue once again tasting the air.

The delay almost made Snape fidget impatiently, only the fear of upsetting the snake curbing the twitching. They didn't have much time. He didn't know details about the snake's venom, but it was clearly lethal.

Weasley could be dying. From the tension on Harry, he knew that he knew it too. It was amazing how calm he could still act.

"Do you have a cup or something?" A bit winded from carrying the fairly large boulder, Harry turned to glance at Snape. "For the venom." He had no idea of how to get the snake to squirt venom out. Could snakes do that? He knew nothing about non magical snakes, even though he was fairly sure they'd had an assignment to write a paper on adders in school. In the Muggle school he had attended before Hogwarts, almost a lifetime ago.

Snape reached into one of the pockets inside his robe and produced a soft rubbery ball. "Tell her to bite this. It's quite safe for her." He handed the ball to Harry.

It wasn't easy to convince the snake to bite the weird looking thing. She spent long minutes staring at it, and then running her tongue over its surface. Finally satisfied it was safe, she sank her fangs into it. As she let go, she let out an offended hiss, making Harry apologize for the extremely uncomfortable sensation of biting something so untasty.

Still hissing, she slithered back to her nest.

"We should get back as quickly as possible." Snape shoved the ball back into his pocket.

Harry didn't argue with him. Hissing a hasty goodbye to the snake, he turned around and started jogging back to the cottage, Snape following right behind him.

Fear was making his heart pound. This could not be happening. Ron couldn't be dying. He could not lose a friend like this. In a freak accident. It made no sense. No sense at all.

He swallowed down the panic, forcing himself to breathe calmly as he reached the cottage. Panicking and desperation would not help anyone. He needed to keep his head now. This was no different from all the times he'd faced Voldemort. If he lost the control over his emotions and gave into the fear gnawing at him, people would die.

Instead of rushing right in, he held the door open, allowing Snape to go in first. There wasn't much he could really do right now. Everything would depend on Snape brewing the antidote.

Ron was now covered with a blanket. His clothes were in a neat pile next to him. Looking extremely uncomfortable, Draco Malfoy was sitting on the floor, keeping an eye on the raggedly breathing young man. Relief filled him as he saw Snape barge into the room.

"Did you find the bite?"
"Yes. It was on his left ankle. No other signs of bites on him." At least as far as Draco could tell. He doubted the snake would have attacked any part now covered by Weasley's briefs.

Snape nodded. "Good." It was nice to see at least some people could follow orders without making a mess about it.

As if hearing the professor's voice, Ron started to convulse again.

"Mr. Malfoy. Hold his hands. Potter, give him two drops from that." Gesturing at the vial that was still on the table, Snape rushed to the other side of the room and lit a fire under a cauldron there. He saw Harry hesitate and look for the glass of water Snape had used earlier. "Don't just stand there. Pour the drops right into his mouth. Hurry."

The urgent tone made Harry comply without questions. As Malfoy held Ron in place, he managed to get the pink liquid into his mouth. It seemed to work immediately.

He put the small vial back on the table, looking unsure of what to do next.

Fortunately, Snape had it figured out already. "Potter, you go and sit with your friend. Mr. Malfoy. Go and wash your hands. You'll help me with the antidote." He knew that Harry would do anything to help him, but right now, he needed someone who actually knew how to brew a potion.

"Yes, sir." Malfoy rushed to the pail at the corner, rolling his sleeves up. He was glad there was something to do. Sitting by Weasley's side and watching him slowly die was not fun after all.

Harry sat down on the floor next to the couch, grabbing Ron's hand. He could hear Snape walk around the cottage, going to his own bedroom and then coming back again. Keeping his eyes on Ron, he tried not to think about the urgency in the man's voice. The potion was probably not an easy one to brew. It would take some time to finish, maybe even longer than Ron had left.

He refused to accept that; was not about to watch his friend die. He had faith in Snape's skill. If anyone could save Ron, it was Snape.

Minutes passed by. Harry listened to Snape bark instructions to Malfoy, the sound of his voice mingling with the soft boiling sounds coming from the cauldron by the fire. Ingredients were shredded, sliced and chopped, the scent of thyme filling the air.

It was strange how soothing the constant sound of instructions and explanations was. Snape kept talking about the reason he wasn't using a bezoar to counteract the poison, muttering things about someone using the last of his dried mandrake. It was almost as if the man was teaching a lesson once again.

Harry was glad of the words, knowing they were meant to distract them all from worrying. He let the familiar voice wash over him, not even paying attention to the words anymore.

Watching Ron breathe slowly made him wonder if he should do something. Anything. There wasn't a thing he could do but to sit here. He couldn't even pray. Didn't know whom to pray to.

"I need your help with this, Mr. Malfoy. Grab the ladle. No. Closer to my hands. Closer! For Merlin's sake, boy! You can do better than that!"

The angry words jolted Harry from his thoughts, and he glanced at the hearth where Snape and Malfoy were standing. He saw the large cauldron, and the impossibly thick ladle, wondering how the man would ever be able to stir whatever was inside the cauldron. The answer came a moment later as both Slytherins grabbed the wooden handle, starting to stir the potion with a well coordinated
It was hypnotic. Harry kept his hand on Ron's, his gaze following the round motion of the ladle stirring the potion. He could remember one of the textbooks describing something like this; some potions being so thick they couldn't be made by a single person, no matter how strong.

At least Malfoy would be able to keep the stirring up for a long time. Steering a broomstick while trying to swoop down after the Snitch and not crash while doing it gave the Seeker muscled arms.

Round and round the ladle went. Firm, precise circles. Harry tried to count the stirs, losing count somewhere around the 160th stir.

All the while, Ron's breathing got a little fainter.

"We will need to change the direction after twenty-five more stirs." Snape's voice sounded strained. Sweat was running down his face, disappearing into his collar. "Then we'll have another 500 stirs counter-clockwise and the potion is finished."

Malfoy let out a pained gasp at that. "Sir! I don't think I can do that." He didn't sound like he was kidding. "My arms are about to fall off."

A short silence followed. Then Snape called out, "Potter. I need you here."

Harry got to his feet immediately, placing Ron's hand on the couch next to the unmoving body. He didn't dare to look at his friend, fearing he'd lose it and start blubbering. He couldn't afford that right now.

He walked slowly to the fire, stretching his shoulders. "What do you want me to do?"

"You need to take Mr. Malfoy's place once we change the direction." Raising his gaze from the potion to Harry, Snape frowned. "Do you remember how to make the reverse S-loop?"

"Yes." Stirring the potion was usually the simplest thing in class, so even Neville was able to remember the rules. The soft stirs, the harder ones. The flicks of the wrist and the vigorous ones where you needed your whole arm.

Snape was glad his seven years of hell with these children hadn't been a complete waste of time. "Good. Ten more stirs before it's time. Count with me, both of you. And when we reach two, you let go of the ladle and let Potter get a grip on it."

Blinking to prevent the beads of perspiration that were running down his face from reaching his eyes, Draco nodded. "Okay. Eight, seven, six, five..."

"Four, three, two..." Stepping to the left, Harry planted his hands on the wooden ladle as Draco let go. It was not the easiest thing to do. The round motion of the ladle was a steady one, but it had to be changed a moment later. Feeling Snape start the loop, he followed the movement, ending up stirring the potion in the opposite direction than just a second earlier.

Snape was actually stunned they had managed to do it without complications. His experience of Harry with potions was not a glorious one. "Good. Now, Mr. Malfoy. You should go and sit with Mr. Weasley. If he starts to convulse, give him a dosage from the blue bottle on the table."

"Yes, sir." Draco nodded, flexing his cramping hands. He needed something cool to drink, and a bath but that could wait. Without words, he padded to the couch, slumping down on the floor.
Harry was amazed of how hard it was to stir the potion. The way he was gripping the ladle above Snape's hands wasn't really giving him a good leverage, and he had to concentrate on making the motion stable. The fact that the wood was slick from where Malfoy's sweaty palms had gripped the ladle didn't really help.

Years of practice made Snape able to keep a count of the stirs even as he said, "You must tell me immediately if you feel like you're going to lose your grip or start cramping. If the stirring pattern changes, this whole thing will be ruined, and we need to start over again." He remembered the boulder Harry had lifted in order to please the snake and wasn't sure he was up to this.

There was no other option. Malfoy was already exhausted, and he couldn't do this alone. Not all 500 stirs.

"I'll let you know." Harry knew he'd stir the thing until his fingers fell off if necessary. He was quiet for a moment, but the nagging fear at his mind forced him to ask, "Will we make it in time?"

Dark gaze met with his. "Yes." If they managed to finish the potion. Weasley didn't stand a chance if they ruined this and had to start from a scratch. Especially since Snape knew he didn't have enough ingredients to brew another potion like this. "But we can't fail with the antidote."

Harry nodded. He trusted Snape not to lie to him.

The ladle felt smooth and heavy, the fumes from the cauldron tingling on Harry's fingers. He was used to the feeling from their Potions classroom. Snape had to feel the warmth worse than he did, with his hands closer to the cauldron, but there was no sign of pain on the man's face. Only concentration.

It was so damn difficult to keep the stirring movement steady.

"Can you move your hands a bit?" Knowing his position was a bad one, Harry stared at their hands. "Move them apart." He wasn't thinking about any lesson taught in the Potions class. This was about Quidditch, and emergency transports on a broom.

Snape nodded. He barely managed to widen his grip, his fingers starting to cramp. Ignoring the feeling, he kept stirring.

The next moment Harry let go of the ladle with one hand, placing it back a moment later, below Snape's splayed hands. As the next stir moved the ladle closer to him again, he repeated the motion with his other hand, replacing it between Snape's. "See? Better balance."

He remembered how Madam Hooch had made them practice dangling from the broomsticks a few years ago. First alone, then sharing the broom. Placing hands like that had made the Firebolt glide through the air with perfect grace, both he and Angelina managing to actually hang onto it for the whole ride.

This was different from holding a broom. This was a smooth motion, round and round and round... Never faltering, never changing. Watching the swirling brew was making Harry dizzy, so he looked up at Snape's face.

The world seemed to narrow down to this; wide circular movement of his arms, his shoulders flexing, hands guiding the ladle, his skin touching Snape's. It didn't take long for him to realize he was even breathing in synch with Snape, stirring the potion as if they were of one mind.

Harry felt small beads of perspiration fall down his forehead. He could see Snape's pale face glisten as well. Ignoring it, he concentrated on their movement.
The ladle brushed against the side of the cauldron, then made its way around again, smoothly this time. Harry's grip was not slipping, even though he could feel the moisture in his palms. He kept staring at Snape, wondering how long this would last and if they could really hang on long enough.

Snape's lips were moving now. The words flowing out in a whisper weren't numbers, or orders to guide Harry. They were a softly spoken charm, the essence of the potion without which the oddly yellow goo in the cauldron would just be a nice scented sludge instead of an antidote.

It was Harry's turn to be fascinated.

He'd seen Snape brew potions before. He rarely actually did that in class but they'd spent enough time together for him to see the reality of a Potions master's time off; there really was none. Whenever he'd gone to the dungeons, Snape had been doing something potion related.

Those evenings, when he'd curled on Snape's chair with a book or a Quidditch magazine in hand, he'd sometimes watched the man work. Cast disgusted glances at some of the icky ingredients. Wondered about how dedicated Snape was on his potions. Simply stared at his hands clutching the ladle.

He'd never really been a part of that. Not before this.

In class, he'd rarely worked with Hermione. She'd always tried to pair up with Neville to prevent a disaster. When she'd worked with Harry, it had definitely not been like this. Hard work, yes, but there had been no real magic there.

Harry couldn't help smiling at Snape as he felt something tingle before him. The scent of thyme intensified. He doubted he'd ever really enjoy brewing potions, but for this one wonderful moment, he was exhilarated.

"Almost there, Potter. Fifty more stirs." It was a novelty for Snape to see such a wild grin on Harry in a situation like this. Potions, his only passion, were rarely appreciated by anyone, not even those whose lives were saved by them. He'd seen curiosity and interest in Draco Malfoy's eyes as they had worked together with the ingredients, but he knew the gleam in Harry's eyes had nothing to do with that.

He was reacting to the moment and the power swirling between them.

Harry was counting down silently. If he let himself think about anything else than the stirs and the tingling, he'd probably scream. His arms were killing him. How the hell was Snape managing this?

"All right. Ten, nine, eight..." Snape counted, seeing Harry's lips move too. When they reached one, both stopped. The ladle was still moving, the circular motion a bit tricky to finish abruptly. "There. You can let go now." He wondered if he could. Fingers numb, he still grasped the ladle in a firm grip.

It took them both a moment to let go. When they finally did, Snape moved to Ron's silent form. The redhead was still breathing, but his face was ghostly white now, his lips completely blue, the deep color also circling his eyes.

"Put him on the floor on top of the blanket." Knowing he couldn't really do anything with that part, Snape watched Malfoy struggle with Weasley. "All right. Now get the cauldron. The potion is stable enough to use a levitation charm." While Malfoy obeyed, he walked to his small bag, grabbing a vial of Pepperup potion. It would have been stupid to ingest it before working on the antidote, considering how spectacular the effects of the fumes mixing with this potion would have been.
They all needed this right now.

Harry felt slightly better as the potion worked on him. The sight of smoke coming out of Snape's ears was hilarious, but he couldn't even smile. Concentrating on the antidote had kept his mind occupied, but now it was wandering again. Ron looked like a corpse, the slight rise and fall of his chest the only sign that he was still alive.

"Hold out your hands." Sounding exactly like he always did while teaching a lesson, Snape moved to kneel by the cauldron, holding a small scoop. "Every antidote works differently. Those counteracting a poison should be ingested. If being stung by a magical creature, the antidote should go straight to the wound." He scooped up the thick potion and poured it onto Harry's hands. Then he repeated the action, handing Malfoy a portion as well. "However, a snake bite is trickier, especially with something that could well be a non magical snake. We need to use this as a poultice and cover Mr. Weasley's whole body with the antidote."

"You mean we rub this in?" Harry stared at Snape to see the nod, and then placed his hands on Ron's bare chest. Without hesitation, he started to spread the dark yellow goo on his friend.

Draco stared at his hands for a moment, watching the thick goo start to slide through his fingers. Seeing Snape grab some of the antidote and start rubbing it vigorously on Weasley's foot, he smeared the potion on their patient's arm. The potion was thick and oily and spread well on the surprisingly cold skin. Pushing all thoughts away, Draco grabbed more of the goo and made certain Weasley's arms and hands were well covered.

They worked in silence. Harry tried not to panic even as the color on Ron's face didn't change from the awful blueish tinge. He wiped his friend's cheeks with his fingers, biting his lips at the awful contrast of yellow against shadowy grey.

Draco tried to avert his eyes as Snape grasped the waistband of Weasley's briefs and cut them off. Curiosity kept him staring as a scoopful of the antidote was poured on his groin, the goo spreading all over the naked skin without any need to be rubbed in.

He held out his hands for more of the potion and then went to work on Weasley's hair.

Together they rolled Ron over and then covered his back too. When the boy was completely smeared with the potion, Snape knelt back, sighing. "We'll have to wrap him into a blanket. He will probably sleep for at least sixteen hours. After that, we'll see if the potion worked." He didn't say it out loud, but it was obvious how they'd find out if it had worked or not. If Weasley was alive, it had.

"All right." Keeping his gaze on Ron, Harry nodded. It would be long sixteen hours.

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Part 8

Snape moved slowly towards his bedroom. Carrying the various potions ingredients back to their place was a careful job, especially now that his arms felt like overcooked spaghetti.

Shoving the door open with his shoulder, he stumbled into his room and then placed the bundles and vials on the table. He was too exhausted to actually organize them on a shelf. They'd be safe here, and he could do the work tomorrow.

The Pepperup potion was wearing off. He knew that in an hour or so, his body would simply stop functioning and he'd collapse on any available surface.

That was why he couldn't rest now. There were things to do.
Sighing, he went back to the living room. Malfoy and Harry had managed to clean up some of the mess there, all traces of the spilled potion were gone from the floor. The cauldron was next to the couch and the ladle rested on the floor by the hearth. None of them had the strength to remove them right now.

They could wait. Right now, they needed to get clean and then eat something. Everything else was unimportant.

Draco stood up straight and scratched his head. He felt absolutely filthy. It had been a long day, and he'd been all sweaty even before working over the hot cauldron. Now there were smudges on his still shaking hands. He hated being all dirty.

Looking around, he wondered what to do next. There was still a big mess in the corner and the air practically reeked of burned thyme. He thought that he should open a window, but couldn't gather enough strength to actually do anything. It was probably past dinner time, but he wasn't hungry. All he wanted to do was to sleep. Maybe take a quick bath and then sleep.

Right now he'd settle with even a simple cleaning charm and then sleep. As long as there was sleeping in his schedule, everything would be all right.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Raising his gaze to see Snape standing at the door, Draco nodded wearily. "Sir?" He hoped the professor didn't want him to do anything right now. Collapsing on the floor would make him look utterly ridiculous.

Snape swayed a little, but refused to lean against the door frame. "Go and get a clean change of clothes, Mr. Malfoy. I believe the Pepperup potion will work long enough for us all to bathe." He sounded weary.

"Yes, sir." Right that moment, bathing sounded like the best idea ever.

It took him a moment to go and gather his last clean robes and a towel, but after a few minutes, Draco trudged after Snape to the stream.

Harry barely noticed the two leaving. He was sitting on the floor next to the couch on which Ron was lying, all wrapped up in the blanket.

He was trying to calm down, his heart still pounding too hard.

Too many things had happened today, too many emotions rushing through him. He felt drained. It hadn't been like this in ages. The last time he'd been... He flinched at the thought.

The last time he'd gone through such an emotional roller coaster had been almost exactly a year ago; when he'd fought against the Death Eaters the last time. It had resulted in the same numbness.

Harry couldn't understand how he didn't feel anything. His body showed signs of exhaustion and excitement, adrenaline making his mouth taste strange. Bitter. But he was all cold inside.

He stared at Ron, relieved by the slow but steady rise and fall of his chest. It had somehow been worse than the assaults he'd faced. He could handle being hurt, but to lose a friend... That was his worst nightmare. Being able to act rationally even when Ron had slowly slipped away had been a blessing.

He didn't think he should be able to keep the fear at bay anymore.
Any normal person should have been shaking and crying or throwing up right now. Maybe even doing all those things at the same time. He just felt numb and tired as hell.

It didn't really matter how he felt as long as Ron was alive.

Everything revolved around that simple thought. He could deal with anything if it kept the people he loved safe. That was the reason he'd keep fighting till the end. Not selflessness or a noble cause. Duty couldn't drive him on like that; love did. As long as Sirius and Remus and Snape and Ron and Hermione and Dumbledore and McGonagall and the Weasleys and all his housemates were alive, he could go on.

He was startled out of his thoughts as the door banged open. The sudden sound from the hallway brought him to his feet with wand in hand. Tension filling his body, he prepared to guard his friend with his life.

"Good reflexes, Potter," Snape commented from the doorway. Behind him, Draco padded forward with a wet towel in hand.

Relaxing at the familiar tones, Harry put his wand back inside his robes. He was so tired, he doubted he could have fought off even the most inept of Death Eaters. "Yeah, well what do you expect sneaking up on me like that?"

Draco raised an eyebrow at the irritated words, certain Snape would hex Potter for them. It was about time. He'd noticed how the Gryffindor got away with things no one else would dare to try. He talked to Snape as if he was somehow equal to him and hadn't called him 'sir' since they'd got here.

To his surprise, Snape simply stood there, staring at Potter. He didn't seem to be offended by the words or the tone.

"You look like you could use a bath as well, Potter." That had to be the understatement of the year, like saying Longbottom needed some help with Potions. "I'm certain Mr. Malfoy will be able to look after your friend while you get cleaned."

Harry's gaze flickered to Draco. He pondered the words for a moment, taking in the completely drained look on the other boy. It didn't seem like he'd be able to look after anyone right now. Still, he needed to freshen up. "All right."

With one last look at Ron, he went to get his stuff.

Climbing the stairs was a task in itself. Harry struggled to get to the top, dragging his feet. He grabbed a shabby pullover and his least favorite pants -- Dudley's old ones, only about five sizes too big on him. All the other clothes he owned were still drying somewhere near the snake's home. He didn't really feel like going there to collect his probably still damp stuff right now.

Holding the clothes and a towel against his chest, he went downstairs. It was definitely easier to descend the stairs. The idea of getting immersed in the water was enough to drive him on.

"Are you ready?" Looking about as tired as he felt, Snape stood there, at the door. He was holding a familiar looking bag and a towel. When he saw the nod, he gestured with his free hand, "Let's go then."

Harry didn't bother to answer. He simply followed Snape outside.

The sun was already setting and it was chilly outside. Wrapping his dirty robes tighter around him, Harry walked beside Snape, trying not to trip over his own feet.
His mind was a bit fuzzy, probably because of all the excitement and weariness. He was glad Snape wasn't into pointless babbling. Getting his brain to form intelligent conversation would be impossible right now.

Reaching the riverbank, he let the clean clothes drop on the ground. Next to him, Snape was arranging the contents of his small bag, the vials clinking softly.

It made Harry blink. "You..." Fortunately his mind could still work enough to make him shut up before he could actually finish that sentence. "Er... I mean, you can bathe first. I'll stand guard." He definitely didn't want to ask Snape how could he trust bathing with a complete idiot.

Snape raised his eyebrow. It was unlikely Harry could guard him against anything right now. He didn't say it, he simply started to remove his robes. He could take care of himself.

"Um... Right." Harry was stunned. Turning his back to Snape, he once again grabbed his wand, squeezing it until his knuckles hurt.

Things were all so weird right now. Malfoy had helped them save Ron's life -- had indeed saved it by dragging him to the cottage. He had enjoyed making a potion. Snape was trusting him enough to do this again, when the last time they'd stood here on the riverbank had been a complete disaster.

Trusting him with this instead of Malfoy. That was definitely a shock.

He was determined not to make an arse of himself again. Being tired helped. The thought of having Snape all naked again so close behind him didn't make him turn around this time. He kept listening to the splashing, though, to be ready to help him if he needed any assistance.

There were no sounds of distress this time. Harry stood there, fiddling with his wand. He could hear Snape washing himself. Heard a vial being opened and then closed again. Then there was a small silence before more splashing.

"Your turn, Potter. The water should still be warm enough for you to bathe." Snape finished pulling his robes on. He wondered if the boy had even heard him, as Harry didn't move for a moment.

"Okay." Harry lowered his wand and started to pull off his grimy clothes.

Snape watched Harry for a moment longer, frowning as he saw him stumble a bit. It was clear that he was exhausted. He would have to make sure the boy didn't drown.

Moving slowly, Harry managed to undress without falling on his face. He saw that Snape had left some of the vials on the rock protruding from the water. Good. He'd forgot to bring anything with him. At least now he could get cleaned.

He waded into the stream with care; drowning wasn't really in his agenda right now. The water was still nice and warm, feeling perfect. He stood there for some time, just enjoying the currents swirling against his body. Then he reached out for the vials.

Even though his arms shook with the exertion, he kept massaging the shampoo to his scalp. After rinsing, he grabbed the soap, happy to get the overwhelming odor of thyme off his skin. Nothing he'd ever bought had managed to clean his skin this easily. The liquid had to be homemade, one of Snape's potions.

Harry smiled at the thought and looked over his shoulder to see the man standing near his clothes, his back turned to him. Snape was running his fingers through his wet hair, staring at the cottage. Definitely not ogling at him as he was standing here naked and wet.
A slow tingling feeling crept down his belly at the thought.

Trying very hard not to think about the fact that yes, he was indeed naked here, and that not that long ago, he had watched Snape bathe, Harry dunked himself, and then grabbed his wand from the rock. Keeping his voice as quiet as possible, he muttered, "Finite incantatem," and pointed the wand at the water.

"Gaaah!" The freezing water made him scream. Wide awake and shivering, he scrambled out of the stream as fast as he could.

Snape was there in a second. "What is it? What happened?" Seeing that there was nothing wrong with Harry, he turned his gaze to the river. Nothing seemed out of place there either.

Wrapping himself in his towel, Harry tried to stop shivering. "Just thought it'd be good to make the water cooler." Realizing how weird that sounded, he offered, "To stay awake. I didn't know it was that cold."

"Apparently your brain cells have fallen asleep already, Potter." Sounding amused, Snape turned his back on the river.

"Yeah. Apparently so." Harry wasn't even offended by the words. After all, they were true. His brain had definitely fallen asleep, was probably in a coma, considering how he didn't seem to be able to do or say anything intelligent.

Snape let a slight smile appear on his face at the grumpy sound of Harry's voice. He'd been wondering if the boy would collapse after they'd finished covering Weasley with the antidote. Hearing such annoyance in his voice made him feel better.

Dressing quickly to chase away the cold, Harry kept glancing at Snape. He didn't know what had changed, but it was obvious something had. It was easy to be with Snape again, the strange hesitation and feeling of giggly -- and utterly ridiculous -- embarrassment gone.

He gathered the small vials into the bag and then wrapped his dirty robes into a bundle. The icy water had indeed invigorated him, but he could feel the fatigue lurking right around the corner.

"Come on, Potter. Let's go back to the cottage." Not even bothering to wait for an answer, Snape grabbed his bag from Harry and headed towards their small hideaway.

They walked in companionable silence.

The first thing Harry did back inside was to check on Ron again. He couldn't help it; he would worry until the moment his friend opened his eyes and said something to him. Hearing Ron's breathing made him relax slightly.

Snape went to put his towel and other stuff away. His footsteps felt leaden somehow. Still, he had the strength to move back to the living room.

He noticed that Malfoy was almost asleep on the other couch. "You should go to bed. We all need some rest. I doubt we will get anything done tomorrow." Seeing the startled expression on the boy, he added, "Naturally this will postpone the exams. Go to bed, Mr. Malfoy. There is nothing you can do here."

"Thank you, sir." Draco yawned as he got to his feet, but he didn't even bother to cover his mouth with his hand. He was too tired to mind his manners. Stumbling a little, he headed to the stairs.
Barely noticing Malfoy leaving, Harry kept staring at Ron. His friend looked so strange lying there. Ron never stayed still for long, especially when sleeping.

"It's best to leave him there."

Harry looked up and then smiled wanly at Snape. "Yeah. I don't think I could carry him upstairs now." If Ron wouldn't really wake up for hours, he'd be comfortable here as well. Harry hesitated. Leaving him alone didn't feel right. "I'll stay with him." He was used to sleeping on chairs and couches.

"It won't make any difference, really. You can't do anything." The potion would work on its own. Snape understood why Harry couldn't leave, it wasn't hard to guess. He would worry if he left Weasley, and he wouldn't want to sleep alone upstairs. "But of course you can sleep here."

"I will." It was painful to watch Ron like this, but Harry didn't want to leave. Didn't think he could sleep in their room all alone. He was still waiting for some kind of a reaction to all that had happened, feeling almost betrayed by the unnatural calmness inside.

He didn't want to wake up in the middle of the night, feeling his skin clammy with sweat, breathing hard as the silence of his room bore down on him. It had happened so often back at Hogwarts, before he'd had Snape to go to. Now, with Ron lying here as still as a corpse, he couldn't handle such silence.

There would be no real sounds in this room either, but at least he'd have the fantasy of not being completely alone here.

A thought hit him. He didn't want to analyze it too much, but simply blurted out, "Could you stay here for a while? With me." He kept his gaze on Ron, not wanting to see Snape's expression right now.

Snape didn't say anything for a moment. He knew Harry would look at him and then ask again if he really needed his company. The silence was mellow, not desperate.

"I..." To his surprise, Snape realized that he didn't have any pressing reason to leave just now. There was nothing urgent for him to do in his rooms, and he didn't think he could fall asleep right now. Staying here with Harry was better than staring at the wall. "All right." He grabbed his wand and then muttered a simple word to enlarge the couch.

Harry smiled at the familiar charm, scooting over to make room. "Thanks."

Gathering his robes around him like a shield, Snape sat down. His body felt heavy, relaxed as he was finally resting.

Had it been anyone else, Harry would have hugged him tight. He knew Snape would abhor such behavior, especially in front of others -- and it didn't matter Ron was unconscious, he'd still be considered as audience. So instead, he reached out and touched Snape's arm softly. "And thank you. For what you did to Ron. Without you he'd be dead right now."

Snape glanced down at the hand resting on his arm, but didn't shrug it off. "I just did my job, Potter." The words were curt, but there was no displeasure in his voice.

"Maybe. But that doesn't mean I can't thank you." Squeezing his arm just a little, knowing Snape had to feel sore as well, Harry let go and then curled on the corner of the couch.

Deciding not to say anything to that, Snape simply nodded.
Harry yawned, enjoying the soft cushions under his head. This was an excellent couch to sleep on. 
"So... You mean it?" Seeing the raised eyebrow, he elaborated, "The exam. You won't give it to us 
on Monday."

"No. I doubt any of you are in condition to think tomorrow, not to mention study," Snape muttered. 
"Even though that may be a permanent condition with most of you."

It was strange how that didn't seem to come out right. There was no malice in the words, just an echo 
of weariness.

Hearing the familiar sarcasm actually made Harry feel better. He was wonderfully clean and warm. 
In a few minutes he'd fall asleep, and knowing that Snape was right here was comforting.

Things had changed. Life had become more complicated, but somehow also simpler.

"I've missed this." Realizing he had actually said it out loud, Harry smiled a little. "Funny, isn't it?"
To be so comfortable with Snape. To miss the evenings spent in his rooms.

That was a part of the uneasy feeling he'd had for days now. He saw the man every day and could 
talk to him whenever he wanted, but it wasn't the same. With Ron and Malfoy there, he didn't have a 
chance to just be with him.

Snape nodded absentmindedly. It was indeed funny. Ridiculous. The mere concept could empty all 
the closets in Britain of Boggarts. But he couldn't say he hadn't noticed Harry's absence as well. This 
was the first time in years when he'd had nothing to do in his rooms. No classes to plan. No potions 
to brew for various people. No grading, no plotting for the next Death Eater meeting. He'd simply 
been resting, enjoying the silence.

Still, it had felt like something had been missing. He'd got used to having Harry in his rooms and 
even if he wouldn't go as far as to say he'd actually missed the boy, he had noticed his absence.

"You know, I don't know whether to be happy about all this or feel really guilty." Yawning, Harry 
shifted his position. "I mean, here we are, doing almost nothing, and back home, everyone's reading 
and studying like maniacs. Even with the thing with Potions and all, this is so peaceful."

It could well be the last peaceful moment in their lives, if Malfoy had been right about Voldemort's 
plan. The summer would arrive pretty soon, and from then on, his life would be about war.

"Enjoy it." Snape chose not to comment on the 'thing with Potions'. He knew Harry was absolutely 
right. Their stay here was an interlude; a dreamlike moment between tiring battles.

He saw a flash of some darker emotion in Harry's eyes, and knew he didn't have to say anything 
about the future. They both knew what would come. Both knew about the risks and the losses. 
Neither had any fantasies about the war.

"I will." It was only a whisper.

Harry snuggled on the cushion, closing his eyes. He didn't want to think about the future, not now 
when everything seemed so perfect. Thinking would just ruin it. It was best to just cherish the 
moment; the heavy feeling of drowsiness descending over him, Snape's presence nearby. The faint 
scent of thyme still lingering in the room.

Still contemplating the war, Snape wondered what the Order was planning. He knew Dumbledore 
well enough to realize that he probably had the future planned already.
It was a good thing, for whatever would happen, it would be well organized. His old Master had his flaws, but if he listened to Lucius, their attack would be brilliantly detailed. He doubted there would be a full blown attack on Hogwarts. That would be too precarious to the Death Eaters.

The Dark Lord would need his people to establish a stronghold, to take over all the important posts in the wizarding world. They would have to defeat more than just Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter. Sadly, Snape thought, the rest of their world would probably fall without those two. Fudge was too stupid to really be any danger to Voldemort. Aurors wouldn't be able to fight him off without a good leader.

So it was up to them.

Above all else, the Order had to survive. That also meant that Albus and Harry had to survive. No one else could unite people to actually fight. What a strange thing. The fate of their world laying on the shoulders of an old man and a youngster. A brilliant old man whose mind was as sharp as a blade. A young man who might not be the bravest or the most intelligent, but who would never give up the fight.

The soft sound of snoring interrupted Snape's thoughts. He turned to see Harry fast asleep on the couch.

He couldn't help feeling amused by the sight. Their great hope was drooling on a cushion. He couldn't understand how people wanted to see Harry as a great hero, an object of reverent worship. He might not be a child anymore, but he was still only a human.

Snape pushed the thought out of his head. How strange his mind would keep insisting returning to that.

It was time for him to go to bed. Everyone else was already asleep and there would be a lot to do tomorrow. They still had things to clean, and someone had to take care of the rest of the laundry.

More importantly, he hadn't finished the questions for the exam yet.

Yawning, Snape stretched his legs, feeling reluctant to get up. The small house was so quiet, silence and darkness lulling him towards sleep. He couldn't really stay here on the couch, especially with Harry Potter stretching on it, his feet almost touching him already, but the door seemed to be so damn far away.

Maybe he should stay here for a moment longer. He closed his eyes, determined to simply rest them for a while. Very soon he would get up and go to his room, where he could curl in his bed and not worry about anyone's dirty socks rubbing against his robes.

Harry's socks weren't enough to drive him away; he was simply too tired to get up. Not even the brush of something heavy against his thigh could make him jolt wide awake. He could always make snide comments to Harry about his obvious tendency to invade his privacy in the morning.

Shifting his position a little, Snape laid his hand on the foot that was resting on his lap and drifted off to sleep.

Part 9

Sunday morning dawned grey and windy. The sun was obscured by dark clouds that would undoubtedly bathe the cottage with rain any minute now.
Draco groaned as he opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of the sky from the window. He shouldn't be surprised by the ghastly weather, but seeing the rainclouds made him miserable anyway. So it would rain again. He just hoped he'd have the chance to go and get the laundry in before it started.

The thought made him jolt up. Yes. The clothes. He'd left them to dry as he'd dragged Weasley back to the cottage.

It hadn't just been a weird and twisted dream.

Since he knew there was no way he could fall asleep again, Draco got up. He wasn't used to waking up early, preferring to laze in the bed for hours if he had nothing better to do, or if he had some company. Now it seemed that he couldn't sleep all that late anymore, not even on weekends, when he'd rarely got up before noon.

Of course the fact that he didn't stay up till the wee hours might have something to do with it. There were no parties or exhausting company here. Only hard work and studying, that drove him to bed a few hours after dinner.

He felt light headed as he pulled on his old robes and ran a comb through his hair. Had to be because he'd last eaten at lunch yesterday. His belly confirmed his suspicions by letting out a loud growl a moment later. What a strange sensation. He couldn't remember ever really being hungry. The heir of Malfoy had never had to go without food and drink.

Pushing the thought away, he left his room in search of breakfast.

It was all quiet when he sneaked down the stairs. None of the portraits were awake yet, so there were none of the usual greetings. He had no idea of what time it was, especially since it was grey and misty outside.

Hopefully there was still breakfast. He had suspicions that Eppy would happily carry the food away a few minutes after serving it if they didn't appear in the kitchen in time.

Draco was smiling slightly as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Then he froze, his eyes going wide as he stared into the living room, gawking at the men sleeping there.

He'd known Weasley would be there, lying still just the way they'd left him. Seeing him was a kind of relief. It puzzled him; the strange selfless joy of having someone else survive an attack. Especially someone as irritating as Ron Weasley.

The still figure lying on the couch by the window wasn't the thing that shocked him the most. His mind went completely numb as he turned his gaze to the other couch, to the Head of his House and Harry Potter.

Snape was sitting at the end of the couch, eyes closed and breathing evenly. Even in sleep, he looked as rigid and forbidding as always. It seemed as if the couch was larger than it had been the previous evening, big enough to have a man sleep there and even have enough space for someone else to sit there. That was painfully obvious, seeing how Potter was lying there, resting his head on a cushion on one end of the couch, his feet on Snape's lap on the other side.

That made Draco blink. Suddenly he wasn't certain he wasn't sleepwalking. If he was dreaming, this was the weirdest dream ever; not resenting Weasley, imagining Potter drooling into the dark blue cushion while he was snuggled against the most feared teacher Hogwarts had ever seen.
His sudden intake of breath made Snape's eyes snap open. The dark gaze was clear, taking in the situation immediately without hesitations. He looked at the red and yellow striped socks resting on his lap, frowning a little as he realized he was actually still holding Harry's feet. The frown melted away a moment later, making way for amazement in his eyes.

Snape turned his head slightly. Something must have woken him up. He saw Draco Malfoy standing by the stairs looking shocked. It didn't surprise him. "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy."

"Er..." It had been some time since Draco's voice had cracked like that. "Good morning, professor Snape."

As if nothing was amiss, Snape pushed Harry's feet off his lap, causing the sleeping Gryffindor to squirm in his sleep and mumble incoherent protests. A moment later Harry turned around and stretched his legs so that his feet were back on Snape's lap.

Draco shivered, knowing something awful was about to happen. There had been times in the Potions class when he'd been certain Snape was a moment from hexing Potter and his friends and had used all his willpower to restrain himself. There was no need for such restrains right now.

It was quite probable Potter would spend the rest of his life as a newt.

Sighing as if he'd been expecting for something like this, Snape reached out and shook Potter's leg. "Wake up, Potter." His voice was cold as always.

That resulted in more squirming. Harry turned over again and hid his head under one of the cushions.

Mornings like this were familiar to Snape. He'd usually had to wake the Gryffindor up after going through his morning routines whenever he'd spent the night in the dungeons. At least Harry didn't mistake him for Weasley anymore. "Potter! Wake up!"

After a moment, the cushion dropped on the floor as Harry groaned something and waved with his hand. He was slowly waking up, unable to drift away again.

Harry's gaze was unfocused as he stretched out luxuriously and blinked a few times. Scratching his neck, he lifted his head, wondering where the hell he was. This place didn't seem familiar.

Memories of the previous night enveloped him as he saw Ron sleeping across the room. He suddenly realized he was lying on the couch downstairs. He must have fallen asleep while having a conversation with Snape. That was probably why he'd slept so well, even on a very uncomfortable couch. At least his feet felt warm.

"Good morning, Potter. Now that you are awake, could you please move your feet."

The words made Harry jolt up. "What?"

Draco had an urge to laugh, but he knew that would probably be the last mistake he ever made. Potter looked so stupid sitting there and gawking at the professor. Apparently the Gryffindor didn't even realize he still had his feet on Snape's lap.

It was a wonder Snape hadn't hexed him yet. Draco couldn't even imagine doing something like that, invading his professor's personal space.

"Oh." Harry finally realized what was wrong. Slowly, he moved his feet and then spent a moment searching for his glasses on the floor before sitting cross legged on the couch. He smiled at Snape as soon as everything was clear once again. "Sorry. I hope I didn't keep you up all night. Or kick you or
anything."

His mind was a bit fuzzy as always at this time of the day, but he could still sense the odd peace that had fallen over him and Snape last night. It wasn't exactly like back at Hogwarts, but it was close enough for him to enjoy it.

"Eppy has probably served the breakfast already."

Ignoring the inquiries, Snape turned back to look at Draco, who was still standing by the stairs as if frozen in place. "We should all get something to eat since none of us had any dinner last night."

It irritated him that he couldn't remember if he'd put a simple preservation charm over the soup kettle yesterday. Exhaustion was something he was used to; it never made him forget things. Seemed like everything was askew somehow.

Realizing that was a dismissal, Draco muttered, "Yes, sir," and padded to the kitchen. Maybe Snape wanted to punish Potter in private and didn't want an audience.

"Your friend will not wake up for some time now, so I'd suggest you follow young Malfoy." Not even looking at Harry, Snape stood up and walked to his room, his crumpled robes billowing limply.

Harry just sat there, scratching his head. It felt like his hair was standing on end, but otherwise everything seemed great. Seeing Ron breathe evenly made him feel almost giddy with relief. For once things seemed to be all right.

Breakfast was good as always. Eppy kept hovering by the doorway, as if waiting for Ron to appear even though she had been told he'd be sleeping through the breakfast. Harry didn't know if her anxiousness was because of worry that Ron wouldn't be all right or because he might actually wake up and come to eat. He never knew with Eppy.

Ignoring the house elf, he munched his toast, trying hard not to grin at Snape every once in a while.

For Draco, the breakfast seemed surreal. He'd been certain Snape would hex Potter, and now he was just sitting there, drinking his tea as if nothing had happened.

No. It was even worse. Potter seemed to be thinking about something amusing, casting weird looks at Snape. And the professor either ignored him or raised an eyebrow slightly, almost encouraging the silly smiles.

It was driving him crazy.

He was confused by the waves of jealousy he felt towards Potter. It was stupid. He had no claims on Snape, his status as the ward of the Slytherin House didn't give him any privileges, not even with Snape's promise to offer him the protection of his own House.

Yet, if he wanted to, he could call himself a Snape now. He had every legal and moral right, for his professor had made his offer in front of hundreds of witnesses.

And here was his guardian, bonding with Harry Potter on levels he'd never thought possible.

Slamming his mug down with more force he'd intended, Draco bit back curses that threatened to escape him. He did not understand what was so bloody special about Potter. People seemed to do stupid things because of him, but he'd never thought he'd see Snape join the Gryffindor hero fan club.

Not that Snape was fawning over him like most of the people in Hogwarts were. He didn't even
seem to treat him kindly. There was just something between those two, the way they looked at each other; like they were comfortable together.

Draco wasn't going to even think about what the relaxed sight that had greeted him in the living room meant. He still felt slightly uncomfortable every time he sat on the same couch with his professor, and he never sat close enough to touch him.

Still, he wondered what Weasley would have thought of the whole scene if he'd witnessed it. His perfect friend cuddling with the dreaded Potions master. It was definitely a hilarious mental image, for Weasley would have undoubtedly had a fit.

He had to think of a way to bring that into conversation if possible.

After breakfast, Snape disappeared into the kitchen with Eppy in tow. The old house elf seemed to shiver with the need to scold him, but even she knew when to be quiet.

Harry watched the two go with a smile on his lips. It would be nice to just relax today. Snape hadn't said anything about the exam, so he assumed they'd have a few days to study for it. He couldn't concentrate anyway. As long as Ron was still unconscious, he wouldn't be able to memorize anything Potions related.

The thought made him head back to the living room to keep an eye on his friend.

Since Malfoy had disappeared somewhere, it was quiet in the living room. Harry picked up the cushion that was still on the floor before going to Ron. A smile that had never quite disappeared bloomed on his lips again.

It seemed like Ron was better. Some of the potion had dried off his face, revealing healthy pink skin instead of that awful deadly pallor from the previous night. He seemed to be breathing more easily as well.

Apparently the potion they had brewed -- or Snape had brewed and they had helped -- had worked. He'd never actually doubted the antidote wouldn't be potent, but even Snape had looked doubtful last night. It was a relief to see Ron look so good, but it would be better when he finally woke up.

They'd have to talk about paying attention to their surroundings. The snake hadn't seemed to be hostile, agreeing to help them for a small price. Harry was certain she hadn't bitten Ron on purpose. Having a dead human lying that close to her nest would just bring trouble as all kinds of carrion eaters rushed to feast. It was obvious Ron hadn't looked where he'd been going, probably keeping his attention on Malfoy.

That couldn't happen again. They were all fugitives one way or the other. If it had been Death Eaters attacking instead of the small snake, they could all be dead now.

He would have to talk to Ron about it when they were alone. If he missed the chance, Snape would undoubtedly make a few comments about Gryffindor stupidity sooner or later. This time he couldn't even disagree with Snape. Dropping their guard out here was stupid. It didn't matter who got hurt, they were all important. All lives were and he didn't want to lose anyone.

Harry turned his attention away from his friend as he heard footsteps coming from the staircase. He already knew what he'd see. "Malfoy."

"Yes?" Pulling on his heavy outer robes, Draco didn't bother to even look at Potter. He didn't want to argue this early in the morning. He had better things to do.
"Are you going to get the laundry?" Seeing the curt nod, Harry moved to get his outer robes as well. "Okay. I'll help you." He knew he couldn't let Malfoy go out on his own. It didn't matter that there would be no more danger from the snake. There could be other dangers out there.

Draco looked startled, but didn't say anything. He finished with his robes and then walked to the door. He even waited as Harry went to tell Snape they'd be right outside, even though that made his stomach clench.

It was strange. Not like yesterday, when a promise of violence had shadowed everything he'd done. Unlike with Weasley, the silence was now neutral. Even curious.

They walked to the clothesline and then got to work, neither feeling the urge to fill the silence with inane babbling. Most of the sheets and T-shirts were dry as well as the underwear Draco stuffed in the basket without really thinking what he was doing. The robes were all a bit damp as were the socks.

"I think we'd better take everything back to the cottage." Looking up, Harry could see the dark clouds right above them. "It's definitely going to rain soon."

"I know." For once, there was no sneer evident in the words.

Harry nodded, even though he was pretty sure Malfoy had his back turned at him. He went to put the sheets into the basket and then walked to the bushes for the bright orange T-shirt that was impossible to miss. Seeing the garment in a small heap made him feel a lump in his throat for the first time.

He picked up the soggy shirt, thinking he could wash it back at the cottage and hang it dry in their room. That way it would be waiting for Ron when he finally woke up.

"Um... Malfoy." He hadn't even thought of saying anything to the Slytherin until he heard his own voice. "You probably saved Ron's life yesterday. I don't know if me saying this means anything to you, but... Thank you."

Draco froze as he heard his name, anticipating accusations. The hesitant words stunned him. Was Potter really thanking him? Seriously? He turned around, eyes narrowed in suspicion. This could well be some kind of a plot, a prelude to more taunts.

He saw the serious expression on Potter's face. It wasn't friendly per se, but it didn't seem like he was mocking him either. Instead of making a flippant comment about Weasley, he muttered, "You're welcome." Then he dropped the still damp robes into the basket.

The way things were going was really confusing, and Draco had never cared for confusion. Unless it was on others. At least Weasley and his insane anger was understandable; it didn't make him feel lost, like professor Snape's behavior. The professor seemed to treat Potter almost as if he were... an adult. It was ridiculous, since the Gryffindor was actually the youngest of them all. What could he have done to deserve such treatment?

It started raining a moment after they reached the cottage. The sky seemed almost black with thunder clouds, the world turning hazy with heavy raindrops falling down and lightning flashing overhead.

Shivering slightly, Draco settled on the living room couch that had been turned back to its normal size. He'd felt strange upstairs in his own room. Everything seemed so wild, untamed, the whole world was suddenly raging with violence. He had never really thought about storms and definitely didn't fear them. Experiencing such bad weather while staying in a house that suddenly seemed as secure as a broom shed was something he would have gladly passed.
He tried to concentrate on the book he held, using every ounce of his willpower not to flinch as the lightning danced over their small cottage. The flashes were bearable, but the sound of the thunder made him jump.

It was fortunate that Potter seemed so focused on Weasley, sitting there on the floor next to the other couch. At least now he could maintain some dignity.

The smell of damp cloth was slowly replaced by the warm scent of spices. Draco cast a hesitant glance at the kitchen door. He wondered if it was Snape working in the kitchen. They hadn't seen the professor since they'd returned with the laundry. He'd spread the still damp robes over the railing and doors while Harry had carried piles of dry clothes into their rooms.

He didn't have to wonder about Snape's whereabouts for long. A few minutes later the kitchen door opened and Snape snapped, "Lunch is served," before slamming the door shut again.

Draco was surprised to see that it was indeed lunchtime. The darkness outside made it seem like it was later in the evening, completely disorienting him.

There was no sight of Eppy anywhere. The table was set, deep bowls and spoons surrounding a steaming pot. As Draco sat down, Snape carried a freshly baked loaf of bread to the table. It made Draco blink again, but he didn't dare to comment on his professor, even to say that the soup smelled nice. He simply reached for the pot.

Harry wolfed down his food, feeling ravenous. He for one wasn't at all surprised by the subtle spicy taste of the soup. If a man could excel in making potions, he could probably cook as well as any gourmet chef.

Grinning at Snape, he said, "We should let you cook more often. This is really good." He accented the praise by shoving another spoonful into his mouth.

Snape let out a small grunt that didn't sound completely displeased. "Speaking with your mouth full must be one of your least charming Gryffindor traits, Potter. I would appreciate it if you learned how to swallow before making inane comments."

The smile widened a bit. Not at all offended by the curt words, Harry finished with the last spoonfuls and then reached out for the pot to get more soup. He didn't miss the glint in Snape's eyes, but decided against saying anything more. They both knew he wasn't just complimenting the man for nothing.

Keeping his gaze firmly on his plate, Draco was trying to figure out what was happening here. He'd never paid attention to the way his professor and Potter interacted before. It had always been the same; Potter making heated remarks and Snape reducing House points, with mutual loathing and hatred barely hidden between them. It was different now. Those two sounded like they were old... comrades.

It was troubling. He'd known of the Order of the Phoenix, just as everyone had; had known that Harry Potter was one of the most important members. Now it seemed as if the Head of Slytherin had also been one of Dumbledore's fighters. How else would they be so comfortable around each other?

Draco was impressed. He'd never seen any signs that Snape didn't hate Potter. His father had always sneered at Snape and made scornful comments about him, but even he hadn't suspected Snape of being anything other than what he seemed to be. A simple Potions master who craved power.

He had really been a perfect spy. Of course he had been; he was a Slytherin after all.
Everything they did was supposed to be sneaky and well organized. Draco smiled cynically at the thought. Yes. Unlike his almost Gryffindor behavior in the Great Hall when months of desperation had driven him into something even Snape must see as idiotic heroism.

He chewed on the small piece of bread and tried to push such thoughts out of his mind.

Placing the spoon on the empty plate, Harry sighed happily. "Thank you, Snape. That was excellent." He saw the raised eyebrow and added, "I mean it. The food was great."

"Will your gratitude wash the dishes, Potter?" It was really a rhetorical question. Snape knew that he wouldn't be eager to obey his every wish, like Malfoy.

"No. I'm not volunteering to wash them either. Like I said, I'm not a total idiot." There was laughter in Harry's voice. He felt wonderful. For the first time in a long time, everything seemed perfect, and he was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

Draco on the other hand was busy choking on his food.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Snape cast a disapproving glance on him. "Please try to..." His voice faded away as a loud crash came from the living room.

Pushing his chair back so hard it slammed into the wall, Harry jumped to his feet. "It's Ron!" Not waiting for any replies, he rushed out of the room. The muffled curses proved that his friend was very much alive. Still, he had to get to him as quickly as possible.

He almost laughed at the scene that greeted him. Ron had obviously tried to get up right after waking up, and had ended up as a messy bundle on the floor. The blanket was slipping, and Ron was flailing with his hands while glaring at Harry.

It wouldn't have been as amusing if he weren't mostly yellow, the dried potion turning even his hair pale.

"'Arry! 'elp!" The sounds coming from him were mere croaks, but his gaze focused sharply on his friend. He seemed relieved and stopped the flailing.

Harry couldn't stop the bubbling laughter now. It wasn't simply amusement. He was so damn glad to see that Ron was all right. "Easy there, Ron. You're safe." Walking to his friend, he held out his hand. "Come on. Let's get you back to the couch."

Nodding, Ron allowed him to help him up. He felt really weak. Dizzy even. His mind was a blur. He remembered washing clothes with Malfoy. Then a surge of irritation and a small snake slithering away from him as his ankle started burning.

"Snake! I was bitten by a snake!" The words came out as a mumble, but at least he didn't sound like Hagrid's second cousin anymore. "My foot!"

"It's all right, Ron. That happened yesterday. Malfoy got you here safely and Snape was able to make an antidote to the poison. You're fine."

Ron gawked. Opening his mouth, he sputtered something, but nothing intelligible came out. It almost looked like he was going into a shock again. Finally he managed to ask, "What?"

He couldn't believe what Harry had just said. Malfoy would never get him anywhere safely. The last memory he had of him was shoving him against a tree and ignoring the angry look on his face. And Snape! Well, he could understand him showing off with his skill with potions, but to voluntarily
brew something to save his hide? That was highly unlikely.

"You're all right. The antidote worked." It was clear to Harry that wasn't what Ron was asking. "And yes. They did save your life."

Pulling his blanket tighter around himself -- and was he naked underneath it? -- Ron shook his head, totally flabbergasted. "Why would they do that?"

"Because, Mr. Weasley, even with dozens of idiots in my class, I have not lost a student under my care yet," came the sarcastic answer from the doorway.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Ron hadn't really thought Snape would be there to hear his words. He was simply reacting to the strange situation as best as he could, which wasn't all that well. Looking down on the floor, he tried not to show his confusion or fear.

Snape didn't say anything either. He cast a knowing look at Harry before walking to the couch. Telling Weasley what a total idiot he was would be a waste of time. None of his older brothers had ever listened to him, so he doubted this one would make an exception. Maybe his ineptitude was genetic, generations of Gryffindors shaping him into what he was now.

"Lie back." No potions were needed now that Weasley was up. He was quite obviously back to his normal self. Snape needed to check out a few things before dismissing him. The potion was potent and sometimes it caused strange side effects on people.

Ron's eyes went wide. That almost sounded like Snape wanted to examine him. No way. He would rather die. "Huh?"

"You almost died, Mr. Weasley." Explaining like he was talking to a two years old, Snape moved closer. "I need to see if you're all right now. So lie back." He didn't add the 'and shut up' even though it was there on his lips.

Protecting students and other idiots was his duty now. Since they couldn't take Weasley to see Poppy, he would have to make sure he was all right. He might not know everything about snakes, but he did know how his potion was supposed to work, and what signs would show if it didn't.

It looked like Ron was about to protest, but a cough and a glare from Harry made him shut his mouth. His skin was crawling even before Snape put his ink stained fingers on his forehead. The sensation was completely disgusting, but he tried to bear with it.

Harry watched with a slight frown on his face as Ron flinched every time Snape moved and cringed as he touched him. He wondered if such behavior was a residue from the snake's poison. Maybe it oversensitized people.

A moment later he realized that there was nothing wrong with Ron. It was simply the way he reacted to Snape.

Thinking hard, he couldn't remember ever really seeing Snape touch anyone voluntarily. He had helped people up -- grabbing them by the collar and yanking them up -- after collapsing in class. He had restrained Millicent by touching her shoulder briefly that time when she'd tried to attack Hermione. But that was it.

The memory of his hands holding Snape's arm flashed clear in his mind, followed by others. Fleeting innocent touches he'd used to emphasize his gratitude after the man had saved McGonagall's and then Ron's life. His feet on his lap.
Why was Snape allowing such familiarity? Harry had no idea. It was clear that Snape was the most private person he knew. It was a thing he envied. No one ever crowded him or pawed him or invaded his privacy.

Harry blinked. The things he had done were not really invading privacy. At least he didn't see them as such. He would never do that, knowing how precious peace and quiet were to people like him and Snape.

He would have to pay more attention to his actions, to see if Snape didn't actually mind his closeness or if he simply forced himself to tolerate it. He didn't want to be a nuisance. Didn't want to offend Snape like that.

Keeping his contact brief, Snape touched Ron's neck fleetingly. He couldn't feel the lumps there anymore, the swelling gone down already. His antidote had indeed worked perfectly. Not that he'd ever had any doubts on the matter.

He grabbed his wand and then cast a simple charm on the boy to be absolutely certain.

That made Ron flinch again.

At least there was no sight of Malfoy. Seeing him grin in the background would really have ruined Ron's day.

"I know you don't like Potions, Mr. Weasley, but to take such extreme measures to assure that the exam is postponed is completely ludicrous." Glaring at the boy, Snape finished with his examination.

Harry smiled slightly. "So he'll be all right?" It was already clear by the slightly relaxed look on Snape's face.

"Yes. There should be no side effects from the potion. Mr. Weasley here will be able to get up shortly. Eat first, that will help with your recuperation. You should take a bath after eating. Once again I'd suggest you to use a lot of soap." Looking disdainfully at the yellow flecks on Ron's skin, Snape put away his wand. "Don't over extend yourself. No stupid stunts for at least a day. I know it may be a lot to ask, but please try."

With that, he left the room.

Ron watched him walk out, the black robes billowing. Then he turned to Harry, looking incredulous. "Can you believe that bastard? All concerned about his stupid exam!"

Sighing, Harry shook his head. He should have known Ron wouldn't hear the slightly teasing note in Snape's words. "He was joking, Ron. You know? A joke. Saying something funny."

"Yeah. Right. Snape made a joke." Ron rolled his eyes.

Sometimes Harry could be so damn blind. Must be because of all the time he'd been forced to spend with Snape in super secret meetings or something.

Harry decided to drop the matter. "I'll get you something to eat." He was certain the soup was still warm. It was better not to tell Ron that Snape had cooked; that would just make him splutter and make rude comments. "Then I'll take you to the river. Let's stay away from bushes and snakes for a while, okay?"

"Yes, mother." Sticking out his tongue, Ron leaned against the cushions again. He sniffed the air, noticing the alluring scent wafting from the kitchen. "So what are we having for lunch?"
Evenings were finally back to normal. Or as normal as they ever got around here.

Harry was keeping his gaze on the notebook, marveling at his handwriting. The notes had been made during his first and second year, when he'd still studiously copied most of the things his professors had said. It was kind of sad to read the clear text now, when his most recent notes were barely understandable.

Shrugging the thought about the way he scribbled things these days out of his mind, he tried to concentrate on the text. He didn't really have to worry about writing badly right now. The worst was over.

They had taken the written part of the Potions exam that afternoon. Snape had given them one extra day to read, but that was the extent of his generosity. Since Ron had recovered well, there had been no need to postpone the dreaded exam.

To be quite honest, Harry had been relieved. He'd spent so much time reading about potions, his head was almost spinning. He just wanted to get the whole thing over with.

There had been a moment of total panic when Snape had handed them the scrolls, revealing the few questions that would measure the knowledge they had gained during their seven years of studying. It had passed quickly as Harry had read through the questions. He'd known he wouldn't get top score from the N.E.W.T.s -- especially the Potions -- but he'd been fairly sure he would pass. Writing down his answers, he'd known he was not going to fail the written exam.

It had been strange to actually be confident of such a thing. Had to be because of all the evenings he'd spent in Snape's rooms reading textbooks. Having listened to the things the man had told him helped. He wondered if anyone else had known to mention Dugbog eyes while writing the essay about love potions.

Harry turned the page. He couldn't really concentrate on the text, but he knew he had to try. They had two days to get ready for the final part of the exam and he had no illusions about Snape being lenient. The potion they'd have to brew would undoubtedly be difficult and challenging.

Next to him, he could hear Ron fidget and mumble something to himself. That distracted him from his efforts to try to study. Unfortunately, the distraction was not welcome this time.

It had been like that for almost three days now. He'd thought Ron would mellow a bit after such a close call. Malfoy hadn't turned into a total bastard, even though his smirk was back. There didn't seem to be a reason for those two to fight.

Still, they did. All the time. Mostly with glares and angry glances, but sometimes Ron threw in a few curt words and muttered curses.

Harry didn't know what drove Ron to such behavior. There hadn't been much time for him to talk to his friend about it, but he doubted Ron even knew the reason himself. It almost seemed as if the need to be nasty towards Malfoy came from his subconscious. It was definitely irrational now.

They were all concentrating on the exam, reading and practicing for the last part. Harry had no idea of what would happen afterwards, when the four of them had to spend weeks upon weeks in the cottage, trying to coexist peacefully.

Maybe he should talk about it with Snape. He might have some suggestions. If nothing else worked,
Snape could talk to Malfoy who would definitely listen to the Head of his House. Harry would have to deal with Ron somehow. The problem was, he had no idea how, not even if he knew what was driving him to rage.

"I'll go to bed now." Shutting his notebook softly, Draco got to his feet. He looked at his professor. "Good night, sir." He didn't even glance at the other end of the room as he turned around and walked out of the living room.

Snape nodded back at him, barely turning his attention from the huge book he was browsing through.

The mood in the room seemed to mellow a bit. Ron was definitely less tense but he did keep glancing warily at Snape every once in a while. He was still confused about what had happened to him; from being bitten to waking up naked and covered with dry and itchy potion, it was all a haze. A part of him wanted to know exactly what had happened, but he hadn't asked Harry about all the details. He wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

He waited for Malfoy to return from the outhouse before getting up and going out himself. He hoped the git had shooed most of the insects away, so he wouldn't have to do that himself.

If he saw one more spider inside the loo, he'd probably have a mental breakdown.

As the door slammed shut behind Ron, Harry lowered his notebook to his lap. It was the first time he had the chance to be alone with Snape for a few days. He wanted to spend these few moments quietly with Snape, with no worries, but he really couldn't.

"Have you found any good potions that will probably make us all go insane yet?" He knew there would be a glare, but asked anyway.

Snape raised his gaze from the book. "I doubt most of you would need a potion to achieve such state." The glare was pointed at the doorway, speaking volumes. "But to answer that pathetic attempt of fishing out clues, no, I haven't decided on the potion yet, Potter."

"I would never fish for clues!" There was actually real outrage in Harry's voice. He was not idiotic enough to think he'd ever actually succeed in such an attempt with Snape. "And you know that."

Snape didn't say anything, but his gaze was definitely not angry. He did know that. Harry was a Gryffindor after all. He wouldn't cheat on this.

Small talk was never a good idea with Snape. Harry had known that since the beginning, but something had made him try. It was probably the whole topic he was thinking of; talking about Ron and his problems felt like betrayal somehow.

There was no one else to talk to. Back home he'd have talked with Hermione, but she wasn't here. He was at a loss and knew Snape would probably have some insight on what was driving Ron to fight with Malfoy all the time.

"I need to talk to you about something." The words were so familiar. They had once been the prelude to an incoherent ramble or a softly spoken problem Harry had spent nights trying to solve. He didn't need that anymore, hadn't needed for a long time now.

Snape didn't even bother to pretend he didn't know what was going on. He'd got used to seeing Harry without the haunted look. "Weasley and Malfoy."

"Yes. They're really starting to bug me. Sometimes I just want to tell them to go and smack each
other for an hour or two and get over it, but I don't think that would work. They're so caught up in this... whatever, that they'd probably kill each other."

It did sound probable. "It does seem like that, yes." How amazing that Harry wasn't blaming young Malfoy. "Have you talked to your friend about this?" Not that talking would do any good. From his experience with the brood of redheaded children, Snape knew that the Weasley skull was thicker than the standard cauldron.

"No." The way Harry said it clearly illustrated that he didn't think that would work either.

A log fell in the fireplace, making them both startle slightly. Watching the fire burn was an excellent way to fill the silence following Harry's denial.

The silence couldn't last forever. Harry knew he had to address the real problem behind the big angry mess Ron and Malfoy had got themselves into.

"Ron really hates Malfoy." It wasn't surprising, really. The blond pureblood had been a pain in the arse for years. But things had changed. "Even now. I know he's an arrogant bas..." At Snape's raising eyebrow, Harry still finished the word as he'd intended. "Bastard. But he did turn his back on Voldemort, and he did save Ron's life."

That was something he couldn't really understand.

Snape's expression could have been a smile if not for the cold look in his eyes. "Do you remember your first year at Hogwarts? The way your Potions master seemed to be so thrilled about having the son of James Potter in his classroom." He could see from the faint flinch that the boy did indeed. "It's no wonder Mr. Weasley doesn't like Draco Malfoy."

"That's different. If you'd stopped acting like a bear that's been shot in the arse, I wouldn't have hated you anymore. You provoked me after you saved my life and got even nastier than before. But Malfoy's just trying to stay out of Ron's way. It's different."

"I know." Snape was actually amazed of Harry's words. He could understand people flinging his personal traits at his face -- the 'nasty, evil and sarcastic' usually accompanied by at least one slur at his outer appearance -- but to have it commented on in passing was new.

He couldn't really believe he'd brought up the subject himself either. It wasn't like him to explain his actions, especially when thinking about the whole mess with the four Gryffindors. Everything that had happened with them, including the incident a few years earlier in the old house in Hogsmeade, had been a total disaster.

Not exactly cherished memories he wanted to visit often.

The situation between young Weasley and young Malfoy was getting more complicated every day now. He needed to make Harry understand what was behind such behavior, in case he tried to stick his nose into it. He probably would. After all, he was a Gryffindor.

"Ron can't see anything good in Malfoy." Frowning a little, Harry asked, "You think it's because he doesn't want to feel grateful? Like you didn't... Well, you know." It was something he'd never talked about with Snape, knowing the other man didn't want to dwell in the past. The curt comment a moment ago had been about their past, not about Snape's own private demons.

Now there was amusement in Snape's eyes, the half smile making him look even more evil than the scowl. "Yes, I do remember. I doubt it's that simple in this case. Your friend has hated Draco since the beginning. I'm certain both Arthur and Lucius warned their sons about each other. I on the other
hand never really felt anything towards your father and his idiot friends before..." He was not going to go there, so he cut his original thought and finished with, "...one of them tried to kill me."

Harry accepted that with a nod. He knew well that Snape wasn't talking about Remus when he talked about what had happened in the Shrieking Shack. It was one of the things he didn't talk about with Sirius. His godfather did seem to regret the whole thing, but not because of Snape.

Not a good basis for a deep conversation.

When Ron came back from the loo and private conversation with Snape became impossible, he was still thinking about the whole thing. He didn't concentrate on what had happened decades ago, since he couldn't change anything about that. Didn't want to think about stupid things his father and his friends might have done out of spite.

Thinking about the way Snape had commented on their earlier relationship was much easier, even though it did make him feel a bit strange. Snape had clearly hated him back then. In a way he could understand it, but it had become a distant memory now.

He simply couldn't see Snape like that anymore. He doubted Snape saw him like that either. If he did, he wouldn't talk to him like he was a person, he'd treat him like a student like he so obviously still did with both Ron and Malfoy.

Smiling, Harry sat there, staring at the flames in the fireplace until it was time to go to bed.

The bedroom wasn't completely dark with all the light coming from the moon. Ron had burrowed under his blankets and was now snoring slightly. He'd been a bit tired all day since he'd stayed up late the previous night, trying to memorize more stuff from his potions books.

He'd fallen asleep a few minutes after going to bed. Not even the angry thoughts about Malfoy could keep him awake.

Harry on the other hand was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't really see much without his glasses, just a hazy outline of the rafters. It didn't matter. He wasn't interested in looking at stuff anyway. He was too busy thinking.

Watching Ron huff with annoyance every time he tried to mention Malfoy was really getting on his nerves. The constant bickering was destroying his peace, the illusion the cottage had provided. He knew their calm coexistence couldn't last forever and that they would have to return to the real world eventually. This was probably his only chance for real relaxation and serenity for a long time and he wanted to enjoy it a moment longer.

He had to admit that he couldn't leave all his responsibilities behind. He was concerned about Ron and while that concern could just be something a friend should show in a situation like this, it was becoming more than that. Maybe he did take this too seriously, but he really didn't need to be dealing with Ron's problems right now, especially when after the Potions exam, they would have to start talking about the war again. There were strategies and plans they'd have to think of. There would be no more time to simply enjoy his life.

Annoyed by the darkness of his own thoughts, Harry sat up. He wasn't tired and lying here would just make his head hurt. Maybe he'd go to sit by the window. That had always calmed him back home, sitting and staring at the landscape opening from the castle, Hedwig sitting next to him and cooing softly. He put on his glasses, not wanting to invite the headache by staring blearily into the blurry haze either.
It was pretty here. The sights and scents reminding him of home.

A soft sound made Harry tense. Down below, the door had just been opened and then shut quietly. If he hadn't sat here, he wouldn't have probably even heard that.

None of the wards reacted to the thing. Still, Harry moved to grab his wand. The movement was instinctual, the alarms going off in his head. Wards might fail. The Death Eaters knew lots of charms, and even though Snape had probably checked their wards every day, someone could get lucky.

Harry sneaked back to the window, keeping in the shadows as he peeked down. He didn't want to give anyone a big target by standing at the window. His hand was squeezing the wand tight.

What he saw made him tense. There was definitely someone out there, but they weren't coming towards the cottage. A dark figure was moving away from the door. A moment later Harry relaxed, lowering his wand. He'd recognize the man anywhere.

It was Snape. Probably going to the loo.

The shadows hid Harry's smile. He leaned against the window pane, relieved. The surge of adrenaline had chased away whatever tiredness he might have felt, so he decided to stand here for a moment longer, at least until Snape returned safely to the cottage.

His gaze followed the man. Frowning, he realized that Snape wasn't heading towards the small outhouse after all. That didn't make sense; he should know better than to go wandering off alone in the middle of the night.

Of course if he had some urgent business out there, he wouldn't come and ask for anyone to accompany him. Stubborn man!

Harry slipped his robe over his pajamas and then padded to the door. Carrying his shoes, he walked down the stairs, making sure none of the boards creaked. He didn't want to wake anyone up. When he reached the door, he put on his shoes and the heavy outer robes. Silently, he slipped out and followed Snape.

The full moon was hanging high in the sky, illuminating the whole landscape. It made Harry smile a little. A wolf moon. One that made even the most level headed wizard want to howl.

Remus was probably doing that right now. Sitting back on his haunches on some meadow, accompanied by the black form of Snuffles by his side, his muzzle raised towards the sky as he sang the eerie song of untamed nature.

There were no sounds of the wolves here. The whole world seemed unnaturally calm as Harry trailed Snape. His steps were quiet, not even his robes making any sounds as he hurried after the other dark figure. It took Harry a moment to realize what Snape was doing, and when he did, he couldn't help grinning. Of course.

Moving slowly amongst the bushes, Severus Snape was gathering herbs.

Harry watched as the small silvery sickle the man was holding glistened in the moonlight. It was obvious this was something Snape had done often. One swift flick of his wrist, and the sharp crescent blade cut a small branch or a seemingly innocent weed.

Snape was clearly working, and it looked like he was enjoying his task enormously. Walking slowly from tree to tree, bush to bush, he spent moments just staring at some of the shadowy plants.
Darkness seemed to be the natural habitat for this man. Harry couldn't really think of him gathering flowers in the bright daylight. This was different; a part of what Snape had always been. Practical, but somehow appreciating his surroundings.

Harry liked it. Liked the silence and the peace surrounding them both. Sharing this with Snape, even though the other man didn't know he was here. He'd made sure of it, tiptoeing as quietly as he could.

"You should never try to follow someone hostile, Potter." Snape didn't look up from the ground, continuing to scrape the dirt from some roots as he addressed the boy who was trying to hide in the shadows. "Your tracking skills are rather dismal."

"What?" Startled by the words, Harry stepped away from the tree he'd used as a cover.

Snape dug up the small milky white root and then straightened himself, turning to look at Harry. Amusement was evident on his face. "The first rule of scouting. Don't slam the door behind you when you go after someone."

That made Harry fluster a bit, but he was also in awe of Snape's hearing. He hadn't slammed the door shut that hard. That would have probably woken Malfoy up, and he didn't want that to happen. "I have to remember that the next time I go after people who go out alone in the middle of the night even when we have agreed that no one should do anything as stupid as that."

"I think we also agreed that calling your professors stupid isn't productive." Not looking at all remorseful, Snape changed his basket to his other arm, brushing the dirt off his fingers. "Now go back to the house. I'll be all right."

As if Harry would obey such a command. "No." He walked closer to Snape. "If you insist on doing this now, I'll stay here too." He was not going to lose anyone. It didn't matter that their surroundings seemed peaceful -- not counting one irritated snake. He wasn't taking any chances.

"Look, Potter, I can't have you following me. We need more ingredients for the potions you three will brew, and you should not see what I'm gathering." Long experience told Snape that he couldn't order Harry right now. He would have to make him see reason, however unlikely that seemed.

Harry shook his head. "Your faith in my deduction skills is unfounded, Snape." Sometimes even he wondered where the sarcastic words came from. "But you can take off some points or even make me swear that I will not think of whatever weeds you're gathering before the day after tomorrow." There was no way he would leave Snape alone here.

Knowing that Harry would indeed swear that -- and would keep his word if it was upon his honor or something as Gryffindor as that -- Snape sighed. "Fine. Just try not to make a big ruckus."

He continued walking slowly through the small area of trees, hearing soft footsteps follow him. It made him once again wonder about Harry's stubbornness. On moments like this, he was certain he could have reduced every single Gryffindor House point and even hexed the boy before he'd left him be. It was annoying; the protectiveness was completely needless.

Still, Snape could recognize that in himself too. Usually it was aimed at his Slytherins, trying to urge them on in the world that would easily treat them as storybook villains. Duty had forced him to extend that protectiveness to Harry Potter, and it had slowly become a part of who he was.

Not paying attention to the quiet figure next to him, he collected more plants. He didn't just need ones for the potion his students would brew. Now that he was out here, he might as well collect all he could for future use. The full moon gave potency to most of the ingredients.
It didn't take long for him to fill his basket. Stretching his back slightly, Snape put his sickle back into his belt. He'd spend the next day working on some of the things he'd harvested, but he would definitely leave some as they were. It was a part of the exam, to prepare some ingredients to be used and not just grab cleaned roots and leaves.

A small smile flickered on Snape's lips as he imagined Weasley's expression as he'd grab some of the plants. He was one of the laziest students he'd ever met. It was quite probable that Weasley would ignore the instructions and simply toss the uncleaned fern roots into the potion he was brewing.

Neville Longbottom was not the only student to manage blowing up his cauldron.

Turning around, Snape could see Harry lean against a tree, looking around him with a bemused expression. A moment later the green gaze focused on him.

"I like the moon. It always makes me want to do crazy things. You know, something wild and impulsive." Eyes gleaming behind his glasses, Harry looked at Snape, wondering if he would understand what he was saying.

Snape shifted the small basket on his arm, sneering a little. "I fail to see how that differs from your usual behavior."

Ignoring the comment, Harry took a deep breath. "I think if I were an Animagus, I'd be some kind of a night creature. It would be wonderful to just let go and run free under the stars." His voice was hushed.

"Yes, I can see how that would be appealing to someone like you. Wild animals and young Gryffindors do bear some resemblance to each other."

Harry smiled at that. There were dozens of things he could say to that, ranging from a sarcastic quip about fluffy bunnies to something that would have reduced at least twenty House points from them if they were still at Hogwarts.

He didn't say anything. The night was too magical, too peaceful. He didn't want to hide behind random bickering.

Apparently Snape didn't see any reason for another scathing remark either. He simply stood there, staring at Harry.

How amazing that he was actually enjoying the repartee. Harry was different from the other two youngsters who were probably snoring the night away in the cottage. He didn't cringe or fret in his presence, still not treating him overly disrespectfully either. Almost as if he saw him as an equal. It was somewhat disturbing, for Snape didn't really want to lose his authority in the eyes of someone he'd always considered a brat.

Potter wasn't all that bad. Discerning enough to see that Snape didn't allow impudence in front of others.

Unlike some who would never understand that. Snape felt a small muscle on his cheek twitch at the amusement of the thought. If young Malfoy were in Harry's shoes, he'd exploit his leniency without mercy. Not this stubborn fool.

Harry saw the brief flash of something like laughter in Snape's eyes, feeling light headed at the sight. Who would have thought he'd be standing here in the middle of the night with his sarcastic Potions master, sharing a silent joke with him? It made his stomach flutter. "Snape..." He had no idea what he was going to say.
"We should probably head back to the cottage." Feeling the night close in on them, Snape could well understand how even the Muggles could sense strange tidings in the pale disc of the full moon. He was done with his harvesting. No need to linger out here.

"I know." Harry thought about the small room upstairs where Ron was snoring, probably having weird dreams about Malfoy. He was in no hurry to go back there. He liked it here with Snape.

It was clear that Snape didn't feel the need to return to their little hideaway quickly either. He stood there, looking unusually relaxed, his black gaze a striking contrast against his ghostly white skin.

Harry couldn't help staring at him. He had seen this man naked and yet he'd never seen him as open and approachable as now. It had to be a trick, the shadows cast on the angular face playing with his mind. Still, he was overwhelmed with images of Snape letting his guards down with him. The concentration on his face when he worked on his potions while Harry studied in his rooms. The absentminded look that sometimes accompanied the second cup of tea he drank, clearly indicating he wasn't exactly thirsty, but was indulging himself.

The relaxed expression on the completely exhausted man that day he had returned from the Malfoy Mansion with Minerva McGonagall. Harry doubted he'd ever forget that look. It had made him pull the covers over Snape when his initial plan had simply been to assist the man to his bed so that he wouldn't just collapse on the floor.

He had pulled back then, his hand freezing a moment before brushing a lock of greasy hair away from Snape's face. The memory of that moment had followed him, even though he'd tried really hard not to think about the whole thing.

Because it was utter madness. Even more demented than harboring dark thoughts about the future. A sign that he was indeed losing his mind.

Now that they were both standing here, it didn't sound so foolish; didn't make Harry wonder about his sanity. The fluttering feeling was in his stomach again, stealing his breath away. This time he had a name for the feeling, and it had nothing to do with fear. His gaze locked with Snape's, Harry leaned slightly forward. No, this didn't seem weird after all. It felt right.

And now he was going to kiss Snape.

Snape swallowed as Harry moved closer. There was a hesitant look in Harry's eyes, glistening in the bright moonlight.

The night that had felt so peaceful a moment ago was now filled with strange sensations. Snape wondered if it was a warning of something malignant approaching.

Hoped that the tension was simply a figment of his paranoid imagination.

He didn't know why Harry was still staring at him like that. Such scrutiny usually made him want to walk away, hide from the surprisingly intelligent gaze. He couldn't read the emotion on Harry's face. It could be anything.

He leaned closer. Maybe he was just imagining things.

Like the slight intake of breath, the dilating pupils. Lips that were slowly parting, as if Harry was about to say something without a sound. The way his own fingers tightened their hold on the small basket, needing to grab onto something real.

Warmth was coursing through his veins, making his skin tingle. A reaction from within, not a charm
crawling all over him. Something in the air was making him dizzy, and his mind was trying to come up with explanations for it.

He was probably not wearing enough clothes. It was chilly up here, and the strange warmth was probably something his tired mind was conjuring up. The moon could influence him more than he wanted to admit. It could be anything.

He just didn't know.

The dark fire in the young man's eyes certainly wasn't helping him to figure it out. It almost looked like Harry was... "Now, Potter. We should go back right now."

The hoarse words broke the spell, and Harry recoiled back. He felt heat rise to his face and nodded. Yes. They'd better go back right now. Then he could go to the room he shared with Ron and crawl under the bed and never come out again. "Yeah."

Turning back to the small path leading to the cottage so fast his foot almost slipped, Snape wondered what had just happened. He refused to even think about what it had felt like.

No. He had not felt anything, just like the look in Harry's eyes didn't really mean anything. It had simply seemed like the most famous teenager in the whole wizarding world was about to... hug him. Touch him somehow.

Sensing that Harry was following him silently, he sighed.

For the first time ever he wished the mangy mutt was there. Black would be able to coddle his godson and offer him hugs. He did not want to become Harry Potter's personal shoulder to lean on, or some kind of a parenting figure.

That was where they had started a few months ago; it had been the way he'd envisioned the whole thing. Not exactly how it had turned out to be. Their relationship was definitely not that simple, couldn't be explained with just one definition.

He refused to even think about that hazy look in the boy's eyes that had been replaced by intensity, because it had been an expression he'd never seen before. The closest thing he could think about was lust, and that had to be wrong. Lust never had affection and innocence in it.

There was also no way Harry Potter would look at him with lust in his gaze. The boy wasn't that foolish.

Harry was trying desperately to think of something to say, anything to break the very uncomfortable tension between them. He hadn't felt like this with Snape for a long time, and it chilled him. Even his embarrassment after the bathing incident hadn't been half this bad. "Um... Hey, is it true that professor Trelawney goes running naked outside the castle every full moon?" Maybe not the most intelligent thing to ask, but it was better than the silence.

It was a good thing Snape's face was turned away from the boy. At least now he didn't have to suppress the evil smirk. "You really think I would discuss the privacy of other teachers with you, Potter?" Waiting for a beat, he added, "I do however believe that most of the rumors circulating amongst the students are absolutely true."

The admission made Harry laugh. A breathless little sound that was pretty embarrassing.

Snape didn't wait for him to think of something intelligent to say, figuring that he would have to wait for a long time. They were almost at the cottage, the light coming from the windows downstairs
welcoming them back. Things would probably look normal tomorrow morning.

He held the door open, shutting it behind Harry and then locking it firmly. Now that he was back inside, he realized how cold it had really been outside. Strange, he hadn't really paid attention to it earlier.

Slowly stripping off his outer robes, Harry stood there in place, reluctant to move. His embarrassment was melting away, leaving all the other emotions behind. He didn't know what to do now. There were things he'd like to discuss with Snape, but he knew it wasn't the right time. He needed to sort things out on his own first.

"You should go to bed." Somehow the surrounding night was still making Snape speak softly.

Harry looked up at him again, the look in his eyes oddly wistful. "I know." He didn't want to go. If he could, he'd follow Snape into the small bedroom full of familiar scents, and spend the night on a chair.

He hesitated to ask the man if he could do it and not only because of Ron and Malfoy.

Something had happened out there to change things between Snape and him. It had brought the undercurrent of unease back, but also tension he'd never felt around this man. It had nothing to do with anger or hatred, no matter how it did burn in his belly.

It was more than desire to stay with someone he trusted and liked. Nothing as simple as that. Harry smiled slightly. "I know." Repeating the words quietly, he thought about the emotion that had driven him to follow Snape that night. Worry. Mixed with things that would have only months ago sounded ridiculous.


Torn between the need to have a moment for himself and the need to stay with Snape, he kept looking at the man, marveling the peace that was still surrounding them. It was unreal, especially because of the mortification that was still festering somewhere inside of him. Life had never felt more complicated, and he wondered what to do next.

In the end, he nodded quietly at Snape and then turned to the staircase. With a whispered, "Good night, Snape," he climbed upstairs.

Snape stood there in the small hallway, looking puzzled.

Part 11

After a poorly slept night, Harry wasn't at all surprised to wake up with a headache. Keeping his eyes closed, he lay there in bed, wishing he could fall back asleep.

Entangled in the sheets, feeling a bit sweaty, he couldn't pretend it was because of nightmares anymore. He couldn't remember having any dreams, good or bad. There was only a strangely satisfied feeling that had driven him to learn how to strip his bed and change the sheets before anyone else woke up when he'd been younger.

This time he knew it had nothing to do with extremely pleasant dreams leading to physical gratification.
He stayed there for a long time, trying to ignore the light shining through the window. Finally, he had to open his eyes. It was too bright in the room for him to sleep anymore.

Harry sighed. Things had been going so well lately. No melancholia, no insomnia. He couldn't understand what was happening to him.

It couldn't all be because of the weird conversation with Snape. Or the... thing with Snape.

The thing with Snape.

Staring at the ceiling, he repeated the words in his mind. Exploring the feelings they brought. Peace and calm. Sometimes heated conversations. Things he would add up to friendship if not for the fact that he had tried to kiss the man less than ten hours ago.

He closed his eyes again, as if to shut out the memory. It didn't work. Blocking out the hazy sight of the rafters just brought the images clearer to his mind. He tried to push them away, determined not to think about Snape like that. There was no way he would spend one moment reminiscing about the look in the man's eyes last night in the woods. Or thinking about the way water had rinsed away soap from his naked body.

Groaning, Harry opened his eyes again as his mind completely disobeyed him. Why couldn't he stop thinking about insane things, just this once?

He could bet he was the only one with this strange trouble sleeping. The house was quiet except for Ron's soft snuffling. Malfoy was probably asleep as well. From what he'd gathered, the Slytherin wasn't especially a morning person.

Snape would be downstairs. He'd been up late, so he'd probably still lie there on his bed, dressed in that silly looking night robe he'd worn back at Hogwarts. Harry wondered if he always slept curled into a ball. When he'd helped Snape to bed, he'd held the covers tight and twisted around as if trying to hide amongst the sheets.

The memory that had been somehow warming was suddenly making Harry hot.

Cursing his stupid thoughts, he turned to his side. This wasn't happening! Seeing Snape naked could not change things like this, spending time together and moonlit walks shouldn't make him think these things. This was simply a proof of his twisted imagination. A hormonal thing.

Too bad he wouldn't get rid of the mental image by going to talk to the man. It would have made things so much easier if he could walk downstairs to Snape's room and sit there on the chair while he worked things out with him. By talking. Nothing more. Definitely nothing more.

He realized his hand was moving slowly down his belly towards the rather shocking reaction the thoughts he tried to ignore were causing and sat up, placing his palms on the bed.

This had to stop. Now.

"Good morning!" A yawn followed Ron's words. "Hey, you're awake! Is everything all right?" He couldn't help teasing his friend.

Harry grinned at Ron's question, wondering what he'd say if he answered honestly. There would probably be no words, just spluttering. "Yes, everything's fine." He'd got good with lying, his voice revealing nothing of his inner turmoil.

"Cool." Not needing to lie in bed and curse the fact that he was awake like some people he could
mention, Ron got up, gathering his clothes from the floor and sniffing them before starting to pull them on.

After a moment, Harry followed suit, grabbing his clothes from the closet. He'd accomplish nothing by staying in bed. His thoughts would still be there even if he was munching breakfast. Putting on his glasses, he busied himself with getting dressed.

His mind was still focused on his problem.

He should never have gone to Snape in the first place. Then he wouldn't like the man or think insane thoughts about him. Things would be perfect if he was still the nasty Potions master who barked out his name like the most vile curse ever invented and treated him like scum.

If he hadn't spent time together with him, finding a strange feeling of home in the dungeons. If only he hadn't seen Snape naked.

It should have been the most disgusting moment of his life. It should have scarred his psyche, terrified him. And damn it! Snape should have looked ugly or creepy or at least he should have had hairy back!

Harry banged his forehead against the wall.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Worried, Ron sat on his bed and stared at his friend. There was something he really needed to ask, but hadn't been certain if he should. Now he thought he kind of had to.

"I... I have no idea. Ask me after breakfast." Harry tried to make a joke out of it. He could tell by the look in Ron's eyes that he had failed miserably.

"This thing wouldn't have anything to do with what happened last night?"

The question froze Harry. Since when had Ron turned into a mind reader? "What do you mean?" He hoped his voice didn't really sound as weak as he thought. He was definitely panicking.

Keeping his expression blank, Ron said, "I noticed you went out for a walk last night." He nodded slightly at the wince he saw on Harry's face. "First I thought you'd just gone to the outhouse, but you were gone awfully long." Of course it didn't mean he'd gone somewhere other than to the small red toilet, but the wince had proven his suspicions right.

"Yeah, I did go for a walk." Harry kept his gaze on his best friend. Something in Ron's voice made him realize he couldn't evade the questions anymore. If he lied, he would seriously damage the friendship that meant the world to him.

Ron tilted his head. "So? You went out there all alone, and all you can say is that?" He tried to keep his voice level. Honestly. He didn't really succeed.

"No. Not alone."

The quiet admission was a surprise. Blanching, Ron wondered if Malfoy was playing some kind of a game with Harry too. The thought made him burn with rage, a strange mixture of anger and awful jealousy. "With Malfoy?" He was going to kill him.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Malfoy? No." He decided not to make any comments about Ron's tone. After all, right now, he was the last person to say anything about weird relations with Slytherins.
"Then who... Oh." Realizing it was a stupid question, Ron paused. Then he yelled, "Snape? You went out for a walk with Snape?"

"Yes." What a strange thing really. A simple, enjoyable walk with someone he was perfectly comfortable with. Not even the almost-kiss had managed to ruin their companionable mood.

"Are you insane? Why the hell would you go for a... With Snape? Why?" Ron knew that there had been Order meetings from which he'd been excluded and that Harry tried to pretend that Snape was a human being, but this was too much. Unbelievable. Crazy.

The obvious shock made Harry smile slightly. Yes, that would have been his own reaction six months ago, but not anymore. It had nothing to do with the strange attraction he felt towards Snape, it was much more complicated than that. "I think I need to tell you something. Promise not to yell." It was a good thing Ron was already sitting down.

"Okay."

Harry took a deep breath and released it slowly before saying, "I got to know Snape better after the holidays. Really know him. And... I like him." What an innocent word to use, but it was the truth. Or at least a part of the truth.

"What?" Feeling heat rise to his face, Ron jumped to his feet. "How the hell can you like him? He's an evil, nasty, greasy evil man! He's spent years torturing us! Giving his stupid Slytherins points and taking out ours with no reason! He's disgusting! And evil!"

It would have been quite amusing to listen to Ron splutter if Harry just liked the man. The words made him angry, not only because they were partly true, but because he couldn't believe in them anymore. "You sound like Sirius there." Realizing his voice betrayed his anger, he took a deep breath. "I know. But I still like him."

Ron couldn't believe what he was hearing. He'd noticed Harry and Snape weren't exactly trying to tear each other apart with sarcasm anymore, but this was just ridiculous.

Trying to calm down, he managed to ask, "Why?" Could there be any reason for anyone to like Snape?

There was nothing Harry could really say. He could list plenty of reasons. Snape was smart, he had an evil sense of humor he rather liked. He was loyal, but not blind, and honest to the point of outright cruelty. There was something calming in his presence, a shared understanding of how it was to be labeled by the public. For a nasty Potions master, Snape could be surprisingly gentle in his own way.

It had taken him some time to realize it, but now Harry could clearly see that Snape must not completely loathe him anymore either. Ever since he'd first gone to see him, he had tolerated his presence. Now it was more like quiet companionship. It almost made him light headed, knowing that Snape wasn't doing any of it because he was the great Harry Potter.

That nonexisting hero had been scorned and then tolerated.

He was treated like a person.

None of that would make sense to Ron, he knew. Especially since Ron had never been where he had been for so many years; locked in loneliness and then showered with mindless adoration. Even if he could make his friend see all his reasons, he couldn't tell him everything he knew and felt about Snape. It would feel like betrayal.
"I just do. He's..." He searched for the words, dismissing such as 'a good man' and the good old 'not that bad' immediately. "He's different outside the class. I can't explain it, but I like him anyway."

Ron shook his head. "You're barmy." There was nothing different about Snape. He was a cruel man who didn't seem to care about anything but his stupid potions.

Shrugging, Harry stood up. "Probably." The grin he flashed at Ron wasn't even forced. He'd known the whole conversation was pointless.

"But..." Now Ron was completely lost. Was Harry joking? The glint in his eyes seemed to suggest that he found this whole thing funny. It was definitely not a sentiment he could share. He stared at his friend, not knowing what to say.

It was clear their conversation wasn't going anywhere. Harry said, "Don't worry about it. Let's go and have some breakfast."

He ignored Ron's suspicious looks and headed downstairs. It was weird, but he felt better after their little talk. Probably because of how he'd been forced to remember just why exactly he'd stopped hating Snape in the first place.

Breakfast was already served as they arrived. Harry smiled briefly at Snape before concentrating on his food. He was determined not to do anything stupid right now. Opening his mouth before he could have time to think about what was going on would definitely be seen as idiotic.

Ron on the other hand kept glaring at both Malfoy and Snape. He had no idea what was going on with Harry, but he for one was not going to start liking Slytherins. Especially the blond one. There had been a moment when he'd been almost relieved when Harry had said he'd sneaked out with Snape instead of Malfoy. It would have been a disaster, Harry being friendly with that git.

There were lots of things he was willing to face. That was not one of those things.

The day was very much like the previous ones; filled with moments of revelation and utter panic as the three students went through various books, scrolls and notepads. The living room was a complete mess of parchment scrolls and books littering every available surface. No one wanted to fail the exam. Snape would surely make their lives hell if they did, humiliating them with snide comments about lack of brains.

Turning the page, Harry lifted his gaze up from the book for a moment to look at Snape. Yes. There would be biting sarcasm if they didn't pass. None of them would be spared, not even him. He wouldn't expect to be.

He smiled a little before continuing reading. It was weird to think of Snape right now. Not because he was feeling uncomfortable around him, quite the opposite actually. Crushes had always made him all squirmy and awkward. Lust had always been simple. This was different.

Friendship, or as close to friendship Snape would ever allow them to get. Companionship. Harry felt peaceful with him, even though there were moments when he wanted to yell at him, mainly when they were arguing about something.

He didn't want to change that now. He needed the peace and quiet. It wouldn't be that difficult to ignore this whole thing and concentrate on what was familiar to him.

Right now that meant reading through his notes once again.

On the other side of the room, Draco was hunched over a huge volume, looking like he was
enthralled by the text. He wasn't paying attention to the ancient potions recepies, his thoughts spinning in circles.

There had been that strange expression on Potter's face again; the smile that held no dark emotions in it, and it was aimed at Snape. He couldn't tell himself he was imagining things anymore, he'd seen that expression too often now. It was probable that Snape was aware of it too. Nothing usually escaped his attention. Yet, there were no cruel words or retributions.

It was curious. Draco couldn't decide which was more shocking, Potter's obvious relaxation near Snape or seeing Snape allow such coziness. If it was anyone other than those two, he would call this mellowness between them with a phrase he'd known since his early teens. All the looks and almost friendly banter were only strengthening his conviction that this was indeed a familiar game he was watching.

With Potter and Snape, he was going to have to find another definition. He wasn't certain he'd find one. It didn't really matter. His contemplations wouldn't change anything.

Noticing how Weasley bristled in the corner, Draco had to hide a grin. Well now. Maybe this did change things. He was not stupid enough to go discussing his professor's behavior with a Gryffindor, but he would indeed drop hints and suggestions when he had the chance to be alone with Weasley.

After all, when the exams were over, he'd have nothing better to do. Taunting Weasley was always his preferred sport.

Lunch was a welcome break from all the studying, a brief interlude, followed by more reading. In a way it was easier for everyone to concentrate on the books after lunch, for Snape retired to his room. It somehow lessened the tension but at the same time, it reminded everyone of tomorrow's ordeal. Snape was probably getting everything ready, or maybe he was grading their essays. Neither sounded very calming.

Knowing that this was the last time they'd ever have to study Potions helped. At least it made Ron and Harry feel a lot better.

Harry grabbed yet another scroll, sighing as he read the header. Of course. He'd completely forgotten about protective charms and clothing. They hardly ever brewed anything really dangerous in class. It would be so like Snape to have them do that now.

Maybe Snape had been right. He hated all these little details, wishing they'd just be given a Potion to brew with detailed instructions. That would not be easy, but he was certain he could manage. Having to remember all the ways to protect people and things, the ways to cut ingredients, the ways to keep up the fire under the cauldron and then adding ingredients and stirring the potion was making his head spin.

He wished they could have had N.E.W.T.s on flying. At least then he could have excelled in something.

By dinnertime, he was completely dizzy. He knew he'd have to read more before going to bed, but was seriously afraid that it would make his head explode.

All he needed was to be able to remember this until tomorrow. Then he could happily forget everything he'd ever read about ladles and ingredients. In a way it felt stupid. Was there any point of studying for years just to pass a damn exam? It wasn't like he was going to need all this knowledge. He could manage to brew simple potions -- like the one to cure boils -- on his own but if he needed anything more complicated, he'd just buy it.
He knew by now that he would never be a Potions master, so all this reading felt utterly senseless.

Eppy had obviously been offended by their invasion in her kitchen. It had sparked some kind of a professional grudge in her. The dinner was excellent, a far cry from the usual tasty but simple food.

It was very nice. Harry kept munching happily, trying not to laugh at the small house elf standing by the door and looking smug.

He would definitely have fun describing her to Hermione.

Enjoying the meal was a good way to relax. Harry wondered if he could indeed go back to the books again. Maybe he should just go to bed early and hope a good night's sleep would clear his thoughts. He knew for a fact that he would need his wits tomorrow.

"All right, gentlemen."

It didn't matter that Snape had spoken quietly. Harry startled, wincing a moment later as Ron dropped his fork on the plate. Taking a deep breath, he looked up at Snape. "Yes?"

"We will start the exam tomorrow morning at ten. You'll need your books with you, and you should bring your wands as well, even though you will not be allowed to keep them most of the time while you work." Snape had seen some very bizarre attempts to cheat during his career and was determined to have everyone's wand where he could see them. "After you receive your results we can decide on what to do next."

He didn't even have to look at Harry. They both knew what would happen. The simple days of studying for the exam would be over, replaced by real work with training for the war.

Harry sighed. Considering what they would most likely face when they went back home, it was not hard to guess what they'd be working on from now on. It almost made him wish they could continue working on Potions. He hated them, but at least they never made him feel empty inside.

"Yes, sir." It was good that someone had a plan. Draco had no idea what would happen after this. His life was in professor Snape's hands for a little longer, until he reached his eighteenth birthday. After that, he would have to work something out.

The others seemed to be focusing on the fight against the Dark Lord and his people. He wasn't certain he wanted to be a part of that, knowing the power they wielded. Fighting would be stupid, they'd probably all get killed.

Then again, it was probable he would get killed anyway. He knew his father, knew that after his deception he would never stop trying to find him. There was no place on this earth where he could hide from Lucius Malfoy's wrath.

He'd go with the flow. Finish studying for the easiest of N.E.W.T.s and then concentrate on this side of the war.

"We have lots of things to figure out." None of the things Harry really wanted to talk about. But the world had never cared about what he wanted. "I think it's best to deal with them here." He looked at Snape for the first time. The shared understanding of all the things they'd have to go through was almost overwhelming.

It made Harry drop his gaze after a few seconds.

"As long as I never have to do laundry again, everything's all right," Ron muttered, casting an angry
look at Malfoy. He didn't know exactly what the others were planning, but he was definitely going to refuse if it had anything to do with him working together with the git again.

Instead of ignoring the glare, Malfoy sneered, "Well if you hadn't gone off wandering around the place, you wouldn't have been bitten."

That made Ron almost growl and he half rose from his chair. The sound of someone clearing his throat made him sit down again, the reaction immediate. It didn't matter what Harry said about Snape. He was not going to mistake of thinking he was friendly.

"I believe we all understand by now why no one should wander off alone." Snape's voice was slightly amused. After all, it had taken an almost lethal snake bite for some of them to learn the lesson.

Ron bristled at the words, but didn't say a thing.

"The wards will not be able to hold out every danger. We don't really know where we are, so there could be poisonous plants around here. Bathing can be dangerous if there are magical creatures in the water." It didn't really sound plausible in Snape's own ears, but then again with the dark creatures being imported to Britain -- and he knew for certain they hadn't left the island -- anything was possible. "Then there could be unfriendly Muggles around, so no hiking to the hills..."

A cough escaped Harry. Meeting the black gaze calmly, he added, "No gathering potions ingredients all alone in the middle of the night." Whatever else had happened last night, this was the most important thing.

Snape had known he'd make a comment about that. He glared, but didn't think he could say anything. It was the truth; he'd gone against the rules he'd set himself.

This was not the right moment for this conversation. They needed to concentrate on the exam first, then work on the rest. Snape knew that but had still allowed the peace and quiet to carry him away. His face hardened at the thought and he opened his mouth to change the subject back to tomorrow's exam.

Fearing that Harry's comment would lead into some kind of a retribution from Snape, Ron blurted out, "So... What do we do if we see Muggles out there?" He thought for a moment, realizing that wayward Muggles would probably be the least of their problems. "And what about Death Eaters? What are we supposed to do if they come after us?"

They were hiding, but Snape had said a couple of times that no place was completely safe. There was no way that Voldemort would get to know where they were, since the only one with that knowledge was Dumbledore. That didn't mean his people couldn't get lucky and stumble into the small cottage while on a raid.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Snape glanced at Harry, not at all surprised to see the understanding on the young man's face. Harry didn't seem to have any illusions about their situation. He turned to glance at Draco, who looked slightly baffled.

Changing the subject was impossible now. For once, these two young ones actually wanted to know what he and Harry already knew. They had not asked about things once since coming here, a willfull blindness Snape would have attributed on Gryffindors if Draco's silence hadn't been so painfully obvious. He couldn't ignore this.

Sighing, Snape said, "If we see any Muggles, we act casually. No magic, no panicking." That much
should be obvious. He wasn't sure just exactly how casually three pureblood wizards could act around Muggles, but they would have to try.

It would probably be a disaster.

"In case we meet Death Eaters... The best option is always to run as fast as you can. Otherwise, you'll end up fighting for your lives."

"I think Voldemort would want at least Potter alive." Draco almost managed to make that sound casual. "They'll probably try to kill the rest of us, though."

Harry agreed on that. "Yes. I bet some of them don't acknowledge any charms or curses but the Unforgivables. They'll probably concentrate on the death curse without even thinking about it."

Black robed, masked figures handing out pain and death. The ultimate terror.

"But... What if we can't run? We can't really Apparate, because we have no idea where we are." Ron had heard Charlie tell about some of his colleagues who'd tried to Apparate blindly in Romania after an encounter with a vicious Longhorn. There was no way he wanted to end up like those two.

None of the four men realized just exactly how deep a silence had followed Ron's words.

"If we can not run, we'll have to fight," Harry said quietly. He knew that was what he'd probably have to do even if he could run, at least if the others were still in danger.

Something told him he'd probably end up standing side by side with Snape, hurling curses at Death Eaters.

"The simple charms or curses won't probably work. Don't even bother with disarming charms or stupefying. If Voldemort's people start something... Well, two words work every time." It still horrified Harry to speak so easily of the curse that had killed his parents. It had disgusted him to actually use it, but he was well aware that a time would come when it would be the only way, and they all needed to know that.

Ron could only stare at his best friend; the person he'd known for almost seven years, who had always seemed to abhor violence. "What? You can't mean that we should..."

"Kill them. Yes. I believe that's exactly what he meant." Snape cut through the babble. "If it ever comes to deciding between you and them, you'll do whatever you need to survive."

It had been something Draco had thought a lot about in his lonely room. There would come a time when he would have to fight against people he'd known for all his life. People he'd called friends. Family.

He wondered how Snape had been able to survive his encounter with Greg's dad. Not because the older Goyle had been any smarter than his son was, but because there was a certain bond between housemates.

If it ever came to deciding if he should take the life of someone close to him, Draco feared he might hesitate. It would be the end. His opposites wouldn't stop, wouldn't think about loyalty. They would simply kill him. It didn't matter who he was then.

He'd made his choice; not to be like them, not to be like his father. He would never be a Death Eater, and he didn't want to die. So he'd better try his best to fight them. "Yes, sir."
Ron wasn't as easily convinced. "You really mean we should try to kill people?" It went against everything he'd been taught at Hogwarts. It was against the way his parents had raised him.

"Yes I do." The way the boy was obviously shocked by the mere thought both pleased and annoyed Snape. "If it means saving your own lives, then yes. You should kill them."

"Well that's easy for you to say!" Somehow the words escaped Ron before he could stop them. Instead of taking them back, he cast a sideways glance at Malfoy as if to add him to his comment, and then looked down.

Snape felt a surge of rage rush through him. This arrogant child didn't really understand anything. The accusation was so familiar, even though it was usually better veiled. He'd once been an idiot, doing stupid things that had led him into the murky world of dark magic. It seemed it had stained him for life, making everyone not only label him so simply, but also feel like it was their prerogative to fling comments at him like this.

"No, Ron."

Even Draco turned to stare at him. Was he really defending Snape?

Green eyes full of pain, Harry looked at Ron. This was the part of their reality he'd wanted to keep from his friends, the reason he'd insisted on excluding Ron and Hermione from the secret meetings and the inner circle of the Order.

He wished they'd never started this conversation. He'd gladly concentrate on Potions if he could forget all about this topic.

"The only people who truly enjoy using that curse are standing by Voldemort." Remembering tales of horror, he swallowed and added, "And maybe some of the old school Aurors as well."

There were always sick people fighting in all the wars. On both sides.

"It's not easy for him, and it's certainly not easy for me. So don't make comments about a thing you know nothing about." No anger. Only a memory of a terrible guilt.

It took Ron a few seconds to comprehend just exactly what Harry was trying to say. Then he went completely cold. "There is a difference between you and him." He didn't even try to hide the contempt in his voice. "He has killed people." Probably more than just Goyle's father.

Harry nodded. "So have I."

His words made both Ron and Draco gawk. Both had identical expressions of shock on their faces as they just stared at him.

The silence was suffocating. Harry didn't look at Snape, not wanting to see the look in the dark eyes. There would be no horror there, for Snape already knew what he was talking about. Not only because of the long hours spent in the dungeons when he'd tried to escape the memories that had haunted him every time he closed his eyes. They all knew; Snape, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Figg, Fletcher, Sirius and Remus. And at least one man outside the Order's inner circle. Bill Weasley.

He sometimes wondered if Mrs. Weasley knew as well. They had never talked about that night, but sometimes there was a look of sorrow on her face when she thought he wasn't paying attention.

Ron was trying desperately to think of what to say. He knew Harry had blamed himself for Cedric's death for a long time, but he'd thought his friend had got over the guilt. Then a thought hit him. Of
course. "You didn't really kill him. Quirrel died because he was evil." Having a protective charm in
your very being wasn't killing.

"Ron... I'm not talking about Quirrel." Pre-empting the next words, Harry forced himself to say,
"And I'm not talking about the Triwizard contest either."

It was strange. Watching professor Quirrel die right before his eyes, the touch of his skin destroying
the man, had not haunted his nightmares for long. Unlike Cedric's death. There had been nights,
when he'd thought he'd lose his nightmares for long. Unlike Cedric's death. He had been innocent, not a
part of the fight. He shouldn't have been there, shouldn't have died like that.

Snape didn't make a move, silently watching the three young men. He'd thought they would start
talking about the war after the final exam, giving the three some time to focus solely on the Potions.
The conversation that had started as one of the endless fights between Weasley and Malfoy had felt
like a good opportunity to begin the dialogue with the youngsters.

He'd never thought it would come to this.

Seeing the determination on Harry's face, he stayed silent, simply observing. He knew what had
happened a few years ago, had known since the first meetings they'd had with their small group. Had
heard more details this spring. Even though he knew it was painful to Harry, he suspected it would
be even more painful for Weasley to hear.

"Remember the night when we celebrated Bill's promotion?" Harry asked. He was sure Ron would
remember it. The way all the Weasleys and Harry had gathered in the Burrow to honor Bill's new
status as the Assistant Deputy Head of the Cursebreaking Department of Gringotts. It had been a
wonderful evening, full of laughter and good food.

Until the Death Eaters came.

Ron nodded at that. Of course he remembered. "Sure. You were staying with us for the whole July,
because..." He didn't think he should say anything about Harry's relatives. It would just give more
ammunition to Snape and Malfoy. "Well, you know."

"Yes. We had the party, and then there were suddenly Death Eaters all over the place." Such a
simple way to describe the utter panic. Everyone reaching for their wands, trying to protect their
loved ones and fight at the same time.

"I remember mum yelling at Percy to get Ginny away from there." Her words had actually included
both younger children, but Ron was not about to say that in front of Malfoy. "Then he and Penny
grabbed Ginny and me and we Apparated."

They had left the chaos behind, but the fear had remained. It had been a horrible night. First waiting
for the others to join them; then the terror when his mum, Bill and Harry had stayed behind.

Harry didn't want to do this. Not now, not ever. But he had to. "You know how they said that the
attack was aimed at Bill, and that the Death Eaters didn't even know I was there at the time? That
was true. They wanted to blackmail Gringotts." He sighed. "But when they realized they couldn't
grab him easily, they tried to kill him."

Nausea swept over Ron. It was nothing he hadn't already guessed, but it still made him feel like he
was about to vomit. He almost wished Malfoy would say something nasty so that he could bury his
terror into rage once again, but the git was just sitting there, not saying anything.

"I kinda figured that out myself." No, he was definitely not thinking about the way Bill had shivered
for hours, his strong and brave big brother suddenly looking like a stranger.

"I thought you would. But... We had to fight them. Your mum distracted them long enough for us to... Well, it doesn't really matter. The point is, they wouldn't stop. I threw every curse I knew at them. So did Bill. He knew stuff I'd never even heard of, but in the end there was just one thing that stopped them."

Ron stared. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Maybe he was hearing wrong. "But... But... The Aurors came. They... They killed the Death Eaters, didn't they?"

"Yes." No emotion in Harry's voice. "They did kill some of them. And so did I."

It had been the hardest thing he'd ever done; to raise his wand, thinking about the words. In the end, they had come out easily, for he'd seen that nothing else would work. He'd had a choice; to kill or to watch Bill Weasley die.

Put that way, there hadn't been much of a choice, really.

Night terrors and awful guilt over the rush of magic that had surged through him that night could not make him regret that decision. Neither could the way Ron was slowly shaking his head right now.

He didn't know why this was so damn hard. It had been painful to talk about it with the others in the Order, but it had been a walk through the Quidditch pitch compared to this.

Ron tried to say something. No sound came out. He could only stare. It made no sense. Harry was his friend. He would have told him. There was no way he would have killed someone like that. Like he actually meant it.

He had never thought about the war like that. It felt foolish now, even after over a year of Order meetings, but somehow it had all felt like a game. They went through meetings where they talked about strategy and healing and protecting and gathering their forces. There had never been real talk about killing. The special DADA courses had been about recognizing dark powers and running away from them or hiding.

Killing had been something that only the Death Eaters did. Even then it was called murder. Slaughter. Defending yourself was all about life.

They really thought this would come to killing? Ron had always had a vague idea of Harry ending up destroying Voldemort, but he'd always thought the Aurors would come to deal with the actual war. He had been aware of the fact that there would be fighting, but he'd never known just exactly what it would mean.

Harry had killed someone? He didn't know which made him feel worse; the fact that his best friend had killed, or that he'd never told him.

Seeing the dozens of questions in Ron's eyes, Harry swallowed. He didn't want to do this right now. "I know this comes as a shock, but can we... Can we not do this now? Please?"

His friend wouldn't simply listen to him talk, like Snape had. He'd ask questions, not probably understanding half of his answers simply because he had never faced such a situation. Harry knew he would eventually have to do this, with Ron and Hermione. Probably others as well. But not now.

"An excellent suggestion, Potter." Snape nodded.

Flinching out of his shock, Ron turned his gaze away from Harry. "Huh?" He wasn't sure he'd heard
right. He wasn't sure about anything anymore.

Snape placed his empty cup on the table and reached for the teapot again. "So, we all agree to be careful out there. Still, we should discuss more about the dangers, after the exam. Gentlemen, you should go and refresh your memory of ingredients. I doubt any of you has had the brains to look into your Herbology books."

That made Harry get to his feet. He didn't even bother to mutter excuses before rushing upstairs.

As Ron stood up as if to follow him, Snape added, "Mr. Weasley. I will not postpone the exam because of Gryffindor emotionalism. I'd suggest you spend the rest of the evening studying and allow others to do so as well." His glare spoke volumes. "Now sit down and finish your meal."

It made Ron seethe with anger, but he did sit back down. After what Harry had just told him, how could he concentrate in Potions?

Merlin! Snape was such an unfeeling bastard.

How could Harry say he liked this man? This uncaring cold creep, who was now sitting there and sipping his tea calmly as if nothing had just happened. It made Ron bristle with anger, but Snape's icy glare kept him sitting at his place. He wanted nothing more than to go to Harry and talk to him; ask him about how he felt and try to help him somehow, if he could.

Stupid Snape! Damn him to the lowest of hells.

Ignoring Ron's murderous stare, Snape finished with his tea. He didn't hurry. It was best if he gave Harry some time alone.

The tension in the small dining area was tangible. He was actually surprised that Weasley could hold his tongue. Young Malfoy was of course concentrating on his cutlery, avoiding eye contact with anyone. He'd always been an intelligent boy.

Finally, Snape pushed his chair back. He didn't say anything, simply got up and walked out of the room, leaving the two youngsters to clean up the mess. He had more important things to do than to coddle young people who could perfectly well deal with themselves. If Weasley chose this moment to fight with Malfoy, he was welcome to. Snape simply didn't care.

Instead of following his initial plan and going to his room, he walked slowly up the stairs. Most of the portraits on the wall were staring at him with curiosity plain on their faces, some even tried to greet him. After all, they'd only seen him once before, when their sleepy peace had been disturbed by the arrival of four strangers.

Not paying any attention to the cheerful greetings, he moved on, not stopping until he reached upstairs. Casting a curious look around, he tried to think of which of the three doors would lead to the right room. Selecting one, he rapped his knuckles on the door. He didn't have to wait for long.

There was a bland expression of indifference on Harry's face, melting into a tired grimace as he saw Snape. He didn't have to pretend now, didn't have to show a brave front. "Hi."

Snape nodded slightly. "I came to see if you needed anything." His words were curt, but he did feel a twinge of genuine concern inside.

"I... I don't know." There were dozens of things Harry needed right now. Needed to stop
remembering, needed silence, but definitely didn't need to be alone. Didn't need any questions or compassion. Smiling wryly, he said, "I just need some sleep, I guess. I don't feel like reading anymore."

Words would simply dance on the paper, none of them making any sense. Last minute reading would be completely useless.

Snape pulled a small vial from a pocket inside his robes and offered it to Harry. He knew Harry didn't like taking potions usually, but this was a special occasion. Even if he didn't take it, he felt like he should offer it; the only kind of peace he could give Harry right now. "Maybe this will help."

"Thanks." Not bothering to even pretend he wasn't grateful, Harry took the vial. His fingers curled over the glass, his hand tingling with the warmth emanating from it.

There were no other words, no explanations. No polite inquiries or small talk. Snape thought about the children he'd left downstairs, knowing that Weasley was probably all anxious to come and see his friend again. Maybe Harry would indeed take the potion, just to avoid all the questions. He didn't blame the boy, for he had been there too; unable to handle his surroundings, too exhausted to fall asleep on his own. There had been lots of nights when the Draught of the Living Death had been the only thing that had kept him sane.

"Good night, Potter." Casting one last look at him, Snape turned around. He'd done what he'd come here for.

Harry held the vial tighter, his expression becoming brittle. He was glad Snape wasn't looking at him anymore. "Good night, Snape." He couldn't really take this kind of consideration right now, not after trying to act normally with the man all day long.

Not turning back to look at Harry, Snape walked down the stairs.

Ron had been pacing in the hallway, almost growling with anger. He'd left Malfoy to help Eppy clean up the dishes, fearing he'd punch Malfoy's face if he stayed with him for a moment longer.

What was Snape doing upstairs anyway? It was his place to go to Harry, not Snape's! Things like friendship and comfort were definitely not a part of that git.

When Snape finally came downstairs, Ron rushed up, his mind a whirlwind of questions. He didn't care that they had the exam in the morning. This was more important than anything. He wanted to be there for Harry.

Soft, even sound of breathing greeted him as he yanked the door to their room open. He stood at the doorway, completely stunned. Harry was lying in his bed, still clothed, fully asleep. On the small table next to the bed lay a small vial.

"Bloody hell..."

Snape had given him sleeping potion? Ron swore again. Damn the man! How could he do that? How could Harry just take such potion? It was clear he had taken the thing just a moment ago, when he'd known he was already on his way up here.

He wanted to grab the small vial from the table and throw it at the wall as hard as he could. He wanted to scream and shout, but of course that would do no good, since nothing would wake Harry up now. He'd probably sleep till the morning. At least he'd be well rested to face the exam.

It didn't make Ron feel any better. He was fuming.
After standing there for a moment, trying to figure out what to do next, he sighed. There was absolutely no way he was going to go downstairs for his books. Seeing either Snape or Malfoy might drive him into doing something violent. Maybe he'd better go to bed too and try to fall sleep.

Yeah right. As if that was going to happen after all that he'd just heard.

There were things he needed to do first. Casting worried glances at Harry every once in a while, he walked across the room to get clean pajamas. He laid them on his bed to be ready for him when he came from the outhouse.

Making sure his footsteps weren't overly loud, he sneaked back downstairs, heading to the door without even bothering to put on his heavy robes.

He was only going to the outhouse. He could manage like this.

As he stepped outside, a cold breeze hit him, almost making him turn around and go back inside for his thicker robes. He ignored the icy feeling and hurried to the outhouse. The sooner he went on with the business, the sooner he'd get to bed.

Ron reached out with his hand to grab the wooden handle to the door and then recoiled back as someone exited the outhouse. He glared angrily as he saw the blond. This was just great! The perfectly fucked up ending to an already fucked up day.

"Oh." Not even bothering to say he was sorry -- which he wasn't -- Draco stepped to his left. He didn't want to aggravate Weasley right now, not after what Potter had told them all. He was still a bit dazed about the whole thing; the goody-goody Gryffindor actually killing someone? He was amazed the Ministry hadn't had him arrested.

But of course they wouldn't arrest Harry Potter.

Moving to the side, Ron glared as Malfoy got into his way again. It wasn't amusing, the git always doing everything he could to annoy him. "Fuck off, Malfoy." It came out without any thought, like it was the only phrase Ron was familiar with and therefore usable in any situation.

That was really too much. The grey gaze was firmly fixed in blue as Draco refused to budge. He could feel the heat coming from Ron's body, realizing that in just a moment this would get ugly. There was a certain line that couldn't be crossed without violence ensuing. This was it.

Whatever had happened tonight didn't matter. They could have spent the whole evening in peace and it wouldn't have changed Weasley's behavior.

Always there to pick a fight. This time he'd get what he was asking for.

Letting the anger flush over him, Draco reveled in the warmth that filled him. He'd warned the weasel. Had walked away every time he'd sought for a fight. No more. Weasley would get what he deserved, for he couldn't resist the need inside him anymore, the urge to just grab the annoying redhead and smash his...

Draco recoiled as he realized his desire was not to smash Weasley's face against a tree and then laugh at his bloodied nose. Eyes wide, he stared at Ron.

How on earth had he never thought of this before? After all, he'd once considered this with Potter, when he'd still thought about ways to hurt him or to bring him to the Dark Lord's side. Watching the strange bonding between Snape and Potter was a bit annoying right now, as if his professor was now succeeding in something he had failed earlier.
There was no need or desire in him to seduce Harry Potter, not anymore. He wasn't certain what good such a game would do with Weasley either. It would however make him feel a lot better. That was certain.

It would probably freak Weasley out. Completely. That would be better than simply bruising his knuckles on his chin.

"So you gonna run after all? I should have known," Ron taunted with malevolent glee in his voice. Seeing Malfoy try to back off made him feel better than anything.

Instead of turning around and walking away, Draco raised an eyebrow. "I'm not going to run, Weasel, and you know it. Actually, you don't want me to run." He'd really been blind with this. This was exactly the way he should have approached this problem from the beginning.

Ron's mouth fell open, as Malfoy moved closer, his body brushing against his. There was something disturbingly alien in Malfoy right that moment. Something he'd never seen before. It made him blush, and he felt shivers go down his spine.

"Oh yes. You want something from me all right." Moving even closer to Ron, Draco smiled evilly as Ron backed away, only to be halted by a thick tree trunk. "But it's not a fight. You don't want to hit me. Or me to hit you."

"What the hell are you doing?" It was supposed to come out as an angry growl, but Ron could only manage a pitiful yelp.

Chest against Weasley's, face only inches away from his, Draco could feel his breath catch. Yes, this was so much better than idle threats. He stepped closer, sliding his thigh between Weasley's. "You know what I'm doing. The same thing we've been doing for a while now. It's simple, See?"

This time Ron didn't have time to try to reply before Malfoy's mouth closed over his in a savage kiss. There was nothing sweet or romantic in it. Only burning passion and lust.

Hatred! His hands squeezing on Malfoy's arms, Ron tried to keep his body from responding. This wasn't need or want, this was anger! And hatred! And... Damn, Malfoy's hands felt good on his arse! But it was still so damn wrong.

Wrong!

"Bastard!" The word was growled between kisses. Ron could feel from the slight shaking that Malfoy was laughing at him. That was even worse than the kissing. Always laughing at him. It made the anger burn even hotter.

With a shove, Ron freed himself of the disgusting Slytherin. He stood there panting, wanting to smash the grin out of his face. Just grab him and... His hands were moving before his brain could catch up with the whole idea, and then he was pushing Malfoy against that same tree. He tried to keep focus on the violent thoughts swimming in his mind, but somehow there didn't seem to be any strength in his fists.

He was simply pinning Malfoy against the tree. Holding him there. Feeling the hardness of his body against his own. Malfoy didn't seem to mind at all, the slight wriggling definitely ineffective if it was meant to be a struggle to get free.

"See?"

Hot breath caressed Ron's ear as Malfoy leaned closer to whisper. He shivered at the ghost of a
touch.

"You don't want to hit me. You just want me." No sound of laughter in Draco's voice now. He acknowledged it to be true for him as well. Angry tension, sexual tension. So close to one another, he couldn't even begin to separate them.

However, he could think of worse things than to spend an evening naked and sweating with Weasley.

"No!" Ron yelled. He didn't want Malfoy. Did not! He could see from the gleam in the grey eyes that the git was about to kiss him again, and he let go, stepping back.

There was nothing he could really say. Words refused to come out, his mind blank. He couldn't think beyond the fact that Draco Malfoy, the most annoying Slytherin ever, had just kissed him, twice. And his body wasn't exactly screaming in horror as his mind was.

With something disgustingly like a sob, he turned around, running away as fast as he could.

Only the sound of Malfoy gasping for breath followed him. There was no laughter, no taunts thrown at his back. Nothing to indicate it had been just a cruel joke.

Ron had no idea why that bothered him the most.

Part 12

Sitting on his bed, Ron kept staring into the darkness. He tried to keep his mind completely blank. Tried to block out everything.

There were sounds in the room; the soft sound of Harry breathing, the shutters moving slightly in the wind. At least there was nothing to see. He didn't know if that was a good thing or not. Maybe if he could concentrate on something outside his chaotic thoughts, it would be easier.

Ron raised his wand again, aiming a simple cleaning charm at his mouth. The tingle made his skin crawl and his teeth felt weird, as if they were made out of rubber. It was probably not wise to overuse the charm like this, but he had to get rid of the strange taste in his mouth.

He tried not to think about what it was.

After all the charms he'd cast, he wasn't even sure the taste was real. It was probably more a memory. Familiar taste of tea mixed with the unique taste of Malfoy's... No! He was not going to think about that.

Closing his eyes, Ron tried to focus on something -- anything -- else. The sounds in the room, the way his sheets felt cool against his skin. The faint spicy scent in the room.

*Malfoy's breath coming in harsh pants as he shoved him against the tree. Hardness grinding against him, his own body responding even as his mind was screaming in disgust. The overpowering scent of heather lingering around them until the warm scent of Malfoy drove it away.*

Ron gagged. The memories were too sharp, too clear. He wondered if he should try the charm again, even though it would probably not change anything.

No matter what he tried, the taste still lingered. Draco Malfoy's mouth on his. The thought made him want to throw up.
What the hell was that about anyway? He did not want the git, had never even thought about him like that. Or any other man like that. Even if he had thought of trying other men -- which he honestly had not! -- he would never, ever think about doing anything with Malfoy.

It was disgusting! Sick and twisted and perverted. How could Malfoy ever think that he would be interested?

And why the hell had his body reacted? It was like his mind had been cut off from the rest of him. Warmth against him, a strong hard body rubbing against him, and suddenly he was excited? Because of Malfoy? It felt like a betrayal, and he wanted to punch someone.

There was only one person here he could hit, one person he wanted to hit. He'd never felt like this before; his whole being thrumming with the need to hurt Malfoy and drown all these disgusting memories under a storm of violence. A bloodied nose might make the git think twice before trying his games on him again.

Yeah, it was just a game, a way to embarrass him. Nothing more. Malfoy hadn't exactly wanted him, it was all a show, to make him back off and think he was going insane. Ron was certain of that. It didn't matter that they had actually kissed -- no, Malfoy had kissed him -- or that Malfoy had been hard. It proved nothing of genuine lust or want.

Even if it did, he wasn't interested. He wouldn't shag Malfoy even if he was the last person in the world. He had standards, and they excluded stupid and evil Slytherins. How could anyone find that git attractive?

Unable to banish the smirk from his mind, Ron got to his feet. This had to stop! He didn't want to spend the whole night thinking about Malfoy. He needed to sleep or tomorrow would be a total disaster.

But how could he sleep when his mind was filled with this confusion?

There was a way; a small vial on Harry's nightstand. Ron walked across the room slowly, reluctant to grab the potion vial. He knew it was safe and it would work but he wanted nothing to do with Snape's potions.

Anything would be better than seeing Malfoy's face every time he closed his eyes or living the kiss over and over again in his mind. Taking the sludge brew by the disgusting Slytherin Potions master was a much better option.

Ron grabbed the vial, swirling the small amount of liquid around. There was roughly half the potion left. Trying not to think about anything, he scrambled back to his bed and then emptied the vial.

He was barely able to put it on the table next to his bed before he drifted off to sleep.

There were no dreams that night. Only the darkness and the silence of sleep. It was so calming, Ron felt actually happy and rested for a few moments after waking up. Then the reality hit him again. The exam. Harry killing people.

The kiss.

Groaning, he jolted up. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he looked around the empty room. Harry had already left, his bed uncharacteristically neat, and Ron was glad of his absence.

He was sure his friend would be able to tell what had happened if he saw his beet red face. It didn't matter that Harry was not a mind reader. Somehow he would know.
Ron didn't even stop to examine his crazy thoughts. His mind was already galloping on, looking for other embarrassing scenarios. Like Harry sitting at the breakfast table, listening to Malfoy make comments about what had happened last night.

It would be so like Malfoy to make fun of him like that. Twist the whole thing so that it would sound as if he'd wanted it.

Trying not to listen to his own mind, Ron pulled on his clothes, for once not cheery and glad to be awake. He wasn't sure where he really wanted to go, downstairs for breakfast to make sure that Malfoy wasn't ruining everything, or just downstairs, out the door and maybe drown himself in the stream.

The latter did sound kind of tempting.

He shook his head, feeling disgusted by his own thoughts. Malfoy was just playing a game and he had to make sure he lost. Panicking like this meant he'd win, so he had to stop that right now.

Slamming the door shut harder than necessary, he strolled to the stairs. He was not going to act like something was wrong, even though everything kind of was. Harry would notice. There would be questions he didn't want to answer.

For the first time he understood why Harry had taken that damn potion last night. Talking about things would be too painful sometimes. Almost as painful as thinking about them.

Ron headed to the kitchen area, following the sound of utensils clinking against porcelain. A silence greeted him as he entered the room.

Muttering, "Morning," he took his usual place next to Harry. He sensed a tension in his friend and flashed a small uncomfortable smile at him. No, he was definitely not going to start talking about anything serious here. Not while he was still so damn pissed and confused.

Not a word was said as he grabbed some breakfast and ate.

It had been like this for ages; Ron had felt really uncomfortable with the four of them gathering together ever since they came here. Mostly because of the two Slytherins. Now he was at a loss of what to say to anyone. He wasn't really mad at Harry but he had no idea how to talk to him, especially since Harry so obviously didn't want to talk about anything.

There was nothing new with that. Harry had been like that for months, keeping secrets from him and Hermione. He kind of understood it now. Didn't mean he approved, but he did understand.

Pausing with the chewing, he looked up from his plate and flashed Harry a hesitant smile. The hesitation disappeared as he saw the answering smile that seemed to make Harry relax completely.

A part of the worry was gone now. Ron could deal with all the crap if he didn't have to wonder about their friendship as well.

So now all he had to worry about was Malfoy and the Potions exam. That made him startle a bit. Wait a minute! Eyes squinting slightly, he turned his attention to the blond Slytherin.

Watching Malfoy munch his breakfast calmly made Ron even more suspicious. He suddenly wondered if the completely mindless panic had been exactly what Malfoy had aimed at. It would be so like the git to do everything in his power to make him fail the Potions exam.

He embraced the possibility of it all being an evil scheme, and pushed all other thoughts out of his
mind. Yes, that was it; only a weird and twisted Slytherin plot to embarrass him. Nothing more.

Incredible, how relieved it made him. Not even angry. Such plotting was what he'd come to expect from the git. Kissing for some other reason was definitely not something he wanted to contemplate, not with his own deranged reaction to the whole thing.

Ron kept his mind busy listing various cloaking potions in his mind for the rest of the morning. There was little time for anything else, since it was awfully close to the time they'd actually have to take the exam.

Once that panic set in, not even thoughts about last evening could penetrate the mindless terror. Ron barely got to visit the outhouse before having a last moment browse through whatever Potions book he could grab. He noticed how Harry was doing the same.

Malfoy's absence from the living room and the mess they were making there was hardly registered.

All too soon, the ancient clock on the wall made a soft clicking sound. It showed the time Muggle way, something Ron had needed some time to get used to. He could read the time well now. It was almost ten am.

"All right, gentlemen." Appearing from his room, Snape walked in like the harbinger of doom. "It's time for you to go and get changed. Wear trousers and T-shirts only. Remember to bring your wand with you." He made a shooing motion towards the stairs.

With one last look at the page he'd been reading -- 'how to improvise when you do not have a proper cauldron' -- Ron slammed the book shut. He walked upstairs in silence, hearing Harry's footsteps follow him.

It felt like going towards an execution. Neither of them talked while they stripped off their robes. Ron wasn't at all surprised Snape demanded such a thing; he would have concealed small slips of parchment inside his clothes if he'd thought it would work.

Then again, who would cheat on the Potions exam? Someone who didn't prize his life. Snape would definitely not be lenient on anyone who cheated.

"Ron?" It was the first thing Harry had said to him all day. "Are you ready?"

Ron shook his head slightly, looking his friend straight in the eyes. This moment, they understood each other perfectly, both sharing the horror. "No way in hell, Harry. You?"

"No. I don't think anyone can be ready for this." Even decades of studying wouldn't make them ready to take the Potions exam. There would always be more things to learn, more details to memorize.

"I know." Taking deep breaths, Ron straightened himself. "Let's go." He had to force himself to actually walk to the door, because his feet didn't want to move, at least to that direction. "Good luck." They would both need it.

"You too."

Nothing else was said as the two Gryffindors walked down the stairs to meet their doom. Malfoy was already there, leaning on the railing, looking perfectly relaxed. Ron noticed that Harry was glaring at the git as well, resenting such lack of panic. He kind of approved the look.

Snape had everything ready. There were lots of potion ingredients on the table next to the wall, piles
of fresh herbs and roots as well as small jars of various preserved and disgusting things.

Shivering with both fear and anticipation, Ron placed his wand on the table, as far away from the professor as possible. He couldn't understand how Malfoy and Harry didn't seem to have any problems with Snape pawing their wands. Such trust was unbelievable and totally undeserved.

Then any other thoughts disappeared as Snape muttered a few words and silvery letters appeared on the far wall and the exam began.

There were no other worries in the world. Somehow the panic that had filled Ron earlier focused on this one thing: reading the problem described, trying to find the correct potion to solve it. Then deciding on ingredients, preparing them and then brewing the actual potion. It was hard work with lots of details.

He had no time to let his mind drift as he concentrated on his cauldron.

It was the same with Harry. He'd known this would be the most difficult exam he ever faced, but he'd had no idea of how bad it would really be.

He'd woken up early and hid downstairs amongst the books. The whole house had been quiet so it had given him a chance to try to read through some of his notes again. Even though he hadn't really been able to concentrate, he'd enjoyed that time of solitude.

Last night's panic was gone. He'd been through the worst, it was now in the open. All that was left was telling Ron the rest -- the details, if he wanted to hear them.

He rather doubted he would. There was no point in wallowing in what had happened. It was more likely Ron would want to talk about the reasons behind his silence and that would be more difficult than anything. Everything he could say would probably sound patronizing, but the truth was you couldn't possibly understand it if you hadn't faced it yourself. They would just have to deal with it, like he had to deal with every decision he'd ever been forced to make.

But only after surviving the Potions exam.

Harry picked up yet another jar, trying to figure out what the small pieces floating in purple liquid were. He'd known Snape would be devious, but this went beyond his wildest expectations. How on earth was he supposed to make a potion if he didn't know what half the ingredients were?

It was obvious the others were having the same problems. Not that he really paid attention to them. He was too busy working on his own potion.

Narrowing the options to two different potions, he prepared all the ingredients that would be needed in both. Then he went through the question again, knowing he'd have to decide what to do next. Choosing the potion that made more sense, he started to brew the thing, ignoring the shiver of fear that ran down his spine.

Time ceased to exist. There was nothing but boiling cauldrons and the soft sound of cutting ingredients. Harry was reminded of the last time he had actually made a potion, of losing all the sense of reality as he worked with Snape to finish the antidote for Ron.

Pushing that out of his head, he concentrated on the one he was brewing. He definitely didn't need to think about that evening and the currents that he'd felt between Snape and him then.

It seemed as if he'd spent an eternity working on this assignment. That's why it felt so strange to look at the clock and see that only three hours had passed since they'd started. Harry eyed at his potion
suspiciously. It was done. He couldn't think of anything more to do.

He wondered if he'd get any extra points from making the potion well even if it was the wrong one. When he'd started with it, he'd been so sure it was the one he was supposed to make. Now he just didn't know.

There was no time for him to do anything about it. He leaned down to write down the last notes on the small piece of parchment, describing the final stages of the brewing and then lay down his quill.

"Good. Time is up, gentlemen," Snape said. He kept his expression neutral, hiding his amusement. It was always the same, his students panicking a moment before the exam, then calming down until it was time to actually present the potion to him. He was amazed that none of these three had broken down in tears or been physically ill. It wouldn't have been the first time that happened.

Harry gathered up his parchment and cauldron. Next to him, the others were doing the same. It seemed that they'd all finished in time.

He glanced to the left, frowning as he saw that Malfoy was presenting his potion in a small clay pot instead of a cauldron. At least the liquid in there was the same color as his potion. Maybe he had managed to actually make the correct one.

A wave of relief flushed over him as he realized that it was over. It was really over. If they passed. He would have jumped for joy if he hadn't suddenly felt so beat. He hadn't even noticed how tired and grimy he was.

Snape looked at the youngsters who all looked exhausted. "Go and get ready for lunch. I'll do the cleaning here." Pretending he didn't see the shocked stares, he started collecting the cauldrons. He preferred doing the work himself, considering he'd have to analyze every cauldron and jar used.

But not today. Listening to the footsteps moving across the room towards the stairs, he decided to grade slowly. There were other things to do. He needed to brew more of the shielding potion before long, so why not do it now? He also had to deal with their outhouse again. There was plenty of time to do his duty as the professor a bit later.

It would also allow Harry and Weasley deal with each other in peace before they'd have to start concentrating on the war.

Reaching their room first, Harry steeled himself against questions he knew would come as soon as Ron closed the door behind them. That's why he was so surprised to see Ron hurry to the closet to get a clean shirt. There were no questions, no words.

He had no idea what to think about it. The hesitant smile on Ron's face told him that the silence wasn't because of some kind of a disgust he made his friend feel. Beyond that, he had no idea why Ron was acting like this. Like he actually knew that he didn't want to talk about this right now.

"If I fail the N.E.W.T.s I'll just give up." Pulling his sweaty shirt off, Ron muttered darkly, "I never want to go through that again." His ears were ringing, and he was sure that he was about to throw up if he didn't get food soon. It seemed as if breakfast had been ages ago. A small cleaning charm would have to be enough for now.

Harry nodded slightly, wondering if this was the way they'd deal with this; ignoring the whole thing. A part of him relished the idea, but he knew they couldn't just pretend this wasn't happening.

Before he could say anything, Ron said, "I'm glad it's over for now. It'll give us time to do other stuff than to read stupid Potions books." A brief pause was followed by quiet, "Like talk or something."
No, they were definitely not going to ignore it.

"Care for a game of chess after lunch?" There had been a time when Harry didn't have to ask. He's simply sit down next to a board and sooner or later Ron would make his first move, opening the game. "We could talk while we play or something." He left it open, wanting to sound inviting and not like he was forcing the issue.

Ron blinked. Then he smiled. "Yeah. Sure."

Lunch was very different from breakfast, the silence between all men mellow somehow. Panic was gone and so were most of the darker thoughts Ron had held. He did glance at Malfoy every now and then, as if to see how he would react. When there was no reaction, he'd turn back to the food.

Snape kept his attention on his students, watching the way they acted together. At moments, he had to control his expression, especially when Weasley glared at Malfoy. There was a new tension between them. He'd have to keep an eye on those two; they were up to something, and unfortunately he knew exactly how foolish these children could be.

At least Harry seemed comfortable around them. He wasn't hiding from his friend anymore.

It was a good thing, considering young Weasley's tenacity. He'd corner Harry sooner or later. Snape knew Harry wouldn't run, but wondered if he needed more time to think.

"I'll take that." Muttering quietly, Harry grabbed the tray before Eppy could gather their empty plates. He didn't look at anyone as he loaded the tray with their plates. Collecting the glasses, he cast a look at Ron, seeing the anger bloom in the blue eyes. "I'll take care of the dishes. You think you can manage getting the chess board ready?" He grinned.

Ron had to blink a few times, as his brain tried to switch gears mid thought. "Huh? Oh. Okay, sure."

With a relieved grin, he walked to the living room.

Seeing both Gryffindors disappear from the dining area, Snape cast a cool look at Draco. "I'm certain you will find something to do." His gaze flickered up, as a hint. Whatever else he could say about the boy, he could read veiled orders well. A moment later, he could hear heavy footsteps heading upstairs.

Harry was smiling a little as he waited for the ancient sink to fill. It was tedious. Watching the water trickle slowly down the tap, he could definitely understand the reason behind the outhouse.

It didn't matter that Eppy was practically sulking constantly. Harry liked being able to do something completely mechanical like washing dishes, especially since no one forced him to do it.

He worked quietly, letting his thoughts drift. The day had been a strange one. He'd thought Ron would have lots of things to say to him as soon as he woke up, but apparently he'd decided not to push. Harry had no idea what had brought his friend such insight, but he was glad for it. That sense of peace had held through the Potions exam that had been indeed difficult, but not impossible to pass. He hoped.

Now he felt restless. They had nothing to do but wait until Snape graded their essays and notes.

Until then, he was determined to enjoy himself. He needed some time to think, time alone away from the others. Not just away from Ron and the questions shining in his eyes, but away from Snape as well.

Thinking had never been difficult around the man, but this time his mind was concentrating on all the
wrong things. Whatever was causing this strange attraction, he wasn't able to process it rationally when he was with Snape.

He wasn't doing a much better job alone either.

He was thinking about it, but in a very bad way, not even trying to rationalize it or work through it. He didn't need anyone to tell him it was idiotic. Thinking about Snape like this was really crazy, and he admitted it freely.

The door behind him opened slowly, making enough noise for Harry to look over his shoulder. He couldn't help smiling slightly as he saw Snape walk into the room. Speak of the devil...

"Potter." Snape placed his cup on the table, glad he'd not finished his tea before Harry and Eppy had disappeared with the tray. A glare at the doorway sent the old house elf scurrying away and the door closed with an audible click.

"Snape." There was a hint of laughter in Harry's voice. No matter how much things changed, this was always the same.

Robes rustling slightly, Snape moved closer to Harry. He didn't want to be overheard by anyone who might linger outside the door. Their conversations had always been private, and he doubted Harry wanted his friend or young Malfoy to hear about this. "Is everything all right between you and Mr. Weasley?"

For a moment Harry couldn't say anything. His whole being was focusing on the warmth radiating against his back. He didn't know if that was only a figment of his imagination, but he did feel Snape's presence like never before. And not only the quiet show of concern. "Yes."

If he moved just half a step backwards, he'd brush against Snape. He could do that, then claim it had been an accident. Or maybe he could just call himself an idiot again. There seemed to be a pattern here.

Snape could see the tension in Harry. "Are you sure? You seemed to be unwilling to talk to him yesterday."

That managed to pull Harry's thoughts back to the matter at hands. He sighed, "I don't feel like talking about these things with him is a good idea." It made him uncomfortable. "Not about the killing or the decisions we've had to make."

"Do you think that the reality is too much for him to handle?" It was clear from Snape's tone that he certainly thought so.

"Probably. Or maybe I'm not ready to have him know about those things." Harry sounded doubtful. He didn't know what he meant himself. Was he trying to protect his friend or was he trying to keep his own image untarnished? "Maybe it's not that simple."

"Explain."

There was that familiar word, forcing him to think about things. Process them and deal with something he'd much rather ignore altogether.

Harry didn't look up from the small sink. "Being with the others. Hermione and Ron and Sirius and all the others... It's like I'm on the outside of everything. Looking at these people I love, but it's not real. Sometimes I don't know what reality means. Is it the things we tell ourselves or the ugly things that really happen?"
"I know the feeling." It was spoken quietly. Snape did know; he'd felt something akin to that his whole life.

He had come to see that to most people, reality was the most obvious things they could see, whatever they were comfortable with. To them, his reality must seem like a nightmare.

Not saying anything to that, Harry kept scrubbing the already clean plate. He didn't want Snape to see how confused he was right now. This understanding and sharing a sentiment was even worse than the strange physical attraction he'd finally admitted to himself. It was much more difficult to brush off.

That didn't mean that the attraction was easy to ignore. Especially now that Snape was standing so close to him, almost touching him.

He didn't know what was bringing this to his attention so damn strongly right now. Was it because of all the months he hadn't really been able to think about anyone like that or feel any physical excitement? All the time he'd been walking around Hogwarts like a ghost, not looking for a warm embrace to drown his sorrows, but for something he couldn't even name.

Placing the plate to dry, he craned his neck a little. Seeing Snape so close to him made him shiver again.

"What are you going to do then?" After watching Harry for so long, Snape could clearly see that something was still bothering him. "With young Weasley."

Focusing on the issue at hand, Harry said, "I think I'll have to talk with him. He deserves to hear the truth, or at least some of it." He wouldn't pour everything out, like he had with Snape, but wouldn't worry about every word, like he sometimes did with Sirius. Ron wanted to know, so he would have to handle the reality of his life.

There was something akin to approval in Snape's gaze. Harry tried not to show his exasperation at his body's reaction to such a look. This was getting ridiculous.

He grabbed yet another plate. "It's just so annoying to do this right now. Especially here. I like it in here. I like the way it's all right to just be. The silence." Harry didn't know if his words made any sense.

Snape stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. "Yes. Not having to deal with multitudes of idiots all the time is rather refreshing."

"So it's easier if there are just a few idiots?" Harry couldn't help saying that out loud.

The soft snort could almost be interpreted as laughter. Snape's voice was dry as he said, "Yes, Potter. It's definitely easier with just a few idiots."

Harry couldn't help craning his neck again to look at Snape. There was that glint in his eyes again, the faint glimmer of amusement over a shared joke. It made Harry's knees go weak. That dark gaze had no trace of malice and he felt like he could stand here forever, just staring into Snape's eyes.

"I assume you've made plans with Mr. Weasley." There was something strange in the silence that made Snape realize it was becoming uncomfortable. He saw Harry blink owlishly as if his mind had drifted somewhere. Then there was a hesitant nod. "Good. I will make sure Mr. Malfoy will not interrupt you."

The words made Harry jolt out of his stupor. Nodding, he turned his attention back to the dishes,
wishing that Snape would take that as a proper answer. His whole being was tingling, and it was definitely getting too hot in here. If he tried to say anything right now, it would come out as a pitiful croak.

He ignored his slightly shaking hands as he grabbed a glass and started to scrub it. Hearing Snape walk out of the kitchen quietly was a relief.

Still, he had to spend a few minutes calming his breath after finishing with the dishes. He couldn't go and babble with Ron like this.

It was like being transported a couple of years back in time, when he had been enthusiastic about the whole idea of getting together with an attractive person. When the prospect of a simple touch had been as exciting as shagging itself. He couldn't understand what was making him act like that now. His body hadn't reacted this strongly -- or at all -- for a long time. Pathetically long time.

He didn't know why this was happening with Snape, even though the man wasn't really ugly or disgusting like he'd thought for years now. Just like he'd thought he was a total monster. Another misconception.

Seemed like he'd been having those a lot during the years.

His friendship with Ron wasn't one. It was sometimes difficult and not perfect, but it was one of the best things in his life. Concentrating on that, he was able to drive away the other, more confusing thoughts.

Leaving the kitchen was harder than he'd expected. His thoughts were far from clear. He knew Ron would be waiting for some kind of an explanation for everything that had happened, but he had none to offer. Nothing that would make everything all right, or that would make his friend really understand what was going on in his life.

Still, he walked across the dining area towards the living room without hesitations. They'd had problems before and they'd survived them. It couldn't be worse than some of the things they'd been through.

The slight scent of sulfur was the only reminder of the Potions exam. Everything else was just the way it had always been, the small cozy room devoid of scrolls and cauldrons. Ron was sprawled on the floor, absentmindedly poking at the small chess pieces in front of him.

Harry sat on the floor on the other side of the chess board. The pieces were already looking excited at the prospect of the game.

For a moment, it was like old times. Ron didn't say anything as he made his opening gambit. It was a reflex by now. Then he looked up, and the sense of familiarity disappeared. There had rarely been such a look in his eyes.

It was something Harry didn't want to see, especially when he suspected that he was the reason for it all.

"Okay. You've been doing extra secret Order stuff, fought Death Eaters and bonded with some creepy people without Hermione and me ever noticing." It wasn't a question. Ron was simply listing the facts he had finally figured out. "So is there something else I need to know? Some big thing that's going to change the world?"

"Not really." Harry figured that technically, his new weird thoughts about Snape fit the 'bonding with creepy people' category.
There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Then a quiet, "And the thing you told us last night? About... Well. You know?" Ron was keeping his gaze on the pieces.

It made Harry sigh. He had no idea how to say this gently. "About killing Death Eaters." He remembered seeing one fall, but he had cursed more than one, so there was a possibility that he had indeed killed others. At least that was what his mind usually whispered in the middle of the night when all the thoughts he'd tried to suppress came to haunt him.

A simple nod wouldn't be enough. Trying very hard not to think about the short inquiry with the people from the Ministry -- who had been strangely lenient with him for actually using magic outside Hogwarts -- Harry said, "Yes. It's true."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Not even trying to hide the hurt, Ron looked up from the board to stare at Harry. "You know you could have talked to us."

Harry sighed. "I know. I know, Ron. It's not that I..." He didn't know how to explain it.

"Yes?" Earlier, back in Hogwarts, or even a few days ago, Ron would have made some kind of a joke about the whole thing or then he would have yelled at Harry. Not now. If Harry really had doubts about coming to his friends with his troubles, he had to try to prove he was worrying for nothing.

"I don't..." Harry shook his head, not knowing exactly how to illustrate the whole thing to Ron. He simply moved one of the pawns.

Life was complicated as it was. He didn't want to make things all gloomy between him and Ron. He suspected it would happen eventually anyway, when they returned to Hogwarts and had to decide what to do next. It would be impossible to steer away from serious subjects here, but he was determined not to do it now or dwell on things that happened in the past.

"I don't have any idea of what to say." That for one was true. "It's just that everything around me is a mess. I guess I just wanted to have something that wasn't. Something good."

Harry couldn't explain it more. Didn't want to say a thing about how he'd thought his best friends in the world wouldn't understand what he was going through. His stomach cramped with an uncomfortable feeling. This was the most selfish thing he'd ever done; assuring that Ron and Hermione would indeed be the best thing in his life, untainted by all the darkness and killing.

Ron smiled hesitantly. He hadn't expected something like that. "Okay." It kind of made sense.

Now that Harry wasn't hiding and running away anymore, he didn't need all the details of things past. If Harry didn't want to talk, they wouldn't, at least about old stuff. Ron could relate to the reluctance to share all the deep and probably distressing thoughts since he didn't want to think about anything that had happened these past few days either. Being molested by Malfoy and then the awful Potions exam had been enough.

He just wanted to make Harry feel better; needed to do something to make things all right again. If it meant dodging certain issues, he could deal with that.

They sat in silence, the only sound in the room coming from the small chess pieces who yelled insults at each other, brandishing their small weapons and urging the players to get on with it. It was a comfortable silence, lacking all the anger and pain that had been so painfully obvious earlier.

"So... Who do you think will win the Quidditch Cup this year?" Ron smiled like a loon as he asked the familiar question. Even the fact that there was no way Gryffindor would win without their Seeker
didn't manage to wipe away his smile.

Harry blinked a few times. Then he chuckled softly. "You want to talk about Quidditch?"

"Sure. Why not?" No need to make everyone miserable now. Ron just wanted everything to be like it used to be. Simple. "Let's talk about Quidditch. Or girls." Now there was genuine enthusiasm in his voice. Their two favorite things. It was funny how many hours they had already spent babbling about brooms and Quaffles and flying robes and good looking Ravenclaws, and never seemed to get bored by any of it.

A very sly smirk spread on Harry's lips as he thought about those two things. Everything had changed indeed. The last time he'd held a broom, he'd been sweeping the floor. Drooling after girls wasn't the first thing in his mind either.

Ron had never seen that expression on his friend's face before. It reminded him of Malfoy somehow. "Don't tell me you have girl trouble?" Maybe it wasn't a smirk but a leer. He grinned at the startled look that spread on Harry's face. Yep. Definitely.

"Um... No. Well, yes. Sort of." Wondering what to say, Harry looked around to make sure no one else was listening. He definitely didn't want Snape or Malfoy to hear this.

"Yeah?" Ron realized that this was exactly the thing that had been missing. Him and Harry talking about normal things. Not about the war or the Order or even school. Bonding, like two guys should.

Sprawling on the floor, he motioned with his hand, "Go on. I'm all ears."

They shared a grin at that, a memory of many such moments when that innocent comment had made Percy bristle.

It took Harry a moment to gather his thoughts. To his dismay, he couldn't even remember the last time they'd talked about stuff like this. It was probably some time last autumn, when he'd had a brief fling with that Ravenclaw. He didn't want to think about what that meant.

It had been months since he'd been with anyone. He just hadn't felt interested in getting together with yet another person who was after his fame.

"I think... I mean, there's someone I like. A lot." The words came out without difficulty. There were so many things he couldn't even think of sharing with Ron, he wanted to say something about this now, even if there was no way he could tell everything about this either.

Ron smirked. "I knew it! So, tell me all about her. What's her name? It's not that buck-toothed Hufflepuff, right?" He took a better position on the floor, leaning his back against the couch. This was just like old times.

"Um... I don't think I can tell you that." Considering Ron's liberal use of the absolutely wrong pronoun, Harry didn't think he should really go into it now. After all, he'd never been brave enough to really talk about that with his friends. Not beyond the hints and open flirting that should have made everything clear.

Widening his smirk, Ron let it go. He didn't need to know all details. Yet. "Okay. So is it serious?"

He'd been through all sorts of relationships during the couple of years he'd been old enough to actually have closer relationships, and used to call himself an expert. He wondered if this was a friendship based crush thing where Harry would decide not to pursue the crush after all, like he and Hermione, or if it was more into the mating like minks thing like the brief, but satisfying fling he'd had with Lavender.
He refused to think about mocking grey gaze and hungry lips on his. That was not about relationship. That was something disgusting.

"I don't know. I mean, I haven't told... her yet. But I think it could be." Harry stammered, and not only because of the lie. He hadn't thought about the whole thing beyond his crazy attraction, knowing that nothing could ever happen between them. No matter how he'd find Snape desirable, he wasn't the kind of man who would ever seduce -- or allow himself to be seduced by -- a student.

Still, he felt like it was wrong to say these things. It had always been about honesty with Snape and talking about him behind his back was not honest. Lying about his gender was even worse.

He hated lies; the ones he had to tell and the ones his years with the Muggles had ingrained into his brain. Still, every time he tried to talk about this, he could remember Dudley waving his dress robes above his head, calling him a crossdressing queer, Uncle Vernon locking him into the cupboard for days after the unfortunate episode.

Taking a deep breath, he corrected. "Um. Him. I haven't told him yet."

Ron felt a tremor of relief run down his back. He had known all along that Harry might be interested in guys as well as girls, but he'd seemed reluctant to talk about it -- probably a Muggle thing, they seemed even weirder about dating than other pureblood wizards did. At least now he could some day tell Harry about the thing that Malfoy had done, and not lose his best friend because he didn't condone guys kissing guys. Of course he had definitely not kissed Malfoy. The git had kissed him.

"Oh. Cool. So it's a guy. No big." He thought for a moment. "It's not any of us, is it?" Seeing the frown, he elaborated, "I mean someone in our House? Like Seamus or something?" If Harry would join dissing the Cannons and the English team, he'd kick his arse.

Harry shook his head. "No! That's gross, Ron." Having the hots for someone he'd shared the bedroom since he was eleven was like wanting your brother.

"Good. Is it Bill? Hope not. He's straight, you know. Fred on the other hand..." Ron dodged the cushion thrown at him, and collapsed on the rug, laughing.

"You are just as barmy as Trelawney, you know. You start sprouting crap about a handsome dark haired stranger next, and I'm out of here." The words made Harry smile a secretive smile. A stern looking dark haired professor was a completely different thing. "Not one of your brothers. Don't worry. And stop asking. I am not going to tell you."

Ron sat up again, hugging the cushion against his chest. "Okay. Sorry." The glint in his eyes told him he wasn't really.

Groaning, Harry grabbed yet another cushion and threw it at Ron too. A moment later he was dodging it as it was flung back. A short cushion fight followed, leaving them both breathless with laughter. He knew that Ron would definitely tease him about the mystery man later on, but couldn't resent the idea, remembering times when it had been the other way around. Simple bantering was exactly what they needed now, a reminder of their friendship that had grown firm enough to survive anything.

On the board, the pieces grumbled more as they realized that the two young wizards were not paying any attention on them again.

Part 13
After all the panic and last minute studying, the following days seemed like the most peaceful time in Harry's life. At least on the surface. Now that he and Ron had experienced the opposite of total boredom, neither minded the peace and quiet.

There wasn’t much to do. The weather had turned from relatively nice to bleak again. It forced everyone inside. Not that it really mattered; they all seemed to be completely happy to be in their rooms. Snape was busying himself with various potions, not even issuing them chores. It was a relief, especially to Ron, even though he was anxious to get his exam back.

Only to see if he had passed.

Harry was glad of the quiet interlude. He didn't feel like concentrating on anything serious right now. He just wanted to spend time either with Ron or alone with his thoughts. It was easy, since Snape was staying in his room for most of the time. His absence was a paradox of relief and longing to Harry.

It was somehow nice to just be, even with his strange thoughts. At least he could now concentrate on them, not having to deal with distractions.

Playing wizard’s chess became a good way to spend time again. It didn't matter that Ron usually won, Harry enjoyed the togetherness more than the game anyway. Whenever it wasn't raining, they would go out for a walk, never going very far, simply walking around.

They talked about ordinary things, not going back to the darker themes. It reminded them both about their first years at Hogwarts.

The evenings were still strained. Harry had trouble acting calmly with Snape, finding it harder to ignore his latest revelation. He couldn't completely evade Snape, knowing that would definitely make things worse. Didn't go seeking for his company either, fearing he'd do something stupid.

There was also something weird going on between Malfoy and Ron. Harry didn't really pay much attention to it, but he noticed there was a change. At least it was quiet now, their new battle fought with glares and smirks instead of the previous insults, yells and threats.

"Do you want to play more?" Still grinning because of his easy victory -- probably because there was no one here to distract him with the constant leering -- Ron nodded towards the chess board. They'd been playing for a few hours now, and they did have some time before lunch.

It wasn't bad to sit here in the living room with Harry. Malfoy was upstairs, and Snape had excused himself, muttering about an important potion he had to brew.

Ron had noticed a strange look between Harry and Snape as the professor had said that, but he'd decided not to comment on that. It would just ruin the day. He didn't really care. As long as they didn't have to see the Slytherins, everything was all right.

Groaning, Harry shook his head. "No thanks. I think I've been humiliated enough for one day." He actually enjoyed losing the game most of the time. At least Ron never let him win because of the whole fame thing.

It was fine with Ron. He wasn't in the mood for anything big now and they could just laze around. Wait for the scent of food spread through the whole cottage as Eppy busied herself with lunch.

He flopped on his back, staring at the ceiling. It was nice here. He could almost pretend he was here alone with Harry. That would be so cool. Better than having the Slytherins here. They somehow managed to annoy him even when they weren't present. Especially the one always watching him,
like waiting for an opportunity to humiliate him again.

It was annoying! Ron almost wished Malfoy would make his next move, just so he could finally hit him or something. The constant smirking and the suggestive looks were driving him insane. Probably exactly what the git was aiming for.

The sound of raindrops hitting the windows was almost lulling him to sleep, driving thoughts of annoyance far away. Ron smiled slightly. He wasn't about to spoil the day thinking about Malfoy.

Right this moment, life was pretty good.

A few minutes later he frowned. Something was burning. There was no smoke in the air, but he could definitely smell something burning. Hoping it wasn't their lunch, he sat up, looking around. "What is that awful smell?"

Harry didn't even bother to sit up. He'd got used to this sensation months ago. "I'd say it's Veela hair. Burning Veela hair." He could tell by the weird sweet scent that lingered at the edge of his awareness. "Snape's probably working on something."

He had no idea what. He didn't really care. The smells were usually nice, even soothing.

To Ron, such an odor wasn't exactly pleasing. "Yeah. 'Making an important potion' my arse! I bet he's stalling on purpose, making us suffer." There was a lot of anxiety hidden behind the scorn as Ron quietly wondered if this delay was a sign of some of them actually failing the exam.

"I don't know, Ron. He does have things to make, you know?" Not that his friend would really get that. Harry hadn't really understood it himself before spending a lot of time in the dungeons.

Snape was undoubtedly working on various every day potions they might need, like the one he used to neutralize unpleasantries caused by the outhouse. He probably had something that would detect danger and of course he would be making more of the salve that was somehow shielding his Dark Mark.

"Yeah, right." Ron huffed. "Making us miserable."

Harry opened his mouth to deny that, but couldn't really say anything as a thought hit him. Maybe Snape was indeed stalling, but not for the reason Ron thought.

Soon, they would have to talk about the future. About things he didn't really want to think about. Before they had their results, they wouldn't really go into those things, simply lingering in the cottage, enjoying their free time.

He felt ridiculously warm inside. Why else would Snape stall the grading? He was very likely giving him time, and it was such a Snape thing to do; looking like one thing but being something quite different. Even something nice.

Seeing that Harry wasn't going to argue with him, Ron nodded again and lay down. He didn't really want to move anywhere before lunch.

Gathering around the table to eat about half an hour later, the four of them ate in relative peace. There was not much conversation, only sounds of munching and the occasional quiet comment about the food. Harry didn't have to look at Ron and Malfoy to know that there were once again glares thrown across the table.

It was better than Ron's barely veiled comments about the weird smells, so he didn't even kick his
friend.

Eppy didn't bother to say anything as she brought the tea, joining the quiet choir of glaring with some of her own. She seemed to almost enjoy the oppressive attitude.

That didn't surprise Harry at all.

Not really thirsty, Harry stared at his tea cup, stirring the pale golden liquid with the spoon. He hoped it would stop raining so that he and Ron could go outside. Maybe they could even go bathing. He was running out of clean clothes, so maybe he should wash them as well.

"Gentlemen." It didn't surprise Snape that his quietly spoken word made Weasley drop his spoon. It seemed to be a habit by now. "I do believe the hallway could use some sweeping." If the three youngsters were unable to learn how to wipe their feet before entering the cottage, they'd just have to learn to sweep the floor more often.

Draco nodded immediately. "Yes, sir." He wasn't going to argue now. Not that he was about to start after getting back the exam either. Somehow all his cockiness seemed to vanish in front of Snape.

It made Harry share a gleeful glance with Ron. "And we will go and bathe," he added before anyone could assign duties for them.

There was a moment of tension as Ron bristled at Snape's instant approval. The fact that the man muttered, "I do believe that is an excellent idea, Potter," didn't help at all.

"Do you think you'll be finished with the grading any time soon?" There was a hint of a knowing smile in Harry's gaze, as if he knew something the others didn't.

Not saying anything, Snape nodded ever so slightly. He knew this meant Harry was ready to face his own role as a grown up. The thought rather boggled the mind, especially since he was forced to watch the childish games between young Weasley and young Malfoy.

Ron tried not to drop his spoon again. There was definitely a hollow feeling in his stomach.

After finishing his tea, Snape got to his feet. "I would appreciate it if you can stay out of trouble for the rest of the day. It will give me time to read your..." A malicious smirk spread to his face. "Well, what you would undoubtedly call intelligent answers." With that, he left the room. He didn't have to stall anymore but he was not going to hurry. Watching the youngsters squirm was too enjoyable.

He would have been delighted to see Harry, Ron and Draco. They all looked a bit green. Even Draco, who knew there was no way he could fail the exam felt a bit queasy.

Ron and Harry had to wait for some time before it stopped raining. Neither really minded. They were too busy gathering their clothes and tidying their room. Now that Snape was once again making noises about cleaning, they could well guess what would come next.

Crawling under his bed to retrieve three socks and a pair of used underwear, Ron sneezed. Yes. Maybe it was about the time to do some dusting here as well.

Malfoy was nowhere to be seen as they finally marched downstairs with bundles of clothes with them. It made Ron relax. He didn't want that git anywhere near him when he was naked. The mere thought was making him tingle with annoyance.

With that thought firmly in mind, he followed Harry to the stream.
It was actually fun to do the laundry. Even though Ron had sworn he would never ever wash clothes in his life again, he had to agree that this was seemed more like a game than hard work. Splashing around the magically warmed water, he had to swim after his socks a few times as the currents of the stream tried to carry them away.

Harry kept closer to the shore, never straying far from his wand. He washed his stuff quickly and then soaped himself, trying not to pay any attention to the fact that he still had some of Snape's potions with him. He must have carried them with him the last time they'd been here.

That was definitely not something he was going to start thinking about. Finished with the washing, he hid the small vials underneath his towel, not wanting to have Ron comment on them.

He was relaxing slowly, just letting the currents swirl against his skin. There would be some work to do later on -- at least to hang their clothes to dry -- but he wasn't going to fret about that right now. It was good to be spending time alone with Ron like this. It took him back to the simpler times, when he didn't have to worry about things all the time.

"Hey Harry! You think we could stay here for a while longer?" Ron wasn't in any hurry to go back to the cottage. He could stay here until his skin was as wrinkled as professor Flitwick's.

Smiling, Harry nodded. "Sure." It was nice and calm here, especially now that the dark clouds had disappeared.

He grabbed his wand to cast a small protection charm that would alert him if anyone approached the stream. They'd had too many scares here, even if there had been no intruders around. The paranoia so evident in the older members of the Order had finally rubbed into him.

Then he lay back, floating in the stream. Gaze unfocused, taking in the vastness of the blue sky, it was almost like dreaming. A dream he wanted to cling to for as long as he could.

Leaving the stream behind wasn't easy. It seemed that Ron was even more apprehensive than Harry, casting worried looks around him as they walked to the small clearing to hang their clothes to dry.

"Um..." Not even hiding his fear, Ron stood next to the clotheslines, keeping as far from the bushes as possible. "Harry? Do you think it's safe in here?" He still had only vague memories of walking back to the cottage after being bitten, but he could remember the fear and the pain.

Harry nodded. "Yes. The snake's nest is on the other side. Over there." He made a gesture with his hand. "Let's just stay away from there and make a lot of noise, so that we won't scare her if she's hunting. She can feel footsteps, you know."

"Yeah." Actually, Ron didn't have any idea of what Harry was talking about. He didn't remember things like that from their Care of the Magical Creatures classes. Well, it was good someone paid attention in class.

The dusk was setting as they made their way back to the cottage. Harry couldn't help feeling like he was coming home as he saw the light twinkling from the distance. A shadow passed over one of the windows downstairs, and he could guess who had been standing there, watching and waiting.

Dinner was already served. It was a quiet occasion, with only Harry, Ron and Malfoy eating. The days activities had mellowed Ron and for once he wasn't paying attention to Malfoy. He was too busy eating and wondering if Snape was already finished with their essays.

It was a thought that would have chased away his appetite if he wasn't so damn hungry.
Yawning, Ron pushed his chair back as soon as he'd finished with his meal. "You mind if I just go to bed? I'm too tired to do anything else today."

"No. Go ahead." Harry smiled absentmindedly. He wasn't in the mood for a game either. He'd stay downstairs and read for a moment, not feeling at all sleepy yet.

It would be nice to just be by himself and enjoy the silence; something he had never been able to share with anyone except Snape. He wouldn't mind his company. The silence with Snape was always nice, even now, when he was so aware of his presence. At least if they sat together in silence, he wouldn't have to worry about saying something stupid.

Being in the same room with Malfoy wasn't bad either, except when Ron was there. Then it was definitely annoying.

Harry could already feel a lessening of the tension. Not bothering to hurry up, he poured himself another cup of tea. He didn't pay much attention to Malfoy besides handing him the teapot.

After dinner, he padded to the living room and slumped on the couch, listening to the usual sounds coming from around him. Eppy was bustling around in the kitchen. There was the sound of dishes being carried around, followed by soft mutters. Malfoy had headed upstairs, and he could hear footsteps coming straight from above. Ron had gone out, and he couldn't help keeping an eye on the clock to make sure that he wasn't gone too long.

Slowly, the sounds faded away. First, the sound of footsteps ceased. Then Ron returned to the cottage, saying a hushed, "Night, Harry!" before climbing to their room.

Harry stretched out, letting the slim book he'd been browsing through fall on the couch next to him. He wasn't really interested in reading right now, it was enough to simply enjoy this moment.

The fire was burning low in the fireplace, sending a soft glow around the room. It was dark outside. The people in one of the paintings had disappeared somewhere, probably visiting the family in one of the larger paintings in the hallway upstairs. Nothing was moving, or making a sound.

Startled, Harry realized he felt completely happy. It was an almost foreign feeling. His mind was still, for once not working overtime to focus on all the nasty things that were going on in the world. Everything was simply about lying here all alone and luxuriating in the silence.

A part of him wanted to just stay here and maybe even sleep on the couch. It was nice and warm here, but he knew that sooner or later someone would come to see where he was, so he sat up slowly. It was best to make a short trip to the loo and then go to bed.

The lights were dimmed in the hallway. Harry stood there for a moment, casting a last longing look at the couch. Maybe he should ignore what the others would think and return there after all. His memory of sleeping there was one of the things that were making him feel happy. It would be perfect.

He turned around and almost stumbled into Snape, letting out a yelp. The hallway had been perfectly empty only seconds before!

Damn, the man always moved so quietly.

"Potter." Snape didn't even try to hide his amused exasperation. "I see you still haven't learned to pay attention to your surroundings." He'd noticed that Harry was quieter these days, lost in thought. It could be dangerous in the long run.
"Sorry." At least he hadn't been in a hurry as he'd collided into Snape. That would have been bad, especially if he'd tripped them both over and landed on the floor. Harry blinked at his thoughts, trying to banish any images of him and Snape sprawled on the floor. Not a good thought right now. Or ever, really.

The only response he got was a raised eyebrow. Nothing new there.

Looking a bit hesitant, Harry asked, "So, how is the grading?" He knew he should just go, but spending a few seconds alone with Snape was too big a temptation.

"As awe inspiring as always." It was clear from Snape's tone that it was not meant as a compliment. "I am once again amazed by the inherent stupidity and simple mindedness of teenagers."

Harry couldn't really disagree with that, not when those things were the same he was having problems with at the moment. He couldn't believe that even the cruel words were making his knees weak. The simple joy he'd been feeling these past hours was once again laden with longing.

"Not that I'm actually surprised. I am however glad I never have to read such utter rubbish from the three of you again." Now there was a hint of smile in the black eyes.

It took Harry a moment to realize what he was hinting. The expression in the usually so stern gaze was once again distracting him, making him feel utterly empty headed. Then he could only stare. Could Snape really mean that they were all passing the exam? Or that they were passing the written exam at least? He knew it was better not to ask.

He simply enjoyed the moment and the comfortable silence that wasn't overshadowed by embarrassment for once. Of course as soon as he thought about it, he started to feel weird again.

"I... I'd better let you get back to the grading, then." Thinking he should at least make a quip about the essays, Harry took a step away from the doorway. Maybe if he stayed away from Snape for a few days, this stupid gushing feeling would go away.

Snape had no idea what was going on. He just knew something was wrong with Harry. There was a new kind of tension between them and he was curious to find out exactly what had caused it.

"Er... I need to go see Ron about something."

It was clear that Harry was lying. For someone who'd had such practice with obfuscating, he was awfully bad at it right now.

"Wait." Realizing that Harry was about to walk away, Snape reached out, touching his arm. He made certain his grip was loose, unrestraining. If the boy really wanted to leave, he could do so easily. But he couldn't let him go without trying.

Harry froze in place, his hasty retreat cut by the soft touch and the apparent concern in Snape's voice. Trying to act naturally, he looked up at the man. Words died on his lips, none of the lies convincing enough to change anything. He could only stare.

There was honest worry on Snape's face, his expression once again open. Harry felt heat rise to his face. It was silly how that look could affect him like that. He'd become to realize that he did indeed fancy Snape, but this was ridiculous.

He tried to say something, anything. Even incoherent rambling would be better than this silence filled with tension.
"Potter? What is it?"

No, words were not better. At least not Snape's words. They only added to the tension, driving calmness away. Harry turned his gaze down and stared at the hand holding his sleeve, swallowing as his arm started to tingle. All his decisions to stop thinking insane things disappeared as he reveled in the light touch.

It came to this; Snape's hand on his arm, the touch soft enough to almost be a caress.

Harry moved his arm a little, careful not to shrug Snape's hand away. This was probably one of his most idiotic ideas, but he didn't care. There were already so many stupid things he'd done.

Slowly, he turned his arm, sliding his hand to grab Snape's in a loose grip. His own breathing sounded awfully loud in the silence of the room. Everything seemed to stand still; there was only the soft touch of their hands.

Snape's hand was warm, callused. Funny, how Harry had never realized just exactly how small his hands were. Watching him work with ingredients always made him see strong, capable hands with a firm grip. Now that grip was holding him, loosely, but still sure.

This might be madness, but Harry couldn't even think of retreating anymore. Slowly, he brushed his fingers against the soft skin between Snape's thumb and forefinger, tracing some of the ink stains with his thumb. He had no idea why Snape was allowing this, why he wasn't pushed away.

"Potter?" Not certain of what was going on, Snape looked at Harry to see his expression. His fingers were tingling from the light contact, as if the simple touch of another was alien to him.

Instead of the lost expression he'd seen so many times months ago, there was an odd intensity in Harry's eyes. He looked determined, not stopping the bizarre, but not totally unpleasant touches. Relief filled Snape as he realized he wouldn't have to try to stop the young man from spiraling towards madness again.

A moment later all relief escaped him, replaced by a sinking feeling.

Harry's touch became firmer, his other hand rising slowly as if to touch Snape's shoulder. He was moving closer, a soft smile caressing his lips.

Lost in the moment for a fraction of a second, Snape leaned forward. He knew what Harry was about to do, but something in him rebelled against the whole thought. He had to see if he was indeed right.

A soft brush of lips against his made him recoil back. It wasn't even a proper kiss, only a hesitant touch. As hesitant as Harry's hand holding his.

He yanked his hand away, feeling the urge to rub his palm against his robes until he erased even the memory of Harry's touch.

This could not be happening.

Snape could only stare at Harry, his thoughts going around in circles. It was easy to interpret the signs now, the obvious teenage reactions to an impossible infatuation. He'd seen it in his students often enough, but never before had it been focused on him. No one had ever been insane enough to do that.

"I..." Swallowing hard, Harry tried to think of something to say. He hated the way Snape's gaze had
turned from open into the obsidian mirror again, only reflecting what was in front of it, not revealing any emotion.

There were dozens of ways for Snape to deal with this. His first reaction was one his students had never before witnessed; he wanted to laugh straight in Harry's face. It was only appropriate at such a ridiculous prospect. He wanted to yell, taunt this idiot for harboring such ideas about him. Logically, he would have to sit the boy down and explain to him a few realities about life.

Frozen in place, he could do none of those things. He simply stared at Harry.

The sound of footsteps coming down the stairs broke the strange spell between them. Snape didn't wait to see if it was Malfoy or Weasley. He simply spun around and walked to his room.

Part 14

Stupid.


It was amazing how many words Harry could find to describe both him and his actions.

Had to be because of Snape's influence. The mere thought brought forth yet another cascade of words describing his stupidity.

Maybe he should hurry upstairs and crawl under the bed and stay there until it was time to return to Hogwarts. It was probably nice and dark under his bed. Clean too. It was tempting.

Harry couldn't move. He just stood there, feeling utterly lost.

"Potter."

Hearing the quiet voice speak his name didn't even make Harry jump. He'd registered the footsteps at the same time as Snape had, but he'd been too stunned to bother to see who it was. He glanced at Malfoy. "Malfoy."

It didn't matter that his voice sounded so damn small and tired. This evening was already a total disaster, nothing could make him any worse. If the Slytherin chose to taunt him, he could always help him with his newly found insight on his own stupidity.

Draco cast a questioning look at Potter, but decided not to say anything to him. He didn't want to do anything to disturb his new game. Starting a shouting match with Potter would definitely ruin it all.

Instead of making a comment about his weird behavior, he went to pull on his outer robes and disappeared into the cold spring evening.

Barely noticing the slam of the door, Harry stood there. He remembered thinking of going to the loo or to the bed. He couldn't do either. Malfoy was in the loo. Ron was upstairs. He couldn't really deal with either right now.

He waited. For what, he didn't know. Maybe for Snape to come back and hex him, or maybe he was hoping he would wake up on the couch and find out that this was all just a bad dream. It wasn't very probable. Life was always worse in reality than it was in his worst nightmares.
The door opened again, allowing cool air to blow through the hallway. Malfoy shut the door firmly behind him, not at all surprised to see Potter still standing there. He decided not to pay any attention to him, shedding his outer robes in a hurry and then returning to his own room.

Still, Harry stood there, staring straight ahead.

After a long moment, he sighed. Nothing was going to happen. He could wait here forever, and it wouldn't change anything. Walking slowly as if in pain, he went to the loo, not bothering with his thick robes.

He was shivering when he came back into the cottage. The golden light that had been so warming earlier felt flat somehow. It had been easier to breathe outside, where it had been dark, reminding him of the dungeons back at Hogwarts.

The thought made his shivering worsen. His stupidity had probably banned him from the dungeons forever.

Cursing himself again, Harry sneaked back to the living room. All traces of the lassitude he'd felt earlier had disappeared somewhere, leaving him wide awake. He walked to the couch, sitting there with his hands squeezed into fists.

He still couldn't understand what had just happened. It had been a great day; like the few before, when they'd been free of the constant studying. He'd had such fun with Ron, enjoying the familiar camaraderie.

It had taken five minutes with Snape for him to ruin everything.

He had kissed Snape. Raising his hand slowly to his lips, Harry closed his eyes. Yes, he had kissed Snape. Brushed his mouth against his.

It had been a fleeting touch as Snape had flinched away the moment their lips had met.

Harry shivered. He had been completely mesmerized by the moment; the touch of Snape's hand. It had been unreal, standing there in the hallway with the man, holding his hand. There had been no sign of disgust in Snape then, when he had caressed his fingers, slowly, hesitantly.

There had only been that familiar burn in the dark eyes, the heat that was inviting him closer, like a moth to the flame.

Maybe that was why he felt like his whole world had turned into ashes. Snape had walked away from him without words, but his expression had been easy to read. There had been no emotions, not even disgust. A complete void of anything real. It was worse than anything else.

Harry hadn't known how much he'd come to rely on Snape really being there for him until he watched him walk away. The man had stopped trying to push him away a long time ago, allowed him close, closer than Harry had ever been to anyone. Had even come after Harry when he'd escaped Ron and the memory of his own past.

Those moments had been brief, but they had become the core of Harry's existence. Being with Snape felt right; the shared silence, the understanding of things most people couldn't even dream of.

What on earth had driven Harry to destroy that? Kissing Snape? He was really a total cretin!

Halting the litany of dark words that was starting to repeat in his mind again, Harry sighed. He couldn't draw conclusions on Snape's retreat. It was a gut reaction. Maybe he would think about it
and let him explain tomorrow. Explain that he was indeed an idiot and apologize for his hasty actions. Promise he would never ever try anything as foolish as kissing him again.

The problem was, he wanted to kiss Snape again. That brief touch wasn't enough. Being honest with himself, he had to admit that he sort of wanted to hold Snape close and do sweaty naked things with him, wanted to spend hours in bed with him, even if to just talk. Needed to be with him.

He sighed. There was a world of difference between what he needed and what he wanted. Usually, he didn't get either.

It was completely quiet in the small cottage now. Harry leaned back against the backrest, trying to relax. He needed to think this through right now, so that tomorrow when he saw Snape he could approach the problem calmly, reasonably. They would have to talk about this, and he didn't want to sound like an idiot, rambling in panic.

No matter how he might feel.

Nothing came to mind, except the need to make everything better again. He could make no excuses. Honesty worked both ways. Lying to Snape now would be a dismal idea, one he'd see through immediately.

Harry closed his eyes. If lying was out of the question, he'd have to go with the truth. He could decide on the amount of the truth, but he would indeed have to tell Snape that he... He didn't even know what to call it. He liked him. Fancied him. He'd probably better not mention the sweaty naked things, even though after the kiss, it was kind of obvious already.

If the wall had been a bit closer, he would have banged his head against it.

He was tired, exhausted after a long day. He was thinking about things he didn't want to think, his mind painting a bleak picture of his lonely future after this one stupid hormonal mistake. He just wanted to sleep. Too weary to go upstairs, he decided to sleep here. He didn't want to move.

Insomnia, his old companion had settled in for the night, though. The clock on the wall ticked nightly hours away as he lay there, completely awake. He noticed how he didn't feel the usual panic, grateful for such a small comfort.

For the first time in months, he knew that even if the walls started closing in again, he wouldn't have a place to go. There wouldn't be a hiding place offered for him, no quiet words.

He managed to drift off a few times, cursing as he startled awake and saw the hand had only made its journey around the clock's face once. Those short moments of sleep only made him feel worse, as his body started to demand proper rest.

The first rays of the sun touched the floor on the other side of the room. It was getting brighter, the sound of birds waking up and chirping was strangely loud. Harry didn't mind. It was better to listen to the sounds coming from outside than to pay attention to his own thoughts.

Soon, the cacophony from outside was joined by the sound of water being run. Eppy was apparently awake, working in the kitchen. She didn't seem to mind the noise she was making, probably muttering to herself as well.

Harry stretched, grimacing as his shoulder popped loudly. Sprawling here for hours and hours hadn't been a good idea after all. The couch was definitely not as comfortable as he'd thought, and for a moment he missed his chair from Hogwarts.
Not a good thought. Maybe he wasn't about to fall asleep, but he refused to spend the whole morning wallowing either.

Padding quietly across the room so he wouldn't wake anyone up, he headed towards the door. Nature was calling. It was chilly outside, the early morning sun had yet to drive the coolness of night away. The ground was wet. Funny, he hadn't even noticed it had rained during the night.

A few insects scurried to hide as Harry lit a small magical light in the outhouse. He didn't really pay attention to them, noticing a fat spider in passing and wondering if he should shoo it away before Ron got here. Seeing how the spider was just sitting there made him reluctant to disturb it. Casting the now familiar cleansing charm on his hands, he decided to let the creature be.

He didn't feel like upsetting anything or anyone. Enough of that was already happening around him.

There were more sounds coming from the kitchen area as he returned to the cottage. Harry could smell bacon frying. Usually, it would make his stomach grumble, now it didn't have any effect on him.

Ron would probably be downstairs any minute now. He could smell food from miles away. At least it felt like that sometimes.

Before Harry could decide whether to go to eat or just return to the couch, one of the doors upstairs was opened, then slammed shut. Heavy footsteps rushed downstairs, as if the person approaching was in a great hurry.

"Hi Harry! You should have woken me up." Not even stopping to see if there was a reply, Ron was already on his way to the dining area. "Bacon!"

The familiar enthusiasm brought a hint of a smile on Harry's lips.

He was relieved to see that Ron didn't find anything weird in him being up this early. After spending the night worrying and brooding, he definitely didn't need to face Ron and his questions.

"Morning." Surprised by the yawn that accompanied his greeting, Harry muttered, "I knew your nose would wake you up sooner or later."

Ron stuck out his tongue at him, not at all offended by the quip. He was a growing young man and needed his food. Even though he'd never be as tall as Bill, he was already taller than Percy, and could consume an incredible amount of food without it showing. Much.

Concentrating on his friend and the breakfast, Harry led the way to the dining area. He didn't even cast a look at Snape's door. Before long, the man would come out and then they'd have to deal with what he'd done.

Eppy had already set the table. Seeing the mounds of food in the middle of the table, Ron grinned happily at the old house elf, not minding the snort she let out. He grabbed his plate and filled it with enthusiasm. This was the perfect way to start a day.

Even Malfoy's appearance a moment later couldn't ruin his appetite. He simply ignored him, already knowing there would be a smirk on his face.

Ron was starting to get used to the smug expression. It hadn't changed since the git had mauled him. Always there, a knowing smile that seemed to taunt him. At first he hadn't been able to keep from blushing when he'd seen that expression. It had brought forth embarrassment and guilt, mostly for his own behavior. Such stupidity was expected from Malfoy, everyone knew how the Slytherins related
to sex. Of course he would see hatred as lust or foreplay. It was wrong of him to be affected by the whole thing.

So he tried not to pay attention to Malfoy and his looks. It wasn't easy, but he was not about to play with his rules.

Confident of his newly found resolve, he looked up as he reached for the juice pitcher, and then almost threw the pitcher at the smirking git as heat rose to his cheeks.

Damn it!

It just wasn't fair. Must be because of his complexion that came with the red hair. He'd never been able to control the way his cheeks reddened whenever he was uncomfortable. Ron poured himself a glass of juice and made sure his gaze didn't meet Malfoy's as he put the pitcher down again.

He was definitely not going to let him destroy his good mood or his appetite right now. Determined not to play Malfoy's game, he kept his attention on his food.

That way he didn't see the smirk melt into a look of deep satisfaction. It was good, for he'd undoubtedly done something rash if he'd realized that he'd just lost a round.

Forcing himself to eat even though he wasn't really hungry, Harry kept glancing at the door every few minutes. He hated this. Hated the waiting and the uncertainty. Was Snape going to come to breakfast at all?

It seemed he wasn't. A few moments later Malfoy pushed his chair back and tossed his napkin on his plate before walking out without a word. At least that was a good thing. Harry didn't want to witness a fight now. There would be plenty of time for that later.

There was no sign of Snape.

Making barely audible sounds of discontentment, Eppy appeared from the kitchen and started to clean the breakfast away. She glared at Ron who didn't seem to even notice her presence and continued eating.

It was such a normal sight, Harry almost smiled. He offered Eppy his plate and moved some of the other dishes closer for her to reach, earning a dark look and more muttered words for such courtesy. He didn't mind. Eppy was actually a welcome change to other, more eager house elves.

He watched her work, not bothering to offer more help, knowing it was not appreciated.

"You want to do something special today? I could go swimming again. Well, I mean later." Ron pushed back against the chair, sighing with happiness. He was certain he'd just sink if he went to the water right now. But damn he felt good. Eppy should cook bacon more often, like every day.

Harry shook his head. "I think I just want to stay here today." He was not about to leave the cottage. Snape had to come out of his room sooner or later, and when he did, he was going to have a word or two with him. He could wait here for as long as it took.

"Oh." Trying not to sound too disappointed, Ron shrugged. "Okay. So we'll just go and get our stuff then. I wonder if it rained last night."

Harry had completely forgotten about the laundry. He sighed as he remembered how wet it had been outside. They'd have to do something about their soggy clothes. He wondered if he could ask Ron to deal with them, knowing already that he couldn't send his friend out there alone. Asking him to work
with Malfoy so that he could stay here and wait for Snape to come out of his room so that they could talk about how he'd kissed him would probably not go well either.

Working with the laundry was just as annoying as Harry had expected. Wet and tedious.

The silence he and Ron shared only added to his annoyance. He couldn't really think of anything to say, his mind too full of doubts and anger about what had happened. It seemed that Ron wasn't in any mood for idle chatter either.

Usually he wasn't too eager to take part in small talk. Now, it would have been a relief. Instead of talking about Quidditch, or school, or even the weather, Harry kept thinking about the cottage. Folding damp shirts, he wondered if Snape had come out of his room yet. Planting a robe on the basket, he thought of going to Snape's door, asking for a moment. It would be a foolish strategy, but it might get results.

By the time he and Ron were finished, Harry was sure he was indeed going out of his mind. All the things he could think of sounded bad. Silence would suffocate him while talking might bring everything to an end. Giving Snape time might mean they never talked, going to him would lead into a fight.

Harry spread the damp robe over the door leading to their room. It would take some time for it to dry. The way the robe prevented him from closing the door didn't matter. He did not want to hide. That was about the only clear thought in his head. He had absolutely no idea of what he wanted; nothing specific came to mind. He wanted things to be back to the way they were, but even that felt false.

Determined not to let go of his plan to at least try to talk to Snape, Harry went back downstairs, not even bothering to bring a book with him this time. He was content on sitting on the couch and waiting.

Having Ron join him shortly after didn't surprise him. He simply smiled at his friend, but didn't say a thing.

Lunch was announced by Eppy, who seemed even more irritated than usual. She walked slowly back to the kitchen, glaring at the doorway across the hall, almost as if her glare would bring Snape out.

Harry looked at the door as well. It didn't open, and Snape didn't come out. So much for wishful thinking.

Sitting here alone with Ron and Malfoy wasn't really making Harry feel any better. He waited in silence as the others cast some strange looks at each other and then managed to fill their plates without accidentally spilling anything steaming on each other's lap.

The food looked excellent and smelled good too. Harry piled sausages and chips on his plate, adding some vegetables as an afterthought, and then sat down, staring at his plate.

He was not hungry.

Not even bothering to play with his food, he sat there, wondering if he should even be here. It had felt better to stay in the living room; at least it had been peaceful there. He could just sit and think and didn't have to watch Ron act weirdly with Malfoy. He hadn't really paid attention on that earlier and wasn't about to start now.
Too many things were already going so damn wrong in his life, he didn't want to get involved with other people's troubles. As long as Malfoy wasn't hurting Ron -- and Ron wasn't killing Malfoy -- everything was all right.

Soft sounds from the hallway didn't alert Harry until the door was suddenly pushed open. He looked slowly up, completely ignoring the way Ron was trying not to choke on his food.

There was a familiar sneer on Snape's face as he stormed into the room. He cast a glare on Ron who was still coughing, allowing his gaze to slide over the table to Draco as well.

He paid absolutely no attention to Harry.

The tension in the room seemed to only grow as he sat down and reached out for the dishes. Even Eppy had disappeared back into the kitchen. She might be a grouchy old house elf, but she wasn't stupid.

At least Ron wished he could follow her example and run. He didn't feel hungry anymore. Casting a worried glance at Harry, who was once again just staring at his plate, he didn't move to get up. It would feel wrong to leave Harry alone with the Slytherins right now.

The only sound in the room was the soft clinking of metal against porcelain, occasionally joined by the sound of a glass being lowered back on the table.

Harry lifted his hand slowly and grabbed his fork. Knowing he couldn't eat a thing, he simply poked at his lunch, avoiding eye contact with anyone.

He tried to remember when he'd last felt this uncomfortable and failed. There were occasions, he was certain, but somehow nothing seemed as bad as this. He wanted to say something to end the silence, but knew he couldn't. If he said something to Snape while Ron and Malfoy were around, he would probably never have a chance to talk to him again.

Him being an idiot might be forgiven. Him being an idiot and embarrassing Snape in front of others would probably result in being turned into something small and slimy.

Pushing his carrots to the other side of the plate, Harry wished this was all over already.

Barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes, Draco watched his professor cut his lunch into small precise portions before skewering them with his fork. He had no idea of what had happened, but he could well guess. Potter was looking completely desolate, where as Snape seemed as forbidding as ever.

Something important had happened last evening. He wondered what he would have seen if he'd come downstairs five minutes earlier than he had.

The way his professor and Potter had behaved together had been an enigma for weeks. They didn't seem to be playing any of the games he was aware of, and he knew many. Whatever there was between those two, it was something that wasn't a part of his vocabulary.

Draco wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

He did know enough to keep his mouth shut. Making any kind of comments would be suicidal now. That was the reason he'd never use the strange looks between Potter and Snape as a weapon in his ongoing battle with Weasley. Speculations about Snape's life were all right only as long as they never went to the man himself.

This silence and obvious discomfort in Potter was intriguing. Draco would not say anything about it,
but he was definitely going to watch. It was highly entertaining.

Finishing with his food in less than five minutes, Snape pushed his chair back. He was not going to stay here a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. He stood up, not even looking at Harry. "I do not wish to be disturbed. If you find it necessary to do something idiotic, please do it outside." It was accompanied by a glare that was much more effective than 'or else...'

Before anyone could even nod, he was out in the hallway.

Harry lifted his gaze from his plate, groaning as he realized that he didn't have a chance to talk to Snape now either.

"Are you all right?" Looking worried, Ron leaned closer to his friend. He'd noticed that there was something going on with Harry, but didn't really want to pry. He didn't want to force him to lie to him.

"No. Not really." Too tired to even evade the hesitant inquiry, Harry shrugged. "But it's nothing big."

Ron wasn't stupid enough to actually believe that, but nodded anyway. "Okay." They had talked about this often enough for him to know that if Harry wanted to talk, he'd talk.

After that disgusting and completely wrong thing that Malfoy had done a few days back, he'd come to understand the need for silence. He wouldn't want to share his thoughts with anyone right now. Not even Harry.

It was a relief to see a hint of understanding in Ron's eyes. Harry pushed his chair back, not bothering to even pretend to eat anymore. Since there was nothing to say, he padded back to the living room.

He would wait here.

He knew it was foolish, but he couldn't do anything else right now. Seeing the blatant dismissal had somehow taken all the fire from him. He felt completely drained, unable to think of anything to do, so he simply curled on the couch, arms wrapped around his knees.

The cottage wasn't quiet. The contrast to the nighttime was enormous. Most of the sounds came from the dining area and the kitchen, where someone was making lots of noise by slamming plates on the table. A moment later there was the sound of the door slamming shut and then footsteps going upstairs.

Harry assumed that was Ron. At least it had sounded like him making an angry retreat. Maybe Malfoy had once again said something stupid to him. He didn't know.

To his dismay, he had to admit that right now, he didn't care. His whole life had been a big drama, his thoughts usually focusing on things around him. Lately, he had tried to keep in mind his duty to the Order, therefore ignoring personal needs.

Worries and doubts that had gathered inside him like a storm had been poured out in the dungeons. It had been the one openly selfish act Harry had done in years. That, and the occasional nights he'd spent ages ago trying to drown everything in warm skin against his.

Otherwise, he'd tried his best to be what was expected of him, at least on the outside. That Harry Potter would have been worried about Ron's behavior and wouldn't have simply stayed here on the couch.
He sighed. Whatever was going on, it wasn't a matter of life and death. It could wait. He didn't know if this could. Snape wasn't like anyone he knew; he could hold a grudge for decades. Waiting for a proper moment wouldn't work. He could probably wait forever, and Snape would be exactly the way he was now.

In Harry's tired mind, the guilt of being a lousy friend mixed with all the other dark emotions, leaving him utterly exhausted. He closed his eyes, wondering if he could take a short nap here. There was nothing for him to do, so he might as well.

Every sound coming from the hallway made him jump. Eppy's work in the kitchen was loud enough to keep him awake. His own thoughts were even louder.

Dinnertime came and went, and there was no sign of Snape. The only sign of his existence was the faint smell of sulfur coming from his room; he was once again hiding in his work.

Ron spent some time with Harry after grabbing a quick dinner. He didn't want to linger in the dining area with Malfoy, so he went to sit with Harry. Sensing that offers to talk wouldn't be appreciated, he offered to play some chess instead. When Harry refused, he simply sat on the other couch and pretended to be enthralled by one of the Muggle novels Hermione had packed in his trunk.

It was dark outside. Neither Ron nor Harry bothered to turn on the lights as it became too dark to read, they simply sat there.

"I'm going to bed." Resigned to the fact that nothing would really happen, Ron stretched and laid the book on the couch. He'd heard Malfoy make his way out to the outhouse and back again a while earlier and knew he could go through his evening routines without bumping into the git.

Harry sighed. "Okay. I think I should do that too." He was tired and disappointed. He was also getting angry, even though he couldn't really decide on the object of his anger.

Yawning, Ron made his trip to the outhouse. It was insane that a day spent mostly inside doing nothing could make him more tired than a day spent doing disgusting chores. He was feeling a bit groggy and there was definitely a beginning of a headache.

He tried to count how long they would have to spend here at the cottage. The days were slightly blurred, forming an endless 'then' in his mind. When he finally came to an estimate, he couldn't help groaning out loud, his exhale disturbing a moth that was circling the small light in the outhouse.

They would still have to stay here for weeks. Weeks of watching Harry brood about something. Trying not to stay alone with Malfoy, who hadn't repeated the kiss, but would probably try something as disgusting and totally unwelcome in the near future if the signs he was sending were correct. Ron was beginning to wish they were back at Hogwarts, even with all the exams approaching. Anything would be better than this.

Lost in his gloomy thoughts, he was startled into a panicked yelp as the cottage door opened the moment he touched the handle. It was like the worst kind of a flashback, except that this time it was not Malfoy.

Managing to stutter, "Good night, sir," Ron stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He couldn't help feeling shivers run down his spine.

The general gloominess would be tolerable without Snape here. Somehow he managed to make things worse with his mere presence. Ron wouldn't be surprised if he had something to do with what was bothering Harry.
Because no matter what anyone said, Snape was and always would be a cold hearted bastard.

As Ron peeled off his outer robes, still wondering why it was so damn cold in here, the door to the living room opened and Harry peeked out. Instead of looking sad and angry at the same time, there was a weird glint in his eyes.

"Was that Snape?" Harry thought he'd heard some steps in the hallway before the door had slammed shut, but wasn't sure about that. Seeing Ron nod made him feel strangely boneless. "Good."

"You know, sometimes I really worry about you." There was enough smile on Ron's face to make that a joke, but he did mean it. The mood swings were nothing new, he'd had to witness Harry move a bit farther from him and Hermione and the others for some time now and there had been signs of brooding for ages. But this whole thing with Snape was really starting to worry him.

Delusions about liking Snape. That was like saying you liked the Muggle way of taking care of dental hygiene. No disrespect towards Hermione's parents, but Ron had heard stories.

"Don't bother. I'm fine." If not fine yet, he would be soon. At least Harry wouldn't have to spend another day waiting. He gave Ron a faint but honest grin. "Go to bed. I'll be up there soon."

He stepped fully into the hallway and then stood there, waiting patiently. This was exactly the kind of an opportunity he'd been waiting for.

Ignoring the weird way Ron glanced at him on his way upstairs, he tapped his fingers against the wall. He was really nervous, but he wasn't going to back away now. He had faced worse than this. Probably.

The hallway was completely quiet. Ron's footsteps could be heard from above, but there were no other sounds. Harry tried very hard not to focus on the unnaturally loud beating of his heart. This was not a thing to be anxious about, this was nothing new. He had talked to Snape before. Everything was going to be all right.

He released a deep breath as the door opened.

Snape walked in from the dark evening as if entering the Potions classroom. The door banged shut with precision, the gust of cold air making his robes billow.

The breeze made Harry shiver. "Snape." There was notable hesitation in his voice.

There was a totally blank expression on Snape's face as he glared at Harry. He didn't say anything, just hung his outer robe on the rack.

Hesitation was slowly turning into annoyance, the feeling tingling through Harry's body. He was glad of it, for it was a strong emotion, driving him on. "Are you just going to pretend that I'm not here?" For some reason that was more offensive than anything.

There was a short silence. Then cold, precise words, "Go to bed, Potter."

At least now they were talking, in a way. Any words would be better than the icy silence. No insults would manage to hurt more than dark thoughts that would linger and fester until one went insane.

"I want to talk with you." Harry was getting really angry at the cold stare. This was the side Snape showed in class, the side he'd become to hate since he'd first seen beyond it.

Snape snorted, the sound full of contempt. "I don't have time for this." With that, he turned his back...
The shock of seeing such clear dismissal almost paralyzed Harry. He stared at the retreating man, feeling cold inside. Then he rushed after Snape, almost catching him before they reached his room.

Panting with rage, he stared at the door that had been banged shut right in front of his face. He was not going to give up this easily. "Snape!" He knocked on the door, his knuckles rapping hard against the wood. "Open the door."

There was no answer, the door staying closed.

Harry hadn't really expected there to be an answer. He knocked again and then tried the handle. The fact that the door was locked wasn't exactly a surprise either. "Open the damn door, Snape!"

Still no reaction. He'd thought the man would at least open the door to scowl at him or to tell him he was a total cretin for yelling like this in the hallway. The silence wasn't going to drive him away. He'd stand here until Snape opened the door even if it took hours.

Of course that would make both Ron and Malfoy come here to see what was going on. He was amazed neither one had come to see what all the noise was about.

He raised his hand again, and then lowered it. This was ridiculous. Grabbing his wand, he pointed it at the lock, snarling out, "Alohomora." Maybe Snape hadn't put any wards on his door yet.

The lock opened with a loud click.

Before Harry could even step into the room, Snape's voice came out clearly, "Get out of my room, Mr. Potter." He sounded like he was definitely not joking.

"I need to talk to you." It was a parody of the need that had driven Harry on weeks earlier. "About what happened last night." He would not back down now. He'd said more painful things to Snape, had ranted and raved and cried until he was hoarse. This was easier than that.

Snape crossed his arms across his chest. "Nothing happened last night. Now get out of my room before I lose my patience with you!"

"Nothing happened? Damn it, Snape how can you say that? Nothing..." Stubbornly standing by the door, Harry shook his head. "No. I am not going to lie about it. Not to you or to myself. We kissed." He faced the glare without flinching. "And it wasn't an accident. I wanted to kiss you. That's the truth."

"Don't be ridiculous!" The tone of Snape's voice was familiar from years of Potions classes. It held all the contempt and annoyance he could muster. Hid a multitude of other emotions as well.

Harry's reaction was instant. Blushing with shame, he said, "Snape..." He had no idea what to say really.

"Now if you're quite through with your childishness, I would like to retire for the night. Leave!" It was clear that Snape had nothing more to say.

It was the cold way Snape shrugged the whole thing off that hurt Harry the most. He looked into Snape's eyes, knowing that there was no getting through to him while he was acting like this. Words would only make him angrier.

He stepped backwards, trying to hide the pain from the other man. It didn't really work as well as he
thought, as he stumbled into his own robes, almost falling on the floor. It was mortifying. Suddenly he didn't want to face Snape anymore. He just wanted to run away from this whole mess.

What a stupid thing to do in the first place! Kissing Snape? He really had been out of his mind. What the hell had driven him to act like a damn teenager, a stupid, horny teenager? Why the hell hadn't it been enough to just be with Snape?

Now he was losing all that; the only person who knew almost everything about him, the peace he felt with him. He didn't know what made him angrier, his own idiocy, or Snape's stubbornness and refusal to let him explain everything.

He slammed the door shut behind him, anger driving him on even into the cool evening. Strange, how long it had been since he'd last felt this mad. Cold anger was familiar to him, the icy feeling in his chest that confined all the emotion inside. This was different; hot rage that made him run until he tasted blood in his mouth, leaving him empty with the urge to smash things. Since there wasn't anything breakable anywhere near, Harry simply drove his fist into the first tree available.

It hurt like hell, but somehow it made him feel a lot better.

Panting, he stared at his bruised knuckles. The pain was overriding some of the rage, and he was now able to have a clear thought or two. Realizing that running blindly around the countryside was idiotic, he leaned against the tree and slid down on the ground.

He just wanted to stay here forever. Not thinking anything. No thoughts. That sounded wonderful.

Of course nothing was ever that easy for Harry Potter.

"Are you quite through with your little tantrum, Potter?" The dry voice was the first indication of Snape's presence. He'd moved through the small grove quietly, not making any sound as he followed Harry.

Seeing the expression on the boy, he doubted he would have heard him even if he'd made as much noise as a herd of stampeding Bicorns.

Harry let out a broken laughter. "It had to be you following me. Damn it, Snape..." He could tell by the intent look in the dark eyes that he probably wouldn't have any privacy from Snape now that he needed it.

"You're wandering around the place in the middle of the night. Of course I would follow you, you idiot!" Snape snapped the words out.

It only made Harry shake harder with mirthless laughter. "Why do you care? Why the hell should you care about an idiot brat like me? It's not like you even want to talk to me. Or be honest with me."

However much Snape wanted to call his tone sullen, he couldn't. There was too much genuine pain there. It surprised him to actually flinch at the thought that he was causing that pain. He'd never cared about such things before. "You know your safety is important to me." That had never seemed as painfully obvious. "But it doesn't mean I have to indulge your fantasies."

That was clearly an evasion. A very careful evasion, but even Harry could recognize it as such.

"Stop it. Just stop. If you can't even... You've never lied to me." Seeing the denial in Snape's eyes, he amended, "Not about things that really matter. Don't start now."

Snape wanted to say something excruciatingly cruel. Remind him that he was simply doing his duty
listening to him, or maybe even say that whatever emotion Harry saw in him was pity and nothing more.

Raising an eyebrow, he said, "I can not be held responsible for your delusions, Potter." He snapped his mouth shut. No matter how hard he'd tried, it hadn't come out right. There wasn't enough real scorn in him.

"Will you just listen to me?" Exasperated, Harry looked at Snape. The moon was still bright enough to illuminate the man's face, but he couldn't really tell anything about his expression. Snape was a master of hiding most of his emotions, except rage, of course. He never seemed to hide that. "Please. You promised you would listen."

There were no words, but Snape nodded. Yes, he had made such an utterly foolish promise. He could handle listening to Harry again, even if this would be the most insane thing he'd ever said.

To his amazement, what came out next wasn't even close to what he expected.

"I don't want this to drive you away. Or make you drive me away." Harry wanted to make that absolutely clear. "I may have a crush on you, but that's not the issue here."

Snape was rarely truly surprised; he'd seen and heard too much during his life. This was the second time Harry Potter managed to astonish him. First by actually having a mind that worked. Now with this.

Forcing his gut reaction of angry words and disdain down with surprising ease, Snape nodded again, urging Harry to go on even though he was certain he did not want to hear this.

Harry let out a soft sigh, glad that his totally unplanned confession hadn't chased Snape away again. He never knew how he would react. It made this conversation more difficult than any they'd had this far. "I won't apologize for kissing you. That would be a total lie. I'm not sorry for that, but I am sorry if it..." He searched for the proper word. "Offended you somehow."

It was enough to convey his meaning, even if the word was not exactly the one he wanted to use.

"I was not offended." Appalled, yes, even disgusted by his own blindness. Snape couldn't believe he had not recognized the looks and touches earlier. Couldn't believe he'd even encouraged them in a way.

"Thank Merlin!" This time, Harry did nothing to hide the relief in his voice. "Okay. Good." He smiled brightly at Snape.

Snape wondered what would come next. He had never seen anyone be so happy for not managing to offend him before. It went against all the rules. Harry was supposed to want to offend him, that was the natural order of things.

Rising slowly to his feet, Harry brushed his hands against his robe. His palms felt clammy, the sensation extremely unpleasant. "Can we talk about it? I mean... We don't have to talk about the kiss if you don't want to, but... I want to talk with you. About something. Anything."

"I'm once again amazed by your eloquence, Potter." The sarcasm came unbidden. Snape knew what he meant. He wasn't prepared to talk about that ridiculously clumsy attempt of a kiss, didn't want to think about his own reaction to it. He'd spent hours working with potions, refusing to think about anything.

It would have been a waste of time to spend any time contemplating such utter lunacy.
Harry wasn't going to let it go. "I mean it. Are you going to stop running away and talk to me?" He
didn't know what he'd do if Snape refused to go back to what they'd had. He'd probably pester him
until he either gave in or hexed him with an Unforgivable.

"I am not running away." The denial was instant, even though Snape knew that neither believed that
to be true. He watched Harry for a moment, and then voiced the thought that had been gnawing at
him for some time now. "You don't need me anymore, Potter. As much as it amazes me, I have to
say that you have learned to process your thoughts quite efficiently these past months."

Shaking his head, Harry said, "No." He was not going to let Snape out this easy.

"Why?" Snape didn't have to elaborate. He knew that Harry's denial wasn't about needing him, it
was about their agreement. He couldn't understand why he would want to continue their
conversations now; they weren't vital to either of them.

"I'm not strong enough to do that. I can acknowledge the fact that 'yes, I do like you and find you
sexy as hell and by the way it's not a good idea to shag your teacher so let's not do it after all'. You
know me. I'm not a walking hard on! But for us to stop talking because of this. Do you have any
idea of how..." Realizing that he was about to say something he would definitely regret later on, Harry
straightened his back. "Never mind that."

Snape felt cold all over. He knew the boy was right. Without realizing just how far it would go, he'd
offered him something unconditional, and was now running away like an idiot just because he was...
Apprehensive. Not about what Potter probably thought of, but apprehensive anyway. "No. Say it."

"Fine. I see you as a friend. Yeah. Go ahead and laugh. I feel comfortable with you, and I thought
you weren't appalled by my presence either. Now you're pushing me away just because of this thing.
It's not fair."

"And what is it I have no idea of?" The way Harry was evading the whole question was actually
impressive, but Snape wanted the truth.

Harry smiled a wry smile. "Of how it feels like to be losing a friend."

It was ridiculous how the words hit Snape. He was quiet for a moment, wondering of what Harry
would say if he ever said a word about the only real friend he'd ever had. Or thought he'd had.

Never trust a Slytherin, was a quite famous saying amongst the other Houses. Never trust a Malfoy
was another one. Snape hadn't exactly been naive as a youngster, but he had made some mistakes.
Trusting Lucius Malfoy was one he regretted the most.

Snape sighed, deciding to drop the whole thought. He was not about to talk with anyone about this.
"I understand you're having..." He had to actually think about how to phrase that. He was definitely
not going to use the words 'sexy', 'shag' or 'hard on' in the sentence. "I understand you're... infatuated
with me." A complete lie. He couldn't understand it at all.

"For the lack of a better word, yes." Biting sarcasm in Harry's voice.

It rather reminded Snape of himself. "You do understand that it's perfectly normal for someone like
you to have such feelings towards someone you trust and confide to." He could still remember how
many of his yearmates had made fools of themselves with Poppy. Trips to the infirmary had usually
lead to idiotic crushes on the woman.

There was a short silence, then Harry started to laugh. He couldn't help it. Snape's words had just
made him think about another conversation they'd had a while back.
Snape waited patiently for Harry to stop laughing. He was convinced this was confirming his speculations of the boy's instability. How annoying. After all, Harry had never shown any signs of real insanity back at Hogwarts.

Wiping the tears of laughter from his cheeks, Harry gasped, "Are you speaking out of experience, Snape?" The snort following that was definitely a muffled giggle; a very unmanly sound of amusement. "After all, you have been in the dark place yourself, needing someone to talk to..." More muffled giggles.

It took Snape a moment to realize just exactly what he meant with that. At first he was trying very hard not to think about how he'd been after leaving the Death Eaters. He'd been in no condition to be sexually attracted to anyone then, not for quite some time. Then the meaning hit him, and he had to roll his eyes at Harry's idiocy. "No, Potter, I have never been attracted to the Headmaster."

He didn't even want to think about what that would have led to. Probably a pat on the head, a bowl of Sherbet Lemons and then murderous glares from Minerva.

After Harry had calmed down a bit, Snape added, "But that does not change the fact that our... association is not one on which you can build a romantic relationship. I do not care if you have fantasies about me. You're probably not the first student to dream of me. However I would assume those dreams usually deal with various ways of killing me." The thought made his lips curl up a bit.

"You're probably right." Harry nodded, still smiling. That was probably the essence of Neville's most cherished daydreams. The laughter was bubbling right below the surface, just waiting for a perfect opportunity to emerge again.

Snape refused to comment on that. "I am not only your teacher, Potter. I'm your..." There was yet another pause as he had to search for a proper word.

This time none of the terms he could think of fit.

"You come to me when you need to talk. That makes this whole matter therapeutic. Infatuation is completely understandable." There. That made sense.

Harry let out a snort. "Right. I see you as a therapist. As a father confessor. We have a student/teacher relationship. Or maybe a doctor/patient one." Another snort. "Tell me another one, Snape, because I'm not buying this one."

"Mr. Potter." There was no hint of humor in Snape's voice. The tone was one rarely heard even in the Potions classroom; the rage there bordering on murderous. Glaring at Harry, he said, "You're out of line."

For someone who had lived through half a dozen attempts for his life, Harry seemed to have poor survival instincts. He didn't budge, didn't even look embarrassed or scared. "No. I'm not. We're not in the classroom, Snape, and I'm not trying to be a disrespectful pest." There was actually a hint of a smile on his lips again. "Even though you probably think I'm succeeding even without trying."

"I see." The lack of apology didn't really surprise Snape. People usually didn't stick around long enough to actually say they were sorry. He was however astonished of the way Harry spoke. It wasn't the first time he'd contradicted his words.

Never before had he sounded like this, serious and honest. Not arguing for the sake of arguments.

Snape closed his eyes, wishing he was back in the cottage. He didn't want this, any of this. Maybe offering his help -- or accepting Harry's request for it, he couldn't really tell anymore -- had been a
mistake from the beginning. He didn't want to know Harry Potter as a person, didn't want to see behind the mask he seemed to wear. His life had been complicated enough before this whole mess.

The story of his life. Never simple, never really peaceful. He was always surrounded by idiots, or the dark demons of his own past. He had enough trouble with that.

He did not need this.

"You know, this isn't about me fancying you. Not really." Harry ignored the rather cold silence, and went on, "You can't really make me hate you. I know you, Snape, and I still like you."

For some reason that was even more incomprehensible than the kiss. Snape wondered if Harry was a total masochist. He had never shown him anything but scorn. Having the idiot tell him he didn't hate him anymore had been bad enough. This was definitely worse. Harry liked him? Why on earth?

Since Snape didn't say anything, Harry said quietly, "And I kind of thought you don't exactly hate me anymore."

There was no answer to that. The silence was in a way as revealing as words would be. If Harry had been wrong, Snape would have undoubtedly hurried to deny it.

Snape felt a surge of irrational anger at that. He didn't want the idiot to be able to read him like this. He would never admit not hating his students; he hated each and every one of those brainless children. Loathed all the unthinking people milling around him. Could barely stand most of the Order, knowing that they had no idea of what they were up against.

He didn't want to acknowledge that Harry Potter was any different from the others, but couldn't really deny it. This wasn't what he'd expected when he'd agreed to listen to Harry.

He should have seen it coming. From the first moment he realized the young man was more than what his reputation told him. That even if he had no talent with potions, he wasn't an empty headed celebrity after all and had hopes and fears, most of which reminded him of his own.

It had been clear from the beginning. Snape sighed. He'd done this to himself, and now he had to figure a way out of this whole mess. "I do understand your worries about friendship." The word came out with a moue of distaste. He'd never needed friends, the word reminding him of those who had used it to describe a bond more horrible than any slavery.

He was still not thinking about Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm not willing to talk about it right now. Nor am I willing to talk about whatever hormonal feelings you may harbor towards me." Snape knew he couldn't continue ignoring the topic forever, but wasn't going to address it without thinking it through. He was not a Gryffindor who barged into everything unprepared.

"Okay." Harry wouldn't argue with that. Now that he'd got what he wanted, he was not going to push his luck. He'd said Snape's presence in his life would be enough, and it would have to be.

"However," Snape said, wishing they could just leave it at that. He knew Harry and knew that it would fester between them if he didn't say something. "I do believe we should address the matter later on."

Harry couldn't say anything. He just stared at Snape. Did he understand correctly?

"If you are still eager to talk about this, we shall. But in private. I would ask you not to make another
scene.” Not that Snape would ask. He was telling.

"Sure. Of course!" It would be all right to wait, as long as it was clear that eventually, they would indeed talk about this. "Can we still... You know. Talk?"

Knowing quite well what Harry meant by that, Snape nodded. He had little choice on the matter now. After allowing himself to get into this mess, he had to deal with what happened next. "Yes."

That was enough.

There were no words exchanged between them as they walked back to the cottage. Snape was in no mood to make comments about anything. Finally noticing how cold it was, Harry simply needed to get inside as soon as possible. The silence was mellow again, holding no secrets or hidden dark emotions.

For some reason it made Harry feel even better than their agreement.

It was quiet in the cottage. No lights shone from upstairs. The lack of anyone lurking in the shadows waiting to see where they had gone was definitely a relief.

Night time wasn't made for big scenes or explanations. It was perfect for quiet contemplation or hiding. This time there would not be any reason for either, at least for Harry. He was covering a yawn already, finally able to feel physical weariness as well. It had been a long day and he was perfectly willing to go to bed.

He was quite certain that this time he wouldn't spend hours tossing and turning and staring at the clock. His dreams would probably not haunt him either.

"Good night, Snape." Harry didn't move any closer to the man, but let some of the fondness shine in his gaze.

He smiled at the way Snape glared at him, knowing it wasn't disgust that made him snort. Feeling warm, he turned around and climbed the stairs.

Slipping into the room he shared with Ron, Harry leaned against the door for a while. His mind was a jumble of hopes and fears, and he still couldn't fully comprehend what had just happened. Life was an endless string of disappointments. Having something go right was a shock.

Snape didn't hate him, wasn't going to push him away anymore and would allow him in his rooms again. It was enough to make him want to shout for joy.

"Harry?"

Startling at the sound, Harry padded away from the doorway. "Sorry. I hope I didn't wake you up.” He'd thought Ron was asleep by now.

"No. Wasn't asleep." A brief moment of groping sounds as Ron reached out for his wand was followed by, "Lumos. Ouch. My eyes."

The bright light forced Harry to blink. It had somehow been easier in the dark. He had never been afraid of the lack of illumination, darkness feeling like a second home by now.

"What was all the noise about?” Mumbling it out, Ron peeked from under the covers. He'd tried to get some sleep, but had been interrupted by some yelling and then a loud bang. Since Harry was so obviously a part of what was going on, he'd decided to wait till he was back before drifting off.
Harry sat on his bed. He was confused about what had just happened, mainly since it had gone better than he’d ever dreamed. "I..." He shook his head slightly, knowing that he couldn't say that out loud. "I had a fight with Snape."

That definitely jolted Ron wide awake. "What?" He searched for signs of Harry slowly turning into a toad. There was no evidence of such a thing happening in front of his eyes.

"We had a... misunderstanding. Nothing serious. We kind of fixed it." Harry didn't know what would happen tomorrow, but at least he knew he and Snape were still talking.

"But..." There had been no rumors about anyone ever really arguing with Snape. Ron remembered some of the words exchanged between Harry and the disgusting creep, but none of them had ever ended with them 'fixing it'. There had been detention. An unconscious Potion master lying on the floor in the Shrieking Shack. Once even Harry running out of the class. Never this. "You had a fight with Snape?"

"Sort of."

Ron couldn’t believe it, even though the sounds from the downstairs had sounded unpleasant. Harry had fought with Snape? "I can't believe you're still alive." He sounded absolutely serious.

The words brought a smile on Harry's lips, a bubbling feeling tingling inside him. It was something he’d felt all too rarely recently. Not fighting against the mirth, he chuckled out loud, finally squirming with laughter. It was an utterly happy sound with no traces of darkness.

Yes. He was alive. And he felt good.
Ron was certain he was slowly turning into Harry's mother.

There were so many things he'd been aware of lately that it had changed the way he was thinking about Harry; not as a simple friend, but something more complicated. All the Order meetings where people had whispered about the importance of Harry Potter must have played with his head.

He couldn't think of another reason for his relief to see Harry smiling and actually eating his food instead of playing with it.

Maybe now they could actually do something together again. Ron didn't like the silences, when Harry was so obviously lost in his own thoughts and ignoring everything around him. He was used to having people around him, loud people laughing and teasing each other. Compared to that, this damn cottage could have been a cemetery.

Not exactly a good thought.

Munching some of his breakfast, Ron looked around the table. His gaze barely brushed over Malfoy. Watching that git smirk at him would just ruin the beginning of the day.

He paid a little more attention to Snape. Intrigued of Harry's claim of having a fight with their Potions master, he wanted to see if there was any sign of homicidal rage in the man. There wasn't. How odd.

It wasn't as if he resented the lack of hostility between his friend and the git. Maybe now Snape wouldn't just give them all an F when he finally graded their exams.

That was about the only thing Ron truly resented these days; the way Snape refused to hurry with their essays. It was a very good and efficient form of torture, keeping them all waiting.

It didn't look like Snape was going to work on the exams today either. After finishing breakfast, he walked to the living room and settled there with a book. Ron muttered a few curses from under his breath so that no one could really hear. Damn the man!

This meant more waiting.

He trailed after Harry upstairs, noticing that his friend's right hand was slightly swollen only when he dug into a small bag and then pulled out a small jar of something he spread on his bruised knuckles. "You hurt your hand last night?" It came out more accusingly than he'd thought. His mind was already conjuring up violent images. That bastard!

"Sort of." Looking up, Harry shrugged the question off. "It's nothing big." He hadn't even remembered the whole thing before seeing Snape's pointed look earlier. When he'd focused on his hand, he'd realized that it actually hurt.

He'd wondered if he should ask Snape if he could give him something for it, but decided against it. It might be awkward.

Determined not to make things any worse, he'd chosen on the salve he carried in his trunk. It had always come handy for bruises he'd got in Quidditch practices.
Ron stared at Harry's knuckles, scowling as the bruises faded under the ointment. He didn't want to push, really didn't, but he couldn't help asking, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Not able to feel annoyance at such obvious concern, Harry smiled. "And no."

"Huh?"

"Snape didn't do this. I did." It was the real question behind the other one anyway. Harry didn't want Ron to worry about him when there was absolutely no need.

It made Ron sigh with relief. He had absolutely no idea what he could have done if Snape was somehow abusing his friend. A chilly thought. In the pureblood tradition he might be considered an adult, but he knew he had no chance against their Potions master in a fight. "You clumsy bugger." It did look like Harry had hit something hard, but joking about such things never hurt anyone.

Feeling the salve already work, Harry flexed his hand. "Thanks for the concern." Enough sarcasm there to make it an answering joke.

Ron made an extremely rude gesture that was followed by relieved laughter. "All right. So what do you want to do today? More brooding?"

"No." Definitely not. "Whatever you want is fine."

Turned out Ron didn't have anything specific in mind. It was cloudy, and it seemed it might rain any minute now. Getting out of the cottage for some fresh air was out of question then. Since Harry seemed anxious to get back downstairs, Ron sighed and suggested they might as well go to the living room and play something.

Not feeling any need to be completely humiliated again, Harry grabbed a deck of cards from his table and then hurried out of their room. He wondered if Snape was still in the living room.

Raindrops started to splash against the windows as they reached downstairs, and the clouds were darkening the sky. A voice called out "Lumos!" as Harry stepped into the living room. It was clear to see the grin on his face in the bright magical light.

Ignoring the grumpy glare Ron cast on the other side of the room, Harry went to sit on the floor. He didn't mind sharing the room with Snape and Malfoy. Not at all.

He dealt the cards, concentrating on the few wizarding games he knew. With Malfoy here, he didn't want to embarrass Ron by beating him in the Muggle games that were more familiar to him. He didn't mind losing in front of Snape. If he did, he would never play wizarding chess with Ron in public.

It was a pleasant way to spend the morning. The quiet conversation with Ron was enough to keep his mind busy, so he didn't have to spend all his time trying not to watch Snape sit there.

He could still feel the dark gaze on him from time to time.

Snape watched in silence as the youngsters busied themselves with games and books. It was a familiar sight, Weasley and Harry concentrating on a game while young Malfoy hid behind a book. He could see Malfoy flinch a little as the shutters banged against the wall as a gust of wind threw them open.

That was unexpected. He'd never thought someone like Draco Malfoy would be afraid of a simple storm. The boy hid it well, but he could still see the tension in him.
Pushing that thought to the back of his mind, he turned his attention back to the two Gryffindors.

He didn't pay much attention to Weasley. There was nothing intriguing about the boy; he was just like all of his family, a simple fool who probably didn't have an original thought in his head. Snape was not going to give him the benefit of doubt even for his loyalty to his friend.

All idiots seemed to be loyal to Harry Potter. Nothing new there.

Doing a much better job than Malfoy pretending to actually read the book he was holding, Snape kept his gaze on Harry. He had already spent hours thinking about him after the completely outrageous scene he'd made last night.

Life had always thrown nearly impossible obstacles into his path, but he'd never in his most idiotic dreams -- or nightmares -- seen this coming.

Facing with Harry's ludicrous notions of friendship and teenage desire, he was determined to treat this matter calmly. Ignoring it was obviously out of question, for Harry would simply pester him more. He didn't know when his glare had lost its edge with this foolish creature, but obviously it had.

He was pretty certain he knew where this all would lead. At least he was very familiar with a part of it, the easiest part. No doubt Harry would want something more complicated.

Snape changed his position slightly, letting a haughty expression spread on his face at the way Weasley jumped. It was good to see at least one Gryffindor could still be controlled by mere expressions. Unlike the other, who had the extremely unfortunate tendency to grin at him.

No matter how he'd tried to think this insanity through, Snape had to admit he was unable to reach any conclusions. There were too many things he was completely unaware of; mostly teenage notions like Harry's thoughts, however simple those might be.

He'd told Harry he didn't want to discuss the matter; still uncomfortable with anything surrounding that pathetic attempt of a kiss he'd prefer to forget all about it for the next fifty years or so. Harry on the other hand looked expectant, as if waiting for him to say something right now.

The idiot would probably not allow him more than a few days to think about it before getting nervous and doing something stupid.

Silently cursing the Gryffindor stubbornness, Snape turned the page. Everything would be so much simpler if he could find the familiar rage inside of him, if he could believe that yelling at Harry and telling him to leave him alone would work. He doubted harsh words could work, even if he could say something evil enough right now.

Harry had not made much sense last night. He was not playing by the rules anymore, never had, really. This time, Snape wasn't certain he even recognized the game. Parts of it were very familiar, but others were incomprehensible. How on earth was he supposed to think about what to do when he didn't know exactly what they would have to deal with?

There was only one way to deal with this nonsense.

If Harry really was as mature as he claimed -- which Snape highly doubted but was for the time being willing to entertain the notion -- he would be able to discuss this in a mature manner.

Content with his decision, Snape turned his attention to his book, and continued to read. He didn't really pay attention to the sound of Weasley and Harry talking nonsense.
The storm passed quickly, and by lunchtime, it wasn't really raining anymore. A few droplets of water dribbled down, making no sound as they hit the windows. Extinguishing the lights in the living room, Snape left his book on the couch as he headed towards the dining area. He wasn't really hungry, but years spent in Hogwarts had tuned his body to crave nourishment at certain times; a thing that always managed to annoy him.

Order and schedule were only acceptable when he had some control over them.

Snape ate slowly, enjoying every bite. Finishing with his meal, he poured himself another cup of tea and sat back, watching the teenagers. It was clear that his gaze made two of them nervous. As he had guessed, the third one simply went on eating.

By the time Eppy came to collect the dishes, Snape was convinced waiting was unnecessary. He did not want to be a part of any games. If Harry wanted honesty, he would be honest. Blunt even.

"Mr. Malfoy." Even though the boy would understand his glance, Snape said, "I assume you can manage washing the dishes without any incidents?" He wanted to make it certain there weren't any.

He was not blind and knew well what was going on with the youngsters. Remembering how Harry's actions had come as a complete surprise, he amended that he was aware of what was going on with Malfoy and Weasley. The way his young ward was behaving was a clear memory from his own youth. It was none of his business as long as no one got hurt.

Still, he did not want anything to happen now. Didn't need any more distractions.

Draco was already up, ready to follow Eppy. "Of course, sir." He didn't look at Ron. Snape's tone plainly said this was not the time for fun and games.

The way the Slytherin disappeared in the kitchen made Ron almost grateful to Snape. It would be nice not to have to suffer the glances and smirks for a while.

He was positively beaming as he pushed his chair back. "So, Harry. Ready for a rematch?" He would definitely enjoy the afternoon!

Hesitating only for a moment, Snape turned to Harry before he could say anything. "Actually, I have a task for Potter. Go and get yourself a basket. I need some aconite and more heather roots." It was not a request but a command.

Harry nodded. "Sure." He didn't know what Snape had planned, but decided not to ask yet. He rushed to his room, grabbing a small basket that held his clean underwear and then unceremoniously dumped the pants on his bed.

Trying not to look too eager to obey, he almost bounced his way back downstairs.

"You can't go out there alone," Ron muttered quietly from the doorway. He looked at Snape suspiciously. Obviously their fight last night wasn't as over as Harry had let him believe, 'cause this was clearly a way to punish. Why else would he order Harry around like this?

Before Harry could say anything, Snape sighed, "Mr. Weasley. If you think I would trust you and Potter to harvest weeds from the garden, you're sorely mistaken. Aconite," seeing the blank look on Ron, he muttered, "monkshood, wolfsbane -- is extremely poisonous as any first year should know."

It made Ron bristle. Of course he knew that! He just couldn't understand why the man needed the damn shrub now. And if he needed it so bad, why didn't he go and get it himself?
"So who is coming with me then?" Harry wondered if this was a way Snape was making sure he wouldn't interrupt his thinking. He could handle harvesting plants with Malfoy. Except that Malfoy was busy in the kitchen.

Snape couldn't suppress another sigh. "Who do you think, Potter?" Without other explanations, he went to grab his robes.

Trying very hard not to show how the words made him both excited and anxious, Harry followed suit.

He refused to meet Ron's gaze, knowing his friend was worried about him and probably angry as well. There was nothing he could say to ease his worries.

It was a bit windy outside, but otherwise it was quite nice. The sun was shining from the now clear sky and the damp grass was the only evidence of the previous storm. A perfect day for a walk in the woods. Or what counted as woods here.

Snape didn't seem to be in any hurry, walking amongst the plants and pointing out things for Harry to gather. Most of the herbs were ordinary, used in everyday potions, some were a bit more obscure. Harry was surprised to see that Snape was actually looking for the aconite. Finding it, he cut it himself, obviously not trusting Harry to be careful enough with it.

Cutting plants was pleasant. Harry didn't even have to think about what he was doing, since he simply followed Snape's lead. He'd read enough about plants for the N.E.W.T.s to steer away from ordinary weeds.

He wondered why had Snape wanted him to accompany him on this. There had to be a reason, there always was one with the man. He doubted Snape had made any decisions about what they had talked about earlier, so maybe this was a test on his resolve; to see if he could control his teenage urges or something.

Determined not to make things worse, he simply followed Snape, enjoying the nice day.

Snape was keeping a sharp eye on the bushes, his gaze never missing a plant. Some were identified for later use, some were collected immediately. He'd always enjoyed harvesting no matter how some Potions masters thought it was a waste of time. At least this way he could be sure no idiot had messed with his ingredients.

He refused to admit that he actually liked the simplicity of collecting plants. It was almost like making the simplest potions even Longbottom couldn't ruin.

Usually, he only went out to gather potions ingredients during the full moon. Those trips were always quiet, solitary. The only person he'd ever seen on those times was Sibyll Trelawney, and fortunately, she was so enthralled with her not so secret obsession, she hardly ever noticed him skulking in the shadows.

The silence was a part of the appeal of those nocturnal excursions. It was strange to be here now, in the bright daylight, but at least the peace and quiet were the same.

Harry chose that particular moment to step on a twig. The loud sound made Snape glare at him poisonsly.

"Sorry."

At least he had the brains to actually mutter it quietly. Snape nodded slightly. He couldn't think of
anything to say. The weird awkwardness he'd felt in Harry was so obviously spreading, or maybe he didn't know whom to address anymore. He suddenly realized that very soon, this young man would indeed be seen as an adult and be forced to take action most people probably couldn't even imagine, no matter how they all saw him as their hope.

That would elevate him far above a simple Potions master. It would make him stand amongst people like Albus Dumbledore, holding their world together with his will power and wand.

To be quite honest, Snape wasn't as appalled by the notion as he had been only a few months earlier, when Harry Potter had been nothing but a brainless child making a mess in the classroom and an even bigger mess loitering around with his friends.

He didn't know exactly when that had changed. It had started at Hogwarts, with the long meetings where the youngest of the Order's inner circle had actually showed some signs of a mind. He had still seen Harry as nothing more than a mindless youngster when he'd come to his rooms for help; not as a pathetic child, but definitely not as a mature person with whom he could actually discuss.

That transition had happened so gradually he couldn't pinpoint it to a certain moment. All he knew was that he couldn't think of Harry as a sniveling brat anymore.

The contrast between the three teenagers was enormous. Snape knew he would probably call Ronald Weasley an idiot child even when the redhead turned fifty. It would take a miracle to have him grow up. Young Malfoy was a bit more mature, probably because he was raised to take on responsibilities from early on.

Yet he looked awfully young to Snape, young and lost. He would have to guide him to the right direction. His ward, his responsibility.

Unlike Harry. It had started like that, with that ridiculous life boon over his head. Doing his best to distract that idiot Quirrel and the odd basilisk and werewolf had been his penance, his way of repaying James Potter. Everything after that was... complicated.

Snape hid his snort of disgust by cutting some fern.

Shoving the cut fern into the basket Harry was still carrying, he tried very hard not to dwell on thoughts about those dark years when Voldemort had returned and he'd had to make some hard choices.

Everything he'd done and seen had only strengthened his resolve to bring the Dark Lord down and to make sure no one had to suffer because of him ever again. Yes, that had been one of his thoughts that night when the boy wonder had first come to his room with his worries.

He wondered if he should cling to the thought now. Back then, he had reasoned he might as well listen to Harry so that he would not succumb under his own private darkness like so many already had. It was tempting to think about that now, to agree to whatever was wanted of him, using that excuse.

Snape shrugged the thought off before it was even fully formed. He refused to use such blatant lies to avoid confrontation with anyone. He was going to be honest -- at least to himself -- if he was indeed going to allow Harry to...

Unable to finish the thought, he glared at Harry again, glad that his attention was on a small rock formation on the ground and he couldn't see his glare. What was the thing he was supposed to be contemplating? What did this annoying young man want from him anyway?
Was it simply the need for physical contact? Here, removed from the world, he was probably the only person Harry could turn to in his desire for a release. Snape had kept an eye on his friendship with Weasley and knew there was nothing there that even hinted about sexual interest.

He wasn't exactly surprised.

Still, he couldn't help wondering just what exactly did Harry want. Sex? Something else? He couldn't really tell. Nothing he did made real sense.

Maybe it really was just teenage hormones. The drive for physical intimacy.

Snape almost let out another snort at the thought. There had never been anything really intimate in the sexual act. It was sometimes enjoyable, usually either painful or humiliating or both. A release, nothing more. Intimacy was something completely different.

He didn't want to think about what he considered intimate. His space, his privacy. Both of which he was already sharing with Harry Potter.

The basket was full now, and there was really nothing else Snape needed to find out here. He would have a lot to do in his room with all the plants to clean and prepare. There were potions he would need to brew, more thinking to do. Except that he didn't have enough knowledge on which to base his thinking on. He preferred to analyze things properly, not wonder and guess.

Still marveling at the way the day had turned out to be so fine, Harry was keeping his gaze on the sky. He liked being with Snape here. It was mellow somehow, the space between them not filled with the gut wrenching tension anymore.

He didn't know why Snape had wanted him to accompany him here. Probably because he knew that if he tried to go out on his own, he'd follow him. It might be daytime but he didn't like the idea of anyone wandering out here alone.

It was a sign that Snape wasn't going to avoid him anymore. Relieved, Harry was quite willing to follow him on whatever menial task. He could be quiet and show he could be more than an annoyance.

Now that they had this, he could try to ignore the other thing. He could live with desire. Dealing with unrequited lust couldn't be much harder than dealing with unrequited emotions. He'd had plenty of practice when he'd been younger.

This was nice; walking, gathering herbs together.

"Are you still determined to have a conversation about your hormonal behavior?" The question came with no preambles.

Harry froze. This was definitely not what he'd anticipated, though he probably should have. Once Snape's mind was set on something, he usually attacked the topic and didn't let go until he'd dissected it like a pile of shrivelfig.

He didn't have to think about it for a moment. "Yes." What else could he do? Sit alone in the dark every night and wonder about the whole thing? He had tried that so often and it had never worked.

"All right." Placing his sickle back in his belt, Snape looked around and then continued walking towards the stream. He didn't want to return to the cottage now, feeling that it was more sensible to talk here, outdoors, where they could be certain of their privacy. "And you still..."
"Yes." It was so obvious what Snape meant, though he did cast a rather annoyed look at Harry for interrupting. Ignoring the glare, Harry shrugged. "I'm not that fickle. Yeah, I still fancy you."

It was strange how something in him drove him to make these comments. He felt a bit uncomfortable, and a lot embarrassed, but was determined to overcome that. If he ever wanted Snape to see him beyond a stupid brat, he couldn't afford behaving like one.

Snape's expression was completely unreadable. "What exactly do you mean with this crush of yours?" He sounded like he was asking Harry to explain some theory or a thought that had been troubling him.

"I..." Blinking, Harry stared at Snape. He wondered just what exactly did he want to hear. Talking about this was weird.

Not as weird as all the other occasions he'd talked to Snape. Compared to some of those first nights, this was nothing. At least now he felt like he was able to actually form coherent sentences.

"What do I mean? I mean I like you. Fancy you." He smiled at that.

"Very amusing, Potter." Snape didn't exactly sound amused. "Now what do you want to do about it? You are obviously not content with keeping your crush to yourself. I would like to know what is it exactly that you want."

Harry had to think about that for a moment. His gaze darkened as he tried to make a list of everything he might actually want. "I want... Lots of things." He saw the way Snape looked at that and amended, "I'm not talking about sex. Only sex. I want things like this."

"Explain." Snape was truly baffled. He could understand sexual attraction, it was familiar to him, but this made no sense. "Things like what? Talking?" It could not be that simple.

"Yes. Talking. Walking together like this. Spending evenings together. Things." Harry didn't know how to explain it better. He didn't really want anything different from what they already had. He wanted to add to it, not change it.

Snape sighed. It was exactly what he'd feared. "Gryffindor emotionalism and useless sentimentality."

It came out almost as a curse.

Trying not to laugh out loud, Harry nodded. "You can call it that, I guess. I'd say companionship."

He didn't want to think about it too much. Companionship was more than he could ever have even dreamed of; something he could actually share with someone instead of just taking. Or being taken.

There was a small silence, as Snape thought about it. He seemed to accept the term, not making any comments about it.

They walked on, strolling slowly towards the stream. Harry liked the easy way they could still share the silence, glad that they hadn't lost that after all. No matter what his body wanted, this was the most important thing.

It was almost as if Snape could read his thoughts. "You said 'not only sex'. I assume you mean you want a sexual relationship as well."

Harry nodded. Yes, he definitely wanted a sexual relationship with Snape. "I do want it. But if you say no, it's all right. I can deal with the rest of it." How funny he'd never even thought about the fact that Snape might not share his view of sex.
He wondered if he should say something about it. Maybe he should have asked Ron more about what was seen as the norm in the wizarding world, if there was a difference between older, pureblood families and the rest of them. Saying things like that now would sound idiotic, so he clamped his mouth shut and waited.

There was no reply. Snape didn't want to share his thoughts about physical intimacy with Harry. It was too revealing. He didn't even want to think about the whole thing, the comfortable silences between them, relaxing in Harry's presence or even trusting him to some degree. It was ridiculous and had nothing to do with this.

He definitely didn't want to discuss about it with Harry.

"Snape?" Voice surprisingly quiet, Harry asked, "If I told you I really need it. Need this. Would you then shag me?" He didn't have to explain it further, they both knew what he meant.

Snape was quiet for some time. He thought Harry deserved an honest answer to this. Collecting his thoughts, he finally nodded curtly. "I said I'd be there if you need me. If you really need physical contact in the form of sex to gain some balance, you can have it." How strange that the idea wasn't half as disgusting as becoming someone's shoulder had been.

"I kind of thought you'd say that." At least now he knew.

It was almost tempting; an easy way to initiate sex. Harry knew it would also be the way to make sure there would never be anything really intimate between them.

He didn't want that. Mindless sex was something he could have with pretty much anyone; these few years of being regarded as a consenting adult had proven him that more often than he wanted to think of. He could live without that. But he wasn't sure he wanted to go on without Snape there to simply be with him.

Waiting patiently for Harry's decision, Snape tried to understand why this felt so important to him. He was used to performing unpleasant duties, had learned to block out all emotions decades ago and do what was expected of him. This would be no different. He had survived much worse than simple sexual acts with Harry Potter and at least now he was certain there would be no lingering after effects, no nightmares of pain and terror that would drive him to his potions.

Something in Harry's words had hit their mark. Snape had always dismissed talks of friendship, he had never known a 'friend' who wasn't seeking for something to gain from their acquaintance. This sounded different, more dangerous. This was a game he'd never learned how to play.

"I don't really need you like that." Harry knew that with his words, he was probably throwing away his only chance of ever getting that close to Snape. It didn't matter. He was not about to lie about this. "If you say you're disgusted by the whole thing, I'll be fine. Your choice."

That definitely caught Snape's attention. Yes, he was familiar with choices and consequences.

He was also impressed by Harry's choice of words. At least he knew not to ask if he wanted this. "I am not disgusted by the prospect of sharing a bed with you, if that's what you mean." It was the truth, but not the whole truth. "I do not however find your age and the fact that you are a Gryffindor especially attractive either."

Harry couldn't help feeling a shiver go through his whole body at the words. They sounded like an insult, but were actually the biggest compliment he'd ever received. Snape would definitely not shag him because he was the great Harry Potter or the Quidditch hero.
Looking at Snape, he moved a bit closer, not really sure what he was about to do.

"No." It was perfectly obvious where this would lead. Snape raised a hand to stall Harry, who once again had that ridiculous look in his eyes. "Absolutely not. You will not do that again. I forbid it."

Harry recoiled back, realizing he had actually planned on yet another insane kiss. He was too dismayed to even blush. Maybe he really was just a hormonal teenager.

There had been something in Snape's words that had made him sway closer, maybe it was the calm acceptance of his feelings and desire. Harry couldn't think of anyone else he could have had this conversation with, which was actually insane because before this spring, Snape would have been absolutely the last on his list. "Why?" The problem didn't seem to be anything he might have imagined. At least there was some mutual attraction. He was certain of it.

"Because I don't kiss children. I don't kiss my students. And I certainly do not kiss idiots."

Harry nodded slowly. "All right. But I'm not really a kid anymore. You know that." It was said so calmly it wasn't really even an argument. "And I'm not exactly your student anymore." He heard the intake of breath and hurried to continue before Snape could say anything. "All right. You're still my teacher. At least until you finish grading the exams. After that, things will be different."

"Only if you pass the test." It was rather lame, and Snape knew it.

Nothing in the whole world would stop Harry from hoping for the best. "Yes. But you said yourself that I'd pass if I study hard enough, and I've been studying. So that's all right. About kissing idiots..."

Snape could already guess what was coming next. He refused to give in, though. There were some things he was willing to label as unavoidable, but agreeing with Harry was not one of those things.

"You'll just have to get used to it."

It was almost a challenge. Snape chose to ignore it. "I shall not allow anything to disturb my privacy. If you think I will ever adopt any of the mannerisms so clearly seen in your peers when they court each other, you truly are insane. I shall not be made a fool of."

Harry shook his head so hard he wondered how he didn't sprain anything. "I wouldn't do that." The need for privacy was one of the reasons he felt comfortable with Snape.

"Being the object of your romantic aspirations is not one of my biggest dreams." Snape's tone spoke volumes of the understatement of his words. "However, if you choose to pursue this..." He saw Harry open his mouth and held up a hand. "I would have to ask you not to do this for as long as you are my student."

The wind was blowing harder now, but Harry wasn't feeling the cold. He could only stare at Snape. "You're not saying no?" He knew it wasn't the same as agreeing to any of this, but that was probably just because of the way Snape was.

"No. I'm not saying no."

Harry didn't even try to fight the silly grin that spread on his face.

"Futile as it may be, I will trust you to control such hormonal behavior until a later date when I am no longer responsible for your learning." Snape didn't sound like he was convinced about Harry's ability to control himself. "In case you find these urges too hard to resist, I can always offer you a neutering potion." There was a note of finality in his voice, as if he considered the subject closed.
Not knowing if that was a joke or not -- one never knew with Snape and there had been a rumor of such a potion circulating around for ages -- Harry just kept grinning. He didn't care if that made him look like an idiot.

Snape seemed to think so, considering the words he muttered next. Harry didn't mind. He was used to the grumbling and it was one of the things that sort of made him happy, not that he'd ever tell Snape that.

They continued the slow walk, following the stream for a moment before turning back to the cottage. Snape was already going through the inventory in his mind, wondering if he needed to collect some heather or not. Deciding he could always come back for it if he needed to, he let the thought go. Now that he didn't need to concentrate on trivialities, he could focus on important things; like his potions.

Harry was content to just walk beside him. Enjoying the sun on his face.

Part 16

It wasn't really dark yet.

The sun was setting, turning the whole world into amber and gold. It looked nice, the horizon almost burning.

Draco sat on his bed, staring off into the distance. He hadn't really ever watched the sunset before. Not like this, in peace, all alone in his room, focusing on the magnificent sight.

He was a bit amazed of how profound it felt. Like it was actually somehow meaningful to sit here and look at something that was an everyday occurrence. He'd read about this, of course; sunsets, sunrises, people wasting time on staring at the sky, wishing upon a star. It had always sounded completely ridiculous to him.

Yet here he was.

It wasn't completely intentional. He hadn't just decided he'd retire early so he could watch the sun set, he wasn't that frivolous.

He's spent the day inside, as always, mostly reading. Playing solitaire with the cards Weasley and Potter had left in the living room when they'd gone out for a walk. He'd even volunteered to wash the dishes after dinner just so that he would have something to do.

They had been here for weeks. At first Draco hadn't really cared what they did and what happened. The day he'd turned against the Dark Lord -- and he was still in awe of how easily Potter called him by his name -- could have been his last. That thought had carried him for a long time.

Now he was just bored.

He'd watched the Gryffindors study for the Potions exam, and felt a bit envious. They actually seemed to fill their time with reading. To him, it was more about revising things he'd already known.

It had always been a part of his problem. Not that he'd ever really thought of it as a problem before. He'd always had everything he'd ever needed or wanted. Money could buy almost anything and he'd never lacked funds. His upbringing had focused on duty and he'd always listened what his father had said.
Life in Hogwarts had been full of excitement. Not the studying; he'd always focused on the subjects, listened in class and done his homework. He didn't have to spend all his free time reading. Evenings had been full of intrigue, politics and scheming. Figuring out how to win the Quidditch Cup and the House Cup, or if the chances of winning were slim, they had to think of a way to prevent Gryffindor from winning. That had been serious business.

Scheming inside the Slytherin House had been more recreational. Everybody knew the games, everybody played.

The situation here was completely different. No need to scheme for a high position amongst them, since it was already clear that Snape was indeed the person everyone had to obey here. There were no one to scheme against, nothing to gain.

Draco missed some of the old times, some of his housemates. The way they had all been when he'd been younger, when everything had been relatively innocent.

At least then he'd had people to talk to. Things to do.

Earlier today, he'd had to spend hours alone while Potter and Weasley had frolicked outside. They'd gone swimming again, leaving the cottage looking rumpled and coming back refreshed. Looking disgustedly happy.

There was a change. For some time both of them had looked sad or grumpy, and at least then Draco hadn't felt like he was totally alone in his misery.

He was tired of spending his time alone. Snape was always there to assist him or accompany him outside, but he didn't feel like he could really ask him to go and make sure he was safe while he bathed or simply walked around. Whenever the Head of his House offered, he felt obliged to decline. He didn't want to be a charity case.

It wouldn't be so annoying if he didn't have to watch Potter and Weasley. They didn't even do anything special, but they had each other to talk with. He couldn't really remember when he'd last talked with someone. People talked to him these days, not with him.

He could usually ignore the things that went on around him, but tonight he had been too tired to watch the others interact. Not only the friendship between the two annoying Gryffindors; even though it was petty, he couldn't help resenting Potter for the easy way he interacted with Snape. After days of weird silence, he was once again making comments to him, relaxing in his company.

It jarred Draco's nerves. Felt completely wrong.

It was best to stay up here. He refused to admit that he was hiding or anything, he simply needed some space and time alone.

A sarcastic smile curved his lips up. Why was it so damn important for him to keep up appearance, when no one was here to see or hear? It wasn't as if even he believed his own thoughts. He was totally miserable here, with the loneliness and boredom that were driving him insane.

The menial work didn't help; cooking and cleaning and carrying wood. He was cooped up in a tiny hovel with two people he hated the most and the only person in the whole world he might respect. One lousy house elf, who was probably older than Dumbledore and madder than Trelawney.

He almost wished the school term was over already.

There was nothing for him to really look forward to. Returning to Hogwarts meant more exams and
then... Then nothing. All his grand plans had disappeared, he really had no future. Hiding behind Snape's robes? Not exactly the glorious fate he'd imagined, but the reality.

His world would be about survival, and nothing more. It sounded sort of liberating at times. Bloody depressing too.

The sun had finally gone down, and it was dark now. Draco didn't really like the dark. He'd never known just exactly how dark it could be out there before that night he and Potter had been sent to the Forest with just a lantern and a coward of a dog to hold all the darkness away.

He was a creature of comfort. There was always plenty of light around the mansion -- where he would probably never go back again -- and Hogwarts. No such lights here. No real thick walls to keep the nature at bay.

Draco pushed all thoughts of the possibility of storms out of his mind. He was not going to spend the whole night trying to scare himself half to death!

It would be best if he simply went through his evening routines and then went to bed.

Padding downstairs quietly, he couldn't help casting an annoyed look at the living room. How long could two people play that blasted game anyway? Muttering quietly to himself, he walked out of the door, steeling himself as he approached the outhouse. To think that a while back he'd never even heard of such a thing.

He definitely wished he never had.

As he returned to the cottage, he was already feeling the lassitude spread all over him. How on earth could he be so tired all the time when he didn't really do anything? He didn't actually care. At least when he slept, he didn't have to think so much.

Passing the doorway again, he cast another look in the living room. What a homey scene. He almost snorted at that.

The hint of a sound made Weasley look up from the board and glare at him. Draco plastered the smirk immediately in place. This was good. Weasley had been avoiding looking at him lately, and the rarity of the moment simply made it so much sweeter.

His only real pleasure here; teasing Ron Weasley. He didn't even have to do much work to make him bristle. No words, not even gestures, just the smiles.

It did make him feel better, always had. This little game didn't even have to lead to anything, it probably never would, but it was an excellent way to keep the boredom away.

Draco's smirk deepened as he realized that both Potter and Snape were too busy to notice him standing here. That meant he could actually take this to another level. Quirking up an eyebrow, he stared at Weasley, challenging him silently.

The way the redhead almost choked on his next inhale was gratifying.

Slipping away from the doorway and walking to the stairs before his professor could focus his glare at him, Draco let the moody thoughts vanish. At least there was one thing he could count on. One thing that could make his life almost pleasurable.

Ron tried to cover his spluttering into a cough. He could tell by Harry's questioning look that he wasn't exactly successful. Hating the expression on Snape's face, he concentrated on the chess board.
Damn it! Why were the Slytherins always here? It would be so much nicer to spend time alone with Harry.

He didn't understand why Malfoy was still trying to get to him. The exams were over. Distracting him didn't really do anything except... Well, distract him. And annoy him. There were even nights when he wanted nothing more than to use Malfoy as a mop and wash the floor with him.

Something curbed his violent urges these days. Probably Snape's presence. He would not allow anything to happen to one of his precious Slytherins, especially one as sneaky and slimy as Malfoy.

Lying must be a second nature to Malfoy; inventing things that didn't exist, saying things that weren't even close to truth. Ron didn't want him! Never had, never would. His behavior that day had been because of shock. He'd frozen in horror. Kissing Malfoy? Damn, he had high opinions of himself. Stupid, lying, sneaky... Muttering softly under his breath, Ron turned his mind back to the game.

It was their second one this evening. He'd won the previous one and knew already he wouldn't be losing this one either.

He scratched his ankle absentmindedly as he contemplated his move. Realizing what he was doing, he moved his hand away from his leg. Damn. He couldn't help it. The small bite mark itched sometimes. It really shouldn't bother him anymore, but it did.

For some reason, the very unpleasant tingling feeling seemed to sum up his whole life at the moment.

This whole mess. Staying here with no way out. All they could really do was to wait. Do chores and play various games. He was not going to read another book for at least a month. He was so damn tired of staying here that there were moments when he just wanted to scream.

Ron took a deep breath, not even realizing that his hand was once again rubbing against his ankle. He could handle the weeks they'd still have to stay here. He could handle anything knowing it wasn't going to last forever.

Then he'd go back home and try to forget creeps like Malfoy even existed. Leaving school meant that he'd never have to see the git again. He could hardly wait.

"Your turn."

Hearing Harry's quiet voice made Ron startle, and he made his move after contemplating it for a moment. He couldn't believe he'd actually lost all track of the game thinking about the damn Slytherin again.

But what else could he really think? He was always around. They were always around.

He refused to even glance at the couch where Snape was still sitting and reading a book. Ron could bet it was about potions. He didn't seem to care about anything else.

Well, that was actually not true. He did seem to care about potions, and making their life completely miserable from their first year on. That one thing hadn't changed in the almost seven years they'd been in Hogwarts.

His mother had always taught him to think good of people. With Snape, that was an impossibility.

It was bad enough that one of them seemed to harbor delusions about the git. Bad? No, disastrous, probably even bordering insanity.
Ron didn't like the way Harry still cast careful looks at Snape and how he always seemed to be so
damn aware of his presence. He didn't care what Harry said about things being all right between him
and their professor. He wasn't going to believe it.

Not when he could plainly see the glares and Harry acting so strangely around Snape. Who
wouldn't? Any sane person would try to stay away from the git.

Damn greasy, evil man. Why couldn't he just give back their exams and put them out of their misery
already?

The loud slam of a book being shut abruptly startled Ron so that he almost fell face first into the
chess board. The small pieces yelled rude comments to him as he straightened his back again and
cast an angry look at the other side of the room.

He ignored the way Snape swooped up. He'd never been impressed by the whole billowing robe act.
It was scary as hell when you were just a kid, then it had become just a routine.

"I assume you are capable of turning down the lights on your own before you go to bed." The timbre
in Snape's voice indicated that he wasn't exactly certain they could manage.

It was things like that that annoyed Ron the most. Not the open barbs, but the veiled ones. You could
never really say anything back at them and not sound rude. Not that he'd ever say anything back at
his professor. No one did.

Well, Harry used to. He used to get really angry and say things no one else ever dreamed of uttering
in Snape's presence. He didn't do that anymore. Of course he still said stuff to Snape, but it didn't
sound as angry anymore.

He was probably just getting really good at hiding his emotions. Ron was actually proud of it. If he
was in Harry's position, with the Order kind of following his words and all, he'd definitely make
Snape suffer. Or at least make sure he didn't insult them anymore.

"Of course we are," Harry said, his expression in shadows so that Ron couldn't really see it. "You
can count on us." His voice sounded cheery.

Ron could almost feel the icy glare on his skin, but didn't look up at Snape.

With a soft displeased sound, the professor gathered his books and then walked out of the room.

It was as if the shadows had disappeared. Breathing more easily, Ron looked at Harry, astonished to
see a real smile on his lips. Sometimes he really didn't get his friend at all.

Still, he couldn't help wondering what the silly smile was all about. "You look like someone just
gave you all the Chocolate Frogs in the world."

"What?" Blinking, Harry looked at him. "Oh. Don't talk about chocolate!"

Ron grinned, knowing that there had to be some chocolate left in the kitchen. They hadn't used
everything from Eppy's little storage. "How about if we talk about getting some?" He wondered
what the shocked look on Harry's face was all about. "I know where to find exactly what we need." When the shock just got worse, he added, "Chocolate. I want some. Now."

Lead the way!"
Shushing him to be quiet or else someone would hear, Ron motioned him to follow him to the kitchen. Sneaking around with Harry in tow was exactly what he wanted to do now. Spending the rest of the evening talking about whatever and munching chocolate would make the day perfect.

Part 17

"Whoo! Look at that one fly!"

Harry grinned at Ron and then took a better hold on the gnome that was dangling upside down in his grasp. "They should have a de-gnoming Cup as well. You'd be in our national team, I bet."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Harry Quidditch Hero Potter!" Ron bowed deep. His gaze was already on the next gnome. He could throw that one even farther.

It was pretty weird how much fun they were both having. After a few days of playing every possible game they could think of -- including a weird wizarding version of tic tac toe -- Ron had been ready to do anything to get out of the cottage. Even go and do laundry.

There had been no need to go that far. Harry had been more than willing to go out on walks with him. It was probably a relief to spend time away from Malfoy and Snape. No matter how his friend might claim he didn't mind their presence, Ron could see the tension in him. This was much better. He was so glad he'd suggested de-gnoming the garden right after breakfast.

He'd noticed how wistful Malfoy had looked as they'd got ready to go out. It had just added to his feeling of satisfaction. Yes, this was a beautiful day indeed.

Harry swung his gnome around and let it go, watching it fly over the bushes. "Oh, bugger!" He'd never be as good as Ron at this. All the Weasleys had too much practice.

"Don't worry! It'll come to you." It wasn't as if they didn't have enough gnomes to practice on. Ron shook his head as he noticed that more of the small creatures were popping up from their underground lairs. They were just stupid. Grabbing another one, he added, "But I still think you'd best concentrate on Quidditch."

Harry wiped his hands on his robes. "Yeah. But just think how it would be if they really had a de-gnoming Cup! I could root for our team whenever Quidditch season's off. Or maybe I'd join Seamus in rooting for the Irish de-gnoming team! That would be fun."

"You little..." Letting out an offended squeal, Ron swung his gnome and then chased Harry around the small garden with the gnome swinging from side to side like a club.

Snape snorted at the sight, and then turned away from the window.

The cauldron he'd used earlier was drying in the corner, the small jars full of various potions for the outhouse lining a shelf with his sharpest cutting knives. He'd been idly cleaning up the room when the commotion from the outside had caught his attention. Forgetting all about sweeping the floor, he'd stood by the window watching Harry and Weasley toss confused gnomes out of the small garden.

No hard work should look like so much fun. It was probably some obscure Gryffindor trait. Snape was certain that most of the professional gnome exterminators were former Gryffindors. Or maybe Hufflepuffs.

Letting out a huffing sound he went to grab his broom and then swept the floor in silence. He didn't
have anything else to do.

No more potions to brew, no things to organize. He could of course read for a while or even go and chase Eppy out of the kitchen and make some lunch. It would be amusing to see Weasley choke on the food again, like the last time when he'd heard that the soup he was devouring with gusto was indeed been made by Snape.

He didn't go to get a book. Neither did he go to the kitchen. He was not about to invent menial tasks to keep busy, when there was something he should face.

It was quite possible that this was absolutely the worst mistake Snape had ever made.

Staring at the parchment rolls on the table, he smiled a sarcastic little smile. No. However foolish this was, it came nowhere near his worst mistake, the decision to throw his life away in a futile quest for glory, excitement and revenge.

This came as a very good second.

He had not hurried in grading, taking his time going through the potions those three half-wits had brewed, reading their essays and notes over and over again. It had been peaceful to concentrate on something real like that. Potions, his only passion.

It had also been a very good way to torment his students. After a week, Weasley had been a nervous wreck every time he'd stepped out of his room. He couldn't really blame him, he'd be nervous as well if he was as incompetent with brewing simple potions as the Gryffindor was. Even young Malfoy had started to look anxious as days rolled by.

Snape refused to even think about the hopeful expression on Harry. The sparkle in the clear green eyes was just the kind of idiotic response he'd come to anticipate from the boy.

He raised his hand to touch the scrolls. He had spent hours reading through them; analyzing every single sentence, making comments with red ink. It had been a strange pleasure not to be rushed with this. Instead of dozens of parchments and a tight schedule, he'd had only three to read and all the time in the world.

When he had finally finished with the grading, he had sat here, in his small room, lost in thought. It had definitely not been as pleasant as the grading. His mind had taken him to places where he never wanted to visit again, through thoughts and memories best left alone.

All because of a foolish young man who seemed adamant on making his life hell.

Snape hated the feeling of being completely lost. Helplessness was something he wanted to avoid at any cost. He'd lived through years with no control over his own destiny, even his own body. Never again. He had his mind and his logic and his sarcasm; guaranteed not to make him feel lost ever again.

Except none of those things could help him now.

Angry at his own thoughts, he pushed the scrolls to the side and reached out for the first thing he could see, a small pitcher. His whole being burned with the need to brew something, to concentrate on something precise and beautiful. Like so many times in the past, he would use it as a distraction from unpleasant thoughts.

Too bad he'd already finished with everything. There were no more ingredients ready, no more potions he had to make.
There was nothing to distract him here. Everything was quiet. The two Gryffindors had left the
garden, so there was no sound of squealing. He was still wondering about how he had become to
anticipate the sound of someone breathing or turning pages or tapping the side of a porcelain cup
with a spoon while he worked.

"This is ridiculous!" he declared. His solitude had always been precious to him, in the dungeons, in
here. He did not miss the presence of a teenage twerp who could barely hold his own end in a
conversation.

He did however notice the difference and wouldn't exactly mind having Harry here. Wasn't utterly
disgusted by everything that had happened between them.

For a fleeting moment, Snape wondered if it was because of all the fumes he'd breathed in the
dungeons and the dismal basement in the Malfoy Mansion; the countless poisons and hallucinogens
he'd brewed in his youth finally working on him, driving him to rash deeds and insanity. Even
though it would be logical, he had to discard the thought after thinking it through.

He was not going to lie to himself like that again. On some level, his honesty really did seem to be
absolute.

The thought reminded him of Harry and his serious expression. It wasn't surprising. Most of his
thoughts seemed to be related to that annoying idiot these days.

Not only thoughts, but emotions as well. None of those disgustingly mushy things most people
seemed to feel when presented with the prospect of an intimate relationship.

Mostly confusion, followed by anger over his own confusion. It was the first time for a very long
time that Severus Snape didn't know how to act.

He couldn't comprehend what Harry wanted with him. His world had never given teenage romance
a change. It had been a lesson he'd been taught early on, when he'd been thrown from complete
innocence into absolute decadence.

It was clear that Harry wanted more than just sex. The problem was, he had no idea what that would
be. He was definitely not interested in such romances he'd witnessed at Hogwarts; the mere thought
of cooing and walking hand in hand and whispering sweet nothings to someone was enough to make
him nauseous. He had no patience for idiotic declarations or public displays of affection.

His life was a quiet one, filled with work and research, and he liked it that way. Relationships were a
game. He had no time nor desire for such interruptions, didn't want to bring that kind of turmoil into
his life.

Harry's quiet presence didn't really change the way he felt. Neither did his dry -- and rather shocking
-- wit. The fact that he wasn't physically repulsive was of no concern.

Snape had to wonder about the very alien emotion he felt thinking about those soft touches Harry
had inflicted on him. They had been... pleasant. For the first time in his life, he had not minded casual
brushes of a hand against his. Had not forced himself to be still as someone invaded his privacy.

No amount of pleasant touches would compensate with ridiculous behavior. Gaining a -- what?
sexual partner? lover? -- would not be worth losing his perfect life. His solitude.

Snorting loudly at his own foolishness, Snape put the pitcher back on the table. He couldn't even
claim he still had his peace and quiet.
This would undoubtedly disrupt his life even more. It was quite surprising to realize that he thought it might be worth it. Harry would stop behaving like a hormonal idiot after a few weeks, of that he was certain. The prospect of physical intimacy with him wasn't appalling and he had to admit he was curious.

Curiosity was something he'd tried to curb ever since it had lead him to the darker side of the magical world. This was not as complicated as Dark Magic or pain or killing. Snape smiled at that. Sexual encounters could be invigoruous, but they were hardly worth angsting over.

If things got bad, he could always slip some memory potions into their tea and then pretend this had never happened.

Snape glared at the clock on his wall. It was a proper wizarding clock, showing him that all the three youngsters were back in the cottage. There was some time before lunch.

Time seemed to go by slowly these days. He wondered if that was the reason for all this strangeness surrounding his life. Living in Hogwarts had meant following a routine set by almost two decades spent observing the cycle of the school year. This idleness was completely destroying his sense of propriety.

He'd made plans; definite plans to teach, to prepare these fools for what was surely ahead of them when they returned to Hogwarts. It was not the same as working with the O.W.L.s or the N.E.W.T.s, but it had been a good substitute.

If only they could now concentrate on what was really important. But no. Young Malfoy was amusing himself making Weasley suffer -- not that Snape could really blame him. Harry seemed completely satisfied with the silly notion of pursuing a sexual relationship with him, seeming happy to be free from the realities of war. He didn't know what Weasley would prefer to do, and neither did he care.

Young people! Sometimes Snape wished he'd never taken on teaching.

Then again, there were many things he regretted. With a sweeping motion he grabbed the parchments from the table. What was one more mistake on his already long list?

The sound of soft laughter guided him to the living room. He stood in the shadows just outside the doorway for a moment, watching the three young men.

Such a familiar sight; Weasley and Harry playing wizard's chess, both looking a bit windy, bits and pieces of grass and twigs in Harry's mussed hair. Draco Malfoy sitting on the couch reading a book.

At least they knew how to be quiet. Snape wished they would not start a big ruckus after this, knowing that it was probably unavoidable.

Harry looked up, a little surprised to see Snape walking into the room. It was almost an hour till lunch time.

Then he realized this had nothing to do with their meal. He couldn't help shivering as he saw the three rolls of parchment Snape was carrying.

Not paying any attention to Harry, Snape walked to the table and placed the parchment rolls on it. He cast a dark look around the room, knowing this would be the last time he could ever intimidate these three for academic reasons. "I should have made an anti-vomiting potion before reading this drivel. I certainly hope neither you, Potter, nor you, Mr. Weasley will even dream of an occupation where you would need the knowledge of Potions. Or logic."
With that, he turned around and walked back to his room.

There was a moment of utter silence in the room. Draco was the first one to get up. He was stunned by the empty feeling inside despite the fact that he did know he had passed the test. Untying the red string from around the scroll with unsteady hands, he tried to stay calm. He almost dropped his notes about the potion they'd brewed. Damn it!

Still, seeing the single letter drawn on the top of the parchment made him almost howl with joy. He smiled so hard his lips hurt. At least this one thing had gone exactly the way he'd wanted.

Ignoring the way Malfoy was grinning, Ron sauntered to the table. He handed Harry his parchment, trying not to think of the way the one with 'Mr. Weasley' on top of it seemed to almost scream the word "Failed!"

"I think I'm going to throw up." He was only half joking.

Harry nodded. He couldn't even say anything. So much depended on this. Yanking the string off, he rolled the parchment open.

The text on the essay was strangely blurred, the black ink joined by red one, familiar handwriting adorning his own with cutting comments and corrections. For a moment, Harry could only see the lines of color dancing in front of him. Then he focused on the grade written next to his name on the top left corner.

"Thank Merlin!" It was a soft whisper. He stared at the beautifully shaped curve of the letter spelled there and felt his eyes fill with tears. No other grade had ever made him feel like this before. Not even the odd top marks he got from DADA.

This was completely deserved, earned by hours of studying. There was no extra for him for being the 'Boy Who Lived', not a hint of favoritism for the hero of the wizarding world.

He had always hated Potions, but right this moment, he felt damn proud of this exam.

"I passed!" Ron's yell echoed in the room, even drawing Harry out of his daze. Holding the parchment tight, he jumped around, face shining with joy. "I passed! It wasn't a dismal failure after all! I passed!"

Harry smiled brightly, accepting Ron's fierce hug. He was feeling giddy as well. They had passed. All those hours of working with icky ingredients and nasty potions hadn't been for nothing. They would never have to go to another Potions lesson or read another Potions book.

He wondered if Ron would want to celebrate in the traditional way, or if he was going to save his books for Ginny. It wasn't a secret that there was usually a large bonfire lit just beyond Hagrid's cottage on the last day of school, and at least most of the Divinations books ended up there.

Of course no one probably wanted to make Snape angry by doing such a thing with the Potions books. It didn't matter that the man wasn't exactly their teacher anymore. He would still be feared by most.

Harry froze, his hands dropping from where they'd been clenched against Ron's back. He stepped away from the joyous hug.

It was over now. The studying, the reading. The time he and Ron and maybe even Malfoy had to worry about failing Potions and maybe the whole year as well. Snape was no longer their teacher, could no longer torment them in class or mark an essay as a failure, forcing them to do even more
work.

He was not Snape's student anymore.

"Harry?" Ron asked, wondering about the determined look on his friend's face. "Are you all right?"

His words went unnoticed.

Still holding the parchment tight, Harry walked out of the living room, heading towards Snape's door. He didn't bother to answer to Ron's yell, knowing that if he didn't do this right now, there might never be another chance. The moment was perfect, and he was not going to waste it.

He knocked on the door, not even noticing his hand was trembling slightly. He knew Snape was in there. When there was no sound from within the room, he knocked again. This time he didn't bother to wait; he simply pushed the door open.

"Come on in, Potter," Snape said sarcastically. He turned away from the small pile of dirty roots he'd been staring at for the past minutes. He hadn't done anything to them, the mold so clear in them making them ill suited for any potion. He just didn't want to just stand there as if he was doing nothing, knowing he'd probably receive a visitor sooner or later.

Harry ignored the words, focusing on the slightly defensive stance the man had taken. "I passed the test." It came out with wonder, as if he still had problems believing it.

"Yes, I do know that. After all, I was the one forced to read through the drivel you call an answer and then scored your incoherent ramblings. Congratulations, Potter. You did indeed manage to pass."

Dropping the parchment, Harry pushed the door shut behind him. "You're not my teacher anymore." He knew that technically he could still be under Snape's supervision, at least that was how Snape would probably interpret his role right now. He didn't care. This was the moment he'd been waiting for.

Snape didn't even bother to pretend he didn't know what Harry meant by that. "I'm not." There was a small pause. "But you're still an idiot."

Things would not change as much as most people might think. The fact that the twerps left school didn't make them adults in his eyes. They'd simply be free to go and spread their stupidity throughout the wizarding world.

He would not change from a teacher into a friend, would not see the youngsters as equals. He had absolutely no patience for idle chit chat. No one would ever get an open invitation to contact him if they needed someone to talk to, no one would be allowed in his life.

Except for this one young man. With him, the damage was already done. There was no hope of pushing him away now.

Harry nodded before moving closer. "Yes. I am."

This time Snape didn't tense, didn't try to move away. He stood there, clearly waiting for what would happen next, to see if Harry would indeed do this.

Slowly, Harry touched Snape's arm. It was a familiar thing, safe to both of them. He didn't leave his hand there for long, sliding it up. The cloth felt almost too smooth under his palm, and a moment later the sensation changed when his hand reached Snape's neck.
He didn't turn his gaze from Snape's eyes. There was a fire burning in the dark depths, not anger, but something unfathomable. It wasn't an invitation, indeed there was no sign that Snape was welcoming any of this. The only sign of acceptance was the fact that he wasn't throwing Harry out of his room with a couple of hexes to emphasize his point.

It was easy to pull Snape closer. Even easier to lean against him, and finally press his lips against his. Harry closed his eyes, knowing nothing could make him back away now.

The kiss was similar to the one they had shared in the hallway. A soft brush of lips. Harry didn't dare to do anything else. When Snape didn't push him away, he leaned back to see his expression.

He should have known Snape looked exactly the same as always.

Closing his eyes, he tilted his head a bit to mind the nose and then kissed him again. Softly at first, then more demanding, wondering if Snape was going to simply stand here and endure this. He opened his eyes in panic only to close them again as Snape finally kissed him back.

There was no hesitation. Snape's lips moved to answer his kiss although his body was still rigid.

Half formed thoughts flashed through Harry's mind. He marveled at the faint flavor of the tea he tasted on Snape's lips. Reveled in the touch. Couldn't believe he was really doing this, not simply kissing him, but being kissed back with considerable skill.

Yes, Snape could definitely kiss. It was quite different from most of the first kisses Harry had experienced. No shoving his tongue sloppily into his mouth and leaving it there, no slobbering. No biting. Harry didn't know why that was such a surprise. Of course Snape would know what to do.

Not everyone thought he was a disgusting greasy git.

Harry raised his other hand and then buried his fingers into Snape's hair. He had wondered about this for some time now, imagined how it would be to finally touch him. It was funny how his imagination had never really caught all the possibilities, for this was nothing like his dreams. Snape's hair felt slick under his touch, the greasy strands falling limply between his fingers. It felt strangely pleasing. Not at all disgusting.

Deepening the kiss, he molded his body against Snape's.

He was hot all over, still a bit dizzy with the relief over the exam. All thoughts were beyond his reach, his world filled with this giddy and happy feeling.

Kissing Snape -- being kissed by Snape -- was way better than he'd ever imagined. He could spend hours doing this if Snape allowed him. The stray thought made him open his eyes.

Slowly, he let go and moved back. It took most of his willpower, but he didn't want to make Snape think that he was being a stupid hormonal teenager. He couldn't believe how calm Snape looked when he himself felt like he'd just ran ten laps around the Quidditch pit.

"Your seduction technique needs some improvement, Potter." Brushing back his mussed hair, Snape cast a faintly amused look at Harry. "Is this the way Gryffindors do everything? Head on?"

It was so like the man to try to insult him right now, Harry didn't even care. "I would have tried a dinner and roses, but for some reason I didn't think you'd appreciate that."

Snape thought of such a scenario, imagining Eppy glaring at the doorway while Harry sat on the other side of the table, trying to eat, talk and make a good impression at the same time. No, he
wouldn't have appreciated that. "Indeed."

The way he said it made Harry shiver.

"I..." For once Harry was glad that his voice cracked. He had no idea of what to say, really. All the things that came to mind felt somehow stupid; that he liked Snape, that he wanted this. It should already be obvious.

He didn't want to make another joke about it, mostly because that would probably lead into nervous babbling, and he didn't want to do that now.

Snape waited patiently for Harry to gather his thoughts. This was completely new to him, such hesitation and fondness never entering his previous encounters. It hadn't been unpleasant to be the object of soft touches, on the contrary, but he wasn't going to initiate any more. He'd survived without them this long.

"I'd like to come back here after lunch." No matter how much he'd like to stay right here now, Harry knew it was impossible. He didn't care what the others would think about him disappearing for hours, but Snape probably would. He didn't want to make the man to feel uncomfortable about this whole thing. "And spend some time with you."

Strange. Sex had always been spontaneous, mutual pleasure being the most important thing. He realized that with Snape it would not be that easy. He didn't want just sex, consequences be damned. Being able to relax with him and talk for hours were still more important than physical intimacy.

After a moment, Snape nodded curtly. "If you wish to." From the look on Harry's face, there was no question about it.

"I do." Harry smiled. He sure did.

He wondered if Snape would allow him to transfigure the chair into a more comfortable one, or even a couch. Maybe, if he demonstrated that he wasn't totally incompetent with his wand. He was definitely going to enjoy spending time here, talking with Snape, or just staying here in silence.

He wasn't going to barge on. He could do slow. Yes he could.

Keeping that firmly in mind, he went to pick up his scroll from the floor where it had fallen from his nerveless fingers and then walked out of the room, resisting the urge to go and kiss Snape again.

Ron was leaning against the wall just outside Snape's room, a worried expression on his face. "Are you all right? You look weird!" He wasn't sure, but he could bet that Harry was flushed with anger.

"I'm fine," Harry said, lowering his gaze to the parchment he held. "We passed the test!" He sounded breathless.

="We sure as hell did!" It was easy to understand the dazed look. After all, Ron was feeling like that as well. To hell with Malfoy and his smirking over his grade. Whatever high score he got, it was probably because he was a Slytherin anyway.

Harry exhaled. He needed to calm down or this would all end. Having Ron worry about his weird behavior previously had been bad enough. Now that he needed time to spend with Snape, it would be worse.

There was no way he could be honest with him. Not because he wasn't comfortable with the whole thing, but because Ron would cause a scene. He didn't want that. Not now, not before he'd had a
chance to be with Snape.

Deciding to stick as close to the truth as possible, he said, "I'll need some time alone with Snape later today." A small smile forced its way to his lips and he didn't even bother to fight it away. "We have some things to deal with, and I think this is the perfect time for that."

Ron wasn't surprised. He'd been thinking about the very thing himself. Now that Snape wasn't their teacher anymore, he had no power over them. He could say whatever he wanted. "Okay. Just try not to be killed there."

"I..." Harry's voice cracked again. He had to swallow hard before he could continue. "I try not to." He couldn't believe it was this easy.

No questions, no suspicion. It made him feel crummy, but not bad enough to actually say anything to Ron.

"Good. Now let's go and see if Eppy's served lunch already."

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Part 18

"Thank you." Grabbing the utensils, Harry ignored Eppy's glare and focused on his plate.

It was hours since breakfast, but he wasn't exactly hungry. The churning in his belly had nothing to do with need for food.

Talking with Ron had been a good way to calm himself. It was something normal, far away from the insane excitement he'd felt in Snape's room. The calmness had followed him here to the dining room only to disappear the moment the door opened and Snape walked in.

There went the peace and calm, replaced by the silly tingling feeling. Even now as Harry could recognize it as it really was, he wasn't good at dealing with it. Or hiding it.

He tried not to stare at Snape or grin all the time. Poking at his food, he took deep breaths. Calm, he had to stay calm. Composed. That way Ron wouldn't ask weird questions, Malfoy wouldn't look at him as if he knew exactly what he was about to do and he could follow Snape into his room and they could finally just spend some time together. Maybe even kiss some more.

Kissing was good. Not as good as getting him naked and shagging him silly, but it would be good enough for now.

A small groan escaped him. Damn! His mind just never gave up, insisting on making him think about all the inappropriate things at the most inappropriate time. After all this time of being practically dead, his libido sure was letting him know it was alive and well.

"Try not to choke on your food, Potter." Snape's voice almost dripped with malice as he stared at him. "I would have thought you had at least some manners."

Harry looked up from his plate, wondering if his face was as red as he feared it was. Trying to mask his embarrassment, he took a sip from his glass. He didn't want to make things weird now that they'd finally got somewhere.

This was pure agony, and Snape seemed to enjoy every second of it.

Casting a sympathizing look at his friend, Ron smiled a little. No matter what, Snape would always
be mean and take pleasure in tormenting Harry. He wondered what Harry wanted to talk to the git about anyway.

He knew it probably wouldn't be anything he would have said, but damn the man deserved to hear exactly what they thought about him.

Eppy was once again glaring at them from the doorway, as if trying to make them eat faster so that she could start cleaning up the mess. She nodded curtly as Ron placed his utensils down and then brought the teapot and cups to the table, collecting the plates slowly.

"Want some tea?" Ignoring Malfoy and Snape, Ron poured himself a cup and then looked at Harry.

"I'm not really thirsty." It was definitely not true. Harry's throat felt parched, but he didn't want to linger here and sip tea for ten minutes or so.

Draco was touching the corner of his mouth with a napkin, not even trying to hide his amusement behind the cloth. He wondered how could Weasley be so damn blind. Anyone could see that Potter was definitely lusting after something other than tea. From the way he had been acting earlier, it was safe to say that things were indeed going to change.

Lowering his napkin, he reached for the teapot, casting a sultry look at Weasley. The anger flaring in the blue gaze was very satisfying.

He congratulated himself for the right choice of strategy as he sipped his tea. If he'd known Weasley was this confused about himself, he would have tried blatant flirting years ago. It would have been different then, aimed to really hurt. He would have probably enjoyed trying to really break him.

Now it was harmless pastime, a way for him to amuse himself. Not that there was much else to do here.

Dodging Eppy and her tray, Harry pushed his chair back. He could see Snape was ready to leave, and didn't want to waste any time trying to look like he wasn't going to follow him.

He liked the fact he didn't really have to hide what he was doing. Ron already knew he liked Snape, and he'd told him he was going to talk to him. He didn't have to carry a book with him to justify the quiet evening spent in Snape's presence or lurk behind a possibility of dark thoughts.

It was somehow freeing.

When Snape finally got up, he was right there next to him. He almost bumped into the doorframe in his haste and had to endure a surprisingly evil smirk for his clumsiness. He didn't mind.

Smirks were a part of Snape, like the glares and the sarcastic voice. A part of the whole that he would miss if something ever mellowed the man.

Not that he thought that was possible.

They walked across the tiny hallway without words. To Harry's relief, there was no more stumbling, either. He stepped back a bit as Snape opened his door and entered the room, waiting for just a second before following him.

Harry didn't know what made him turn around and lock the door behind him. The act made his stomach clench.

He had absolutely no idea what he was going to say or do next. Somehow he'd thought that when
the moment came, he could simply relax and be here with Snape. The way his palms were sweating kind of belied that.

Why was it that now that he didn't have any secrets left, he was more nervous than before?

They had nothing to hide now. Snape would want to talk about this for sure, examine the matter. That would probably go on for days on end. It wouldn't be easy, but at least everything between them was already out in the open. No more surprises.

Harry had no delusions about this. Snape wouldn't simply take him to bed. He didn't seem like that kind of a man.

The sound of the door closing barely registered as Snape stood there, feeling slightly irritated.

It had been amusing to watch Harry during their meal and afterwards. Now that they were here together, Snape couldn't see anything amusing in his behavior. He could see the hesitation, and it made him hollow somehow.

He didn't want to think about Harry's youth, his probable inexperience. It was undeniable that he knew more about the world than Harry did, and for the first time, it weighed on Snape's shoulders.

He'd guided idiots through adolescence for decades, teaching them with varied success. He didn't want to bring that memory to this.

"Snape?"

Flinching at the sound of Harry's voice, Snape shook his head slightly. There were bad ideas, and then there were those that were completely disastrous. He could recognize both and this was definitely of the latter. "Maybe you should go to your friend. Spend the day doing whatever you two do together. Think this over."

This was exactly what Harry had expected. "I don't need to think this over. I know what I want."

At least this time he could say it with conviction. He did know. For a long time, it had all been about what he didn't want to do or say. This was different. It had taken him forever to understand this, but now that he did, he was not about to let it go. "I want to be with you."

"There is nothing I can give you, Potter." Snape refused to even look at the young man. What did Harry want from him anyway? There was nothing he could give, nothing he could teach, unless it was a lesson in pain and fear. In betrayal. "Not a thing."

Harry could hear a timbre of tiredness in the usually cool voice and wondered if Snape had any idea of how much his tone revealed. "Okay. You don't have to give me anything." Moving around Snape so that he could look into his eyes, he slowly reached out with his hand. There was plenty of time for Snape to turn away or push him back. "I can do the giving."

It would be easy, as most things with Snape. He could be himself with his pleasure and desire and insecurities.

Snape could only stare as Harry moved closer and touched his shoulder. He knew he should shove the annoying boy away, but couldn't. He couldn't pretend that this was a joke or that he despised the mere idea of touching him.

He wondered if Harry really knew what he wanted or what he was doing. The hungry look in his eyes seemed to suggest he did indeed know where this would lead. Such involuntary reaction wasn't
enough. "I..." He thought he had to say something about taking, explain that it wasn't the sexual act he was referring to. The words refused to come out the way he wanted to, so instead he said, "I refuse to be your teacher in this either."

It didn't matter that technically, Harry wasn't his student anymore. He didn't want to take responsibility over this, no matter how Harry might want or need it.

He would. There was no question of that. He'd resigned long ago to do whatever it took to keep Harry safe and relatively well. Sex was not a problem; he had always used it as a tool before.

Using that as an excuse wouldn't work now. Snape admitted to himself that this wasn't about his duty to the Order. Harry didn't seem to be in that kind of a need. If he refused, the boy wouldn't be reduced into a gibbering idiot.

He didn't mind such contact with Harry. Definitely didn't crave it, but was not disgusted over the prospect and for once, he would like to do this for the right reasons.

"I don't need a teacher." Harry wondered what Snape would say if he told him all the details of his pathetic love life.

Snape raised an eyebrow at the comment. During all their talks, Harry had sometimes mentioned his loneliness and how he missed having someone in his life. He had never explained his comments, had never breached the subject of sexual encounters.

Until now, Snape had not cared one way or the other.

"There are so many people who think that shagging Harry Potter would be the culmination of their life..." Harry mused out with soft voice. Focusing his gaze on Snape again, he added more firmly, "I really don't need a teacher."

Of course there had been rumors, there always were. Snape tended not to listen to them, especially ones about students and their sexual adventures, but he knew there had been lots of rumors circulating about Harry Potter, and could well guess his words were no lie. "All right."

It was actually a relief. The last thing he needed was a clingy emotional and inexperienced idiot in his bed.

Harry hadn't thought he'd give up that easily. Grinning, he let out a deep breath. "Good." He just hoped they wouldn't have to spend the whole day arguing about this. He wanted some peace and quiet and could bet that when enlarged and with some pillows, that chair would be damn comfortable.

The grin made Snape scowl. "Some things do not change, Potter. I have never suffered fools in the classroom. I refuse to make an exception in my private quarters."

"I'll try not to be a total fool then." Harry tried to sound as solemn as possible.

He knew that the silence didn't mean that Snape actually agreed with him.

Snape surrendered. He'd known all along what would happen. This had been the last and rather desperate -- not that he'd ever admit it -- attempt to bring Harry to his senses. It hadn't worked. Not that he'd ever really thought it would.

So now there was only one thing they needed to agree on.
"I am willing to share..." Here Snape sneered slightly, remembering the way Harry had stuttered earlier, "Things with you." Another pause. "For as long as we live here."

He needed to set some kinds of guidelines. The way Harry claimed parts of his life was already annoyingly overwhelming. He didn't want to lose any more ground to this madness.

Harry opened his mouth as if to protest, but then closed it again. It was so like Snape to try to control this somehow. He could agree on this. They had weeks here, and when they returned to Hogwarts, he'd figure out a way to continue this. "Okay."

He smiled happily. At least they wouldn't argue about this anymore. Maybe now he could relax and just be. Even with seeing Snape every day, he had missed this togetherness that had no place for a sulking friend and a smirking former enemy. Just him and Snape.

No hiding behind schoolwork, no wondering when Snape would tell him to leave. That alone was enough right now, everything else could wait.

"So I assume you would like to have sex now." Snape's tone was exactly the way it was when he asked Harry if he wanted something to eat.

Harry almost choked on his inhale at that. He coughed a few times, trying to cover his utter shock. From the small smirk on Snape's face, he could guess he wasn't doing a good job. "I..." Now? Snape thought they would just shag now?

For a moment he couldn't think of anything. It was way too soon for this. His mind was still too wrapped around the fact that he could spend time with Snape. But sex? Now? It boggled the mind. Kissing had been great, more than great. He'd been quite willing to continue on that.

He'd thought they'd move slowly to the other stuff and not hop straight to bed. Not that he didn't like that idea; his body definitely did. He wanted to say things about just being with the man, but couldn't.

Staring at Snape, he wondered what the hell should he say? That no, he didn't want sex now? That would be a complete lie.

Crossing his arms across his chest, Snape stood there, waiting. He was beginning to enjoy this, the prelude to whatever other things to come definitely more intriguing than the physical act itself.

"Yes." It was accompanied by a small nod. A rueful smile appeared on Harry's face as he gave in to the embarrassment. He knew he was reddening by the heat spreading on his face. "I... I want you. I really do. It's nice being with you. And I... Well. Like you. Want you. But you don't have any obligation to... You know?"

"Please stop being an utter Gryffindor, Potter." Such concern for such an insignificant thing.

Harry closed his mouth. He didn't want to make things worse by rambling more. It was clear that Snape had no objections about this.

They were here, alone at last with no excuses between them. Harry knew that this moment was unique, a chance he might never have again. Ron was upstairs, not expecting him for some time. He didn't care where Malfoy was. All he knew was that he was here, and that he really wanted Snape.

It was easy to take the few steps forward, to reach out.

This time, Snape's body felt relaxed, pliant against his. Harry closed his eyes even before his lips met
Snape's, trying to hide his nervousness. Thoughts of naked Snape and even their discussions about this hadn't prepared him to face the reality, but he'd be damned if he let it show.

He pressed his lips against Snape's. Not thinking anything beyond this.

A soft sigh escaped him as Snape touched his shoulder, sliding his arms around him a moment later. He'd feared it would feel too much like he was doing this to someone who barely tolerated his touch.

The touches were firm, knowing. The mouth on his opening to respond to his kiss, the lips capturing his, claiming them.

Soft caresses. Just the right amount of pressure to leave Harry breathless, wanting more.

So, embarrassment and arousal weren't mutually exclusive. Harry held Snape tighter, not caring that his breathing sounded really loud in the room.

He could have spent the whole day doing this; holding Snape close, kissing him. The madness of need would have come in time, but he was sure he could have handled that if only Snape hadn't suggested they actually had sex now.

It changed everything. He didn't even have to try to hold back.

His lips moved slowly away from the enticing mouth, brushing against Snape's cheek, moving to his neck. After a moment, Snape tilted his head slightly, exposing more skin.

Harry ran his fingers through Snape's hair before touching whatever skin not hidden by his robes; wanting to see and touch more.

"May I?" Too excited to even feel shame of the way his voice caught, Harry waited for Snape to nod before lifting his hands to his collar.

Buttons. Tiny buttons forming a trail down Snape's chest. Harry opened them as fast as he could, his fingers incredibly clumsy in their task. Finally able to pull the frock coat off, he faced another row of buttons fastening the white undershirt.

Barely biting off a curse, he moved to open the rest of the buttons. The bare skin revealed made him want to simply rip the shirt off. He was certain that wouldn't be appreciated, so he muttered something from under his breath and continued with the buttons.

He hesitated for a moment as the shirt was finally open, eyes widening as he looked at Snape's bare chest. This close, he could see that the small imperfections on his skin were indeed burn marks. From a bubbling potion? He had no idea, and wasn't about to ask right now.

He wanted to touch them, run his fingers over the scarred skin. Yet, he wasn't sure if he should. Would it be all right? Snape would probably let him know if it wasn't.

"Are you planning on actually doing something, or did you decide you just want to watch?" Sneering slightly at the mesmerized look on Harry's face, Snape spread his arms a little.

He wondered if those rumors had been highly exaggerated. The way Harry was moving on with soft touches suggested he wasn't as experienced as he'd claimed.

Harry lifted his gaze to the dark eyes and smiled. "Am definitely planning on doing something." Not waiting for a reply, he moved his hand to touch Snape's chest.
Warm. Smooth, with a hint of hair tickling against his palm. He slid his hand up and down, feeling the contours of Snape's skin, the hint of a steady heartbeat, then the slightly wrinkled cloth of the shirt. He didn't push the shirt off, simply sliding his hand beneath it. Touching Snape's back, trailing the faint lines with his fingertips.

He remembered how he'd seen the scars while standing at the riverbank; a network of tiny lines criss crossing all over Snape's back. Looking into his eyes again, he wondered if he should stop touching them, if it made Snape uncomfortable.

There was no sign of real annoyance in Snape's eyes. Deciding he would not stop unless he was told to, Harry went on with the touches, sliding his other arm around Snape as well, holding him in a loose embrace.

Snape stood there, once again allowing the strange hesitant touches. It wasn't unpleasant, just a bit peculiar. Considering Harry's age, he had thought they would both be naked by now. He knew perfectly well just how much problems Harry had with patience, so these soft touches were truly a wonder.

There was enough knowledge in the way Harry caressed his skin to make him realize they didn't come from inexperience. Harry simply seemed to enjoy mapping his skin with his fingers.

"You know..." Muttering the words, Harry looked up at Snape. "This would be much more fun if you participated." Not wanting to see how his suggestion would be met, he planted a kiss on the hollow of Snape's throat.

Fun? Yes, that was probably what Harry intended to have. Snape waited for a small moment, knowing that it was not a command. Failing to obey would not turn the world into living nightmare. More likely, Harry would whine until he complied.

It was no hardship. Moving slowly, Snape touched Harry's shoulder briefly before opening the simple fastenings of his robes. Similar to the ones he'd once worn as a student, the robes were ridiculously easy to unfasten. The already slightly wrinkled garment slid down Harry's body, pooling around him on the floor.

A shiver ran down Harry's spine. He lifted his arms at the slight nudge, helping Snape to pull off his T-shirt. The shivers that intensified weren't because of cold. He felt like his skin was burning now.

He squirmed closer to Snape again and let out a soft happy sound as his bare chest pressed against Snape's. For some time it was enough to simply hold him. Then his hands started to move again.

Snape's fingers mimicked his caresses, featherlike touches on his skin. Not lingering like his exploration, more knowing as they trailed steadily down to meet the waistband of his trousers. There was some hesitation as Harry let out a shuddering sigh.

Looking straight into Snape's eyes, Harry moved his own hands to cover his, fumbling a little as he couldn't decide whether to simply open the button and yank his trousers off or enjoy the touch of Snape's fingers for a moment. The urgency to hold naked skin against his won, and a moment later he kicked his trousers off. The crumpled garment slid under Snape's bed.

That earned him a glare which did nothing to dampen his arousal.

He had been sure that when -- if -- they got to this point, he'd be feeling all weird and embarrassed. Considering how flustered he'd been after seeing Snape naked, he'd thought this would be a complete disaster filled with fumbling and stuttering. Not really knowing what to do or where to
It was a bit weird to stand here in his boxers, not hesitating for a second as his hands moved to Snape's trousers. But it was because of the novelty of the situation and the slow exploring. He couldn't remember feeling this comfortable with anyone. It was insane; this was not one of his classmates. He should be at least intimidated.

He wasn't. Not by his near nakedness, not because of the fact that this was Snape. Even the silence didn't make him feel uncomfortable.

He'd never expected Snape to mutter sweet nothings to him.

Harry didn't allow himself to think about anything as his fingers worked on the button of Snape's trousers. Slow, he'd wanted to take this slow, but damn it he just had to get him naked right now. They could do slow later.

The dozens of half realized fantasies burst into reality, pulling him towards the whirlwind of desire. He wanted to laugh at himself, but couldn't.

"Bed." Harry had to swallow before adding, "Now." He knew Snape would understand even if he couldn't squeeze more words out. All his brain cells seemed to focus on one thing.

Letting out a snort which seemed to only make Harry more anxious to get to the bed, Snape walked backwards, leading the way across the small room. "Your elegant words amaze me as always, Potter." His voice was perfectly even.

How could Snape still form such perfect sentences when he had trouble with simple words? Harry shook his head slightly as he slumped on the bed. It was completely unfair. Almost as unfair as Snape still wearing so many clothes.

He let Snape push him down and lay back, sprawling on the surprisingly soft bed. This was a far cry from the confidence and seduction he'd wanted to project, but it was all a bit too much. He didn't seem to possess enough skill to even peel off Snape's clothes. It didn't matter. Snape was perfectly capable of doing that himself.

Breath coming in short pants, Harry stared at Snape as he took his trousers off as calmly as he undoubtedly would if he were retiring for the night. He squirmed as Snape folded the garment and laid it neatly over the chair. The white shirt followed a moment later.

Harry would have said something if he'd thought he'd find his voice. Instead, he moved his hands down his chest and with a lot of squirming he managed to pull his own boxers off. He didn't even look where they landed as he tossed them to the corner.

"I do believe we need to talk about proper housekeeping," Snape said drily. Only his gaze revealed his slight amusement. Like he'd thought; a hormonal teenager.

"Later." Certain that the sarcastic comment was aimed to both arouse and frustrate him, Harry patted the mattress next to him. He refrained from saying anything else, knowing perfectly well that all he could manage would be 'naked, now'.

Snape let out an agreeing murmur. There was plenty of time to talk later. He was now curious to see where this strange mixture of awkwardness and obvious lust would lead.

Watching Harry's naked body, Snape could see why most students always seemed to be after Quidditch players. The hard practicing did tone one's muscles. He did admit to himself that naked
Harry Potter was aesthetically pleasing. At least he didn't look scrawny anymore.

It was clear that Harry enjoyed the silent scrutiny, heat rising to his face and his breathing getting more labored.

Snape could feel his body stir, the feeling so familiar he barely paid attention to it. For a fleeting moment he wondered if he could truly desire this, or if this was simply a response his body had learned years ago. As Harry's hand slid down his own belly, he discarded the thought. It didn't really matter right now.

"Are you sure you need my participation in this?" Snape raised an eyebrow. He noticed how the hand stilled immediately. "Or do you simply want someone here to watch?"

The choking sound Harry let out was very likely a curse. He glared at Snape. It was very clear what the glare meant.

Snape enjoyed the clear annoyance for a moment and then finished undressing. He did not hurry, but moved to place his briefs neatly over his other clothes.

The glare disappeared, replaced by an open mouthed stare.

Up until now, this had been strange. Harry had entertained a few fantasies these past few days, but they had been hazy; completely different from the reality he was now facing. The matter of fact way Snape was treating this situation only added to the unreal feeling he had.

He'd concentrated on the drama that seemed to be ever-present in his life, the turmoil, the angst. Gathering all his courage to kiss the man. And here he was, barely hours later, naked on his bed, watching Snape stand there just as naked. Harry's gaze fixed on his erection. Naked and hard.

A very delighted grin spread on his lips.

He let go of the notion that this was all too fast. It felt right, so he could forget about being embarrassed and awkward and just enjoy this.

Standing still at the foot of the bed, Snape spent a brief moment wondering if the universe would never stop making fun of him. Even the simplest things never went quite the way he planned.

It shouldn't have surprised him anymore, but it did. He tried not to let strange situations overwhelm him and simply dealt with them as well as he could. This was no different from anything else he'd faced.

Harry's reaction to seeing his arousal was almost comical.

The silly smile spreading to his lips made Snape tense at first. It brought back memories of other such expressions that were more about ridicule than joy. Realizing there was nothing but astonished delight in the grin, he let some of the tension ooze away again.

He should have remembered the reality of this; Harry being who he was, what he was. But then again he had never been in this situation with a Gryffindor before. Who knew how they would act?

Probably as foolishly as in any other given situation.

It was amazing how Snape didn't seem to mind being completely naked. Harry remembered how uncomfortable he'd looked moving his sleeves up just a bit, and now he was standing here, naked and relaxed.
Well, mostly relaxed. Harry swallowed. How could someone look so relaxed and hard at the same
time anyway?

He wasn't complaining. Not at all. It just made him curious. Snape's body language had always
declared he did not like people coming too close, even though he did use the whole swooping down
from behind you and glaring at you in class as a weapon. That was so unlike the man standing in
front of him now.

Somehow he felt like he should gawk and be all flustered at seeing Snape's erection. He wasn't. All
he wanted was to hold him right now.

"Come here." Harry's voice had already deepened during the years, now it was deeper still, the
husky tone timbre aching in his throat as he reached out with his hand. "Please."

Snape should have remembered the foolish courage as well. Not saying anything, he moved to grab
the offered hand and allowed himself to be pulled onto the bed.

Touching was never easier than this. Harry sighed as he felt Snape's body against his. There were no
barriers between them, and before he could think of anything, his hands were moving on their own
volition.

He didn't say anything, didn't want to ask permission or guidance. He was certain Snape would say
something scathing if he didn't like what he was doing, so he figured that as long as he didn't say
anything, everything was all right. It wasn't as if he was alone in this. The strong, callused fingers
were skimming over his sides, caressing his skin.

Burying his nose in Snape's neck, he wiggled around a little, needing more contact. After all this time
without someone to touch, he'd almost started to think he wasn't really interested in shagging
anymore. Feeling Snape's hard prick brush against his, he let out a needy sound, knowing he'd been
completely wrong.

The warmth flared into a flame. Harry didn't hesitate for a moment as he dug his fingers into the soft
skin on Snape's arse, urging him to move closer still. He wanted so many things right now, but knew
this would be enough.

His movements were almost feral. Not even trying to regain his control, he kissed Snape's throat over
and over again.

Knowing hands moving down his belly, fingers curling around his prick. It was simple and good.
Harry had to force his own hand to let go of the excellent hold he had on Snape's arse to return the
favor.

It was not going to last long. Harry held on as long as he could, but he knew there would be no time
for anything more than this. He was going to prove Snape right by coming in mere minutes and he
wasn't even slightly worried about the way he'd undoubtedly comment on it later. The pressure
building inside was too delicious to be stalled in any way.

They could do this more properly the next time.

The familiar scent of herbs surrounded him, becoming his whole world. The scent of potions
ingredients was now mixed with the heavy scent of arousal and musk. He liked it. There was nothing
else but Snape and the low hum of his own body.

He couldn't believe how good this was.
Snape raised an eyebrow at Harry's blissful expression. He wasn't sure what he wanted, how far did he want to go, but right now, this seemed to be what was needed.

After a bit of fumbling, Harry's grip tightened on him and he started to move his hand in a steady rhythm.

He realized this simple rubbing was enough. He didn't really understand it, but was more than willing to do it. Used to the more demanding touches, Snape found this strangely freeing.

Maybe he should have known Harry would bring his strange innocence into this. Touches. Hot, wet kisses on his neck. The hard young body moving frantically against his, perspiration turning the movement slick, fluid. It was strangely alluring, tempting Snape to let go of his eternal control instead of just ripping it away from him.

Harry tried not to let out the groan building in his chest. He wanted to hold on to this moment for as long as possible while his whole body tingled with the need to find release.

Now. Right now. Reaching up, he pulled Snape into a kiss, muffling his soft whimpers against his lips.

Snape swallowed the sounds, his hand never stilling even as he felt the warm wetness spread between them. He was a bit surprised to feel his own arousal grow more demanding, his body yearning for a release.

Completely boneless for a moment, Harry sagged against Snape. His heart was still pounding in his chest, almost drowning the sound of his heavy breathing. Gradually he became aware of the hardness still pressed against his hip.

A satisfied smile spread to his lips as he reached out again.

Snape allowed him to push him back a little and settle better against him. He didn't flinch as the nimble fingers moved back to his erection, his hips moving slowly to the touch.

The touch was not unlike his own; the fingers curling around his erection, the rhythm settling into somewhere close to perfect, the pressure applied satisfying. It was clear by the soft look on Harry's face that he was determined to give him pleasure as well.

Exactly what he should have expected.

Closing his eyes as Harry leaned into another kiss, he rolled his hips, meeting the touch easily. There was no real urgency in him, the pressure building slowly as Harry's hand moved faster.

It was harmless. Almost as if he was taking care of his own arousal. The simplicity of it should have offended him, but instead he reveled in it. If this was indeed what Harry wanted, he could handle it.

Snape didn't mind the awed expression on Harry's face, the hazy gaze sweeping over his body. He concentrated on the squeeze of Harry's fingers and the rhythm of the movement, feeling the relief gather almost warily before rushing through him.

Breathing shallowly through his mouth, Harry watched Snape thrust his hips up to his touch. He wanted to keep doing this forever, Snape's prick hot and hard in his hand. Whatever he'd imagined seeing when he was actually touching him, it was nothing like the reality.

He stared in awe as Snape tensed and came. Those dark eyes burned with intense fire, not unlike rage. It made him wonder if he could control his body the next time he saw this man angry.
Probably not.

Waiting for a moment to let Snape catch his breath, Harry wiped his hand to the sheet and then wrapped his arms around Snape. Taking deep breaths, he nuzzled against Snape's sweaty skin. "That was nice. Really, really nice." Did he really sound that smug? Yes, he did. And he didn't care.

There was a word Snape had never used for his sexual encounters before. He had to agree with Harry. It had been simple and harmless, pleasant even. Nice. He grunted. He wasn't going to stroke Harry's ego right now. If he wanted praise, he could go to someone else.

Harry hadn't expected there to be a real answer. The soft sound was plenty enough to tell him that Snape hadn't exactly hated the whole thing and wasn't going to hex him any time soon. Smiling, he kissed Snape's neck one more time and then rested his head on his shoulder.

"You're not planning on falling asleep here." It was not a question. Snape's voice was definitely not mellowed.

Wondering if he could now call the man git and get away with it without the glare, Harry sighed, "No, I'm not. But jumping up, casting a cleaning spell on the sheets and then rushing out without even a good bye isn't really my thing." He tightened his hold on Snape. "Besides, this is one of those things. Like walking together and talking."

There was a sound of very familiar words muttered, but Harry ignored them. He knew that very soon he'd have to get up and get cleaned. Then he'd have to leave Snape here and go to see what Ron was doing.

He'd probably have to act like nothing had happened, so that no one would ask stupid questions and Snape wouldn't feel crowded and push him away.

Listening to Snape's heartbeat, he wondered how soon he could come back.

Part 19

The weirdness of the whole thing hit Harry exactly two days later.

He had no idea why it took so long. Probably because of the strange endlessness of their stay in the cottage. He couldn't remember how long they'd already been here, and it took some real effort to calculate how long they'd still stay. The number of the days meant little; somehow time seemed to pass slower here. Not a frantic blur of hours as it had been in Hogwarts.

There had never been a time like this in his life; when there was no one around to either loathe him or worship him. When he could simply relax, spend hours thinking about whatever he wanted or simply spend time not thinking about anything at all.

Harry smiled a little as he shifted on the couch. He couldn't deny loving this.

It was still bright outside. No need for more than a few candles here, even though it was way past dinner time. Not that Harry needed the light to see anything. He was simply lazing here, not bothering to read or play chess with Ron.

A rare occasion, to sit here in the living room, doing nothing.

Dinner had been good as always, although Ron had glared at his plate, poking at the food as if trying to find something disgusting in it. Harry had ignored it, eating with healthy appetite.
He’d offered to wash the dishes afterwards, but the glare on Snape’s face as well as Ron’s spluttering had made it clear that such an offer wasn’t appreciated. So he’d left Snape to it; retreating as far as to the living room.

No matter how he wanted, he couldn’t really justify going to Snape’s room to wait for the man. Not this late.

It wouldn’t have bothered Snape. Of that Harry was certain by now. After all, he would have said something if he minded his presence. But Snape wasn’t the only one he had to consider.

Harry glanced at Ron, who was sprawling on the other couch, his spread out posture a clear message that he didn’t appreciate company. Smiling, he noticed that his friend was dozing off.

Good. That meant that he could sit here in peace and think.

It wasn’t easy to do that these days, not since he’d got his exam back. Two days, full of amazement; evading Ron’s questioning glances and going to Snape’s room, feeling the familiar fluttering excitement in his stomach.

No matter how he tried to be calm about the whole thing, he couldn’t stop the smug smile from spreading to his lips as he thought about Snape. The grin assaulted him in the most inappropriate times, usually resulting in at least one person glaring at him. At least once wiped off by a kiss.

Kissing Snape. That thought alone had been a bit weird mere days ago, and now he was beyond that. Sneaking to be with the man whenever he could, the kisses were usually a prelude to other things to come.

After the first and surprisingly desperate need had somewhat dissipated, he’d realized he was indeed curious about Snape, in more ways than one. Some of the things he would have to figure out in time. He wasn’t foolish enough to think that this new intimacy gave him the right to ask things considered personal.

It had been awkward enough to ask for the permission to watch, to explore, almost mortifying to hear the replying snort.

He still wondered how someone like Snape could be so comfortable lying there, completely naked, allowing him to stare at him, to touch him. Not that he complained, but he did wonder.

Like he wondered about other things; the comfortable silences between them, whether they were naked or not, being able to not perform things in bed like he sometimes did with those who saw only his fame. The ease with which he could talk to Snape, the grace in Snape when he’d knelt before him and then lowered his head to lick his prick.

Now there was heat rising to his face as the memory of this morning hit him. Going to Snape’s room, trying not to feel like a total idiot. The first kiss that was still bordering on awkward, then biting hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from yelling as Snape had demonstrated his prowess in things that had nothing to do with Potions. Holding onto Snape's shoulders until his fingers cramped and knees gave up.

Curling deeper on the couch, Harry tried very hard not to blush. He didn't want Ron to ask any questions in case he wasn't asleep already.

He would be curious if he saw the foolish grin that was undoubtedly accompanying the blush. Harry couldn't help it; he'd never known anyone as uninhibited as Snape, had never shared the bed with anyone so experienced. Mind still focused on those nimble fingers or that mouth, he couldn't think of
anything to say if Ron indeed asked why he was acting weirdly.

The truth would probably give him a heart attack. Hopefully Snape had some potion to cure that.

Of course sooner or later Ron would realize what was going on. Actually, it was a miracle he wasn't asking any questions yet. Harry wasn't in any hurry to tell him about him and Snape, even if it would be easier not to be forced to sneak around like this.

Telling Ron wouldn't make it easy, not immediately anyway. There'd be gawking and ranting. He knew that. But at least afterwards he wouldn't have to lie anymore. He was tired of lying.

He pushed the thought out of his mind. He wasn't about to tell Ron anything yet.

That's why he would spend the evening here staring into the flames, controlling his need to go to Snape's room again no matter how he craved his company. It wasn't about sex, they'd already spent hours in bed naked. It was about being close to him, simply enjoying his presence.

Maybe that was the weirdest thing. Not the sex, but the other things; being so comfortable with the man. He'd always thought that shagging changed things between people. Not this time.

Harry didn't know whether he wanted to think about the whole thing or not. It was so easy to just let things happen.

Near the fireplace, Draco Malfoy stroked the embers, planting a log into the fire. It was merely a routine, since the warmth of the day didn't call for a real blaze in the fireplace.

He was fascinated by the fire. Once again something he'd never really thought about earlier, when the fireplaces had been tended by dozens of house elves, and the flames were simply a means to contact others by the floo.

Planting another log in the fire, he smiled a little. This was probably the most enjoyable task he'd encountered here, not hard work like washing the windows or the dishes. He'd never volunteer to that, but he did kind of like this, watching the bright flames eat through the wood.

There was nothing better to do now. Weasley was snoring on the couch, probably still trying to recover from the ordeal that was eating Snape's cookings. Draco snorted at that. There was nothing wrong with the food. At least everyone else had liked it.

He cast a glance over his shoulder to see Potter sit on the other couch, lost in thoughts.

Of course Potter would have eaten even if it had been marinated Acromantula, Draco mused, not able to suppress his amusement at the thought. He turned his attention back to the fire, hiding his smile.

After all the resentment he'd harbored towards the Gryffindor hero and his strange ease with Snape, he was stunned to actually approve this new turn in their relationship.

If Snape wanted to shag Harry Potter, that was his business. Not Draco's.

He wondered just how long would those two continue acting as if there was nothing new between them. It had taken him a long time to see the weird companionship between them, but he had noticed this change immediately. Mostly because Potter was completely incapable of hiding any of his happiness right now.

That kind of glowing was really disgusting, the basic Gryffindor openness almost laughable. Draco
would have indulged in showing his mirth if Snape weren't involved.

Now he simply watched, with only his gaze revealing his amusement from time to time.

Weasley was of course oblivious to the whole thing. It was inconceivable of how someone could be so blind about what was going on around them. Draco couldn't believe he was so repressed.

Things would definitely spice up when he did finally see what was going on right in front of him. There would be spluttering and probably screaming matches between the Gryffindors. Considering how silly Weasley could be, he might even try to confront Snape about the whole thing.

It was certainly something Draco was looking forward to.

He grabbed the iron poker and pushed one of the logs, watching in awe as it collapsed into embers. This almost peaceful silence wasn't that bad. At least it would lull him into sleep later on, when he got to his room.

Any night when he didn't spend hours tossing and turning, wondering about his future and remembering his past was a good one. Blissful in a new way. Mental calmness was a novel concept, one he was going to cherish whenever he could.

The sounds coming from the kitchen had died some time ago, followed by a soft click of Snape's door opening and then closing. There was a louder sound of the door slamming shut once again, heralding Snape's appearance. It was loud enough to even wake Ron up. Looking blearily at the man walking into the room with a scroll in his hands, he squirmed a little before settling back into the sprawl.

Not paying any attention to him, Snape walked across the room. There was a nod towards Malfoy as usual. He didn't seem to even notice Harry as he sat on the couch and then concentrated on his scroll.

The silence in the room sounded strange all of the sudden, as if the lack of sound that had previously been natural was now forced. Ron kept staring, his expression incredulous. Still poking at the embers, Draco held his expression in check only by biting the inside of his cheek.

Harry looked at Snape, gaze full of happy wonder. There was enough space for Malfoy to sit between them, and Snape had not said anything. To him, the gesture was still clear; an offering of sorts.

A thing, as Snape still called it. It was as appropriate word as any, Harry thought. He couldn't think of a more accurate one.

He knew Snape would not demonstrate any kind of friendliness towards him, especially not in public. He never instigated the touches in private either. That was why this was so astonishing.

Ignoring the way Ron kept staring at them, he closed his eyes, determined to simply enjoy this rare moment. The peaceful, happy moment.

Complete happiness came in flashes; small moments that were almost frozen in time, perfect in joy or pleasure or love. Harry preferred his memories that way, steering away from the events surrounding them.

For life was cruel. No happiness lasted beyond a moment.

He'd spent the past two days catching such moments as often as he could. Quiet moments alone with Snape; a hand brushing against his, hours spent in bed.
It wasn't perfect. Far from it, actually, with all the sneaking around and longing. Maybe that was what made it so good. As long as it wasn't perfect, it wouldn't go away.

Harry refused to wallow in that now. This was not going to end. Snape was not going to leave. They still had time here at the cottage, and he wasn't about to ruin it by thinking dark thoughts. There was no need for them.

Spoiling whatever happiness he could have by worrying about the time it might be over was the biggest stupidity ever, and an idiot or not, he wasn't going to do that.

He sighed softly.

It was easy to sit here, in more ways than Harry could have imagined. He didn't need to even look at Snape to know that there was once again that sharp look on his face as he concentrated on the scroll, completely focused on the text.

Not moving closer to touch was harder than he'd thought. Closeness with Snape was instinctive by now. Trying to act nonchalantly in front of Malfoy and Ron was definitely not easy.

Harry enjoyed this nevertheless.

The silence in the room was mellowing slowly, as nothing special happened. Ron was still keeping an eye on Harry. He didn't know why his friend was spending time with Snape, but could guess it was about the war. Snape could probably teach them all about being a real bastard, the core of the Death Eaters.

It was actually a relief that he wasn't giving any lectures to all of them. Ron shuddered. The awful Potions classes had been enough.

Things would be just fine if they continued like this, with Snape and Malfoy staying away from him. Preferably from Harry as well. So maybe his friend had to talk with Snape about Order business. It didn't mean he had to spend more time with him than necessary. Ron would wait and be patient and even more importantly, he'd be there for Harry.

A smile ghosted over his lips. They'd had so much fun a few days ago, de-gnoming the garden. Maybe they could do that again soon.

He didn't want to leave Harry alone with the Slytherins, but his bladder was now practically screaming at him. Moving slowly, he padded across the room. At least it wasn't raining outside.

"I think I'll go to bed." Not waiting for the door to slam shut after Weasley, Draco gave one last poke at the embers and then stood up.

He saw the approving nod from Snape and had to hurry out of the room before the insane urge to laugh took over.

Life was indeed strange. Insane even. But then again he couldn't think of anything in his world that had made sense these past few months.

Finding out that his father valued his own skin more than his hadn't come as a huge surprise. Watching the Head of his House allow someone like Harry Potter inch closer to him did. Whatever happened now, he didn't want to gawk. He'd leave that to Weasley.

Draco strolled to the stairs, imagining how shocked the redhead would be when he found out his perfect friend was having sex with Snape. It was the best thought he'd had in a long while.
The silence in the living room was somehow changed by Malfoy's absence. Harry let out a soft sigh and sagged on the couch a little, no longer so determined to keep the distance between him and Snape.

He was not going to Snape's room again today. They both knew it. It was still nice to be able to relax like this.

Not even trying to pretend he didn't notice the change in Harry's demeanor, Snape lowered the scroll he'd been reading and cast a knowing glance at him. The sheepish grin that greeted him simply made him snort. He wasn't going to waste any comments on that.

Harry moved even closer. Now that he had Snape's attention, he was not going to waste this short moment. No one would interrupt them for a few minutes.

"Wait!" Snape muttered and then turned to put the scroll on the small table. He was used to this by now, but was not about to let Harry destroy his reading material simply because he couldn't wait for a few seconds.

A moment later Harry snuggled against him.

It was quite strange to adapt to these demonstrations of fondness. To his utter dismay, Snape didn't react to the touches the way he usually did. Somewhere along the line he'd got used to Harry's nearness.

The mere thought was enough to make him uncomfortable.

These touches he could take in stride most of the time. It was the quite silly expression in Harry's eyes that turned the touches strange. Not the hungry look he had in bed, but something open, happy even.

Emotional Gryffindor! Only those coming from that House could be so easily affected by something as irrelevant as sex.

Harry turned his gaze away from Snape's, already shivering at the familiar dark look. He didn't want to start thinking about certain things right now, when he couldn't do anything about them.

Looking down, he leaned slightly against Snape's shoulder, trying very hard not to be too crowding. This was just so damn nice; him and Snape sitting here. He could spend hours like this, like he could spend hours in bed with the man.

Definitely not something he wanted to think right now.

He cast a look at Snape's hands, the stains catching his attention again. He couldn't remember Snape writing anything today. It was weird, the constant ink stains, considering there were so few calluses in his hands. Harry had seen hand lotion potion in his room and knew Snape wasn't neglecting his body.

"Wouldn't a simple charm get rid of those?" He asked it before he could think.

The question was followed with a brief apologetic glance that was completely ignored. Harry allowed himself to relax again, knowing he hadn't just overstepped some line; there were probably dozens he wasn't even aware of, but the matter of ink stains didn't seem to be one triggering actual anger.

Glancing at his hands, Snape shrugged, "I don't really need to get rid of them." He saw the naked
curiosity on Harry's face and waited for the next question.

Which never came.

He was amazed by the self control Harry was showing. It was clear to see Harry wanted to ask, but something made him respect his privacy. How remarkable. It seemed Harry could indeed learn some measure of tact.

The relaxed silence pushed the words out of Snape's mouth. He didn't know why, but it didn't feel completely intrusive to address this. "There used to be a time when a certain symbol, a mark defined everything I was. It was a lie, of course. This is... a far more accurate definition." It was definitely true. Not able to be a spy anymore, he was nothing but a potions brewing man.

The words made perfect sense. Harry remembered how careful Snape had been to hide his arm, but how he'd never seemed to even think about the smudges on his hands.

He smiled, wondering if Snape had said that intentionally, as a thing or if it just came out. Without even realizing what he was doing, his hand reached out to touch Snape's.

"Stop smiling like that, Potter. You look idiotic," Snape said.

That only made Harry's smile widen. "Sorry. Can't help it." Knowing that Ron would be back any minute now, he moved closer to Snape for just a moment.

Words between them were not always easy. Not the banter, not the quiet honesty. Touches were quite different.

Quirking up an eyebrow, Snape sat still as Harry nuzzled against him, quite obviously sniffing his neck. He wasn't really surprised by such odd behavior anymore. "No, I don't think you can."

Of course for a hormonal fool, Harry was showing remarkable restraint.

They sat in comfortable silence until the sounds coming from the door made Harry get up. His slow movements showed how reluctant he was to leave.

After his usual silent words to Snape, he walked out of the room, managing a thin smile at Ron who was muttering dark things about the outhouse and spiders.

Snape listened to the commotion Weasley made on his way upstairs, wondering how a person could manage to make so much noise on his own. He adjusted his robes a little before grabbing the scroll again.

Life did seem to be somewhat easier now. The tension that had filled the small cottage for weeks had lessened after he'd returned the Potions exams. He hadn't cared about the near panic showed by the three; one of the fringe benefits of being a teacher was being able to enjoy such small pleasures. Only now that there was no tension between Harry and him, he realized it had actually jarred his nerves.

He could sense another change as well, one that affected him even more clearly. True to himself, Harry was not trying very hard to hide his obvious enthusiasm, barely able to keep it from his housemate.

At least he was able to control it somehow. He wasn't even monopolizing Snape's time.

Snape raised his gaze from the scroll as the door opened again. He could hear Harry's soft footsteps falter as he passed the living room door, and then pick up speed again as he went upstairs.
He stretched, enjoying the simple movement. His shoulder was still a bit sore, the bruises a bit faded thanks to the salve, but certainly still there. He would have to brew more ointments for such injuries. There would undoubtedly be more times when Harry gripped him harder than he'd intended.

Considering that grip had been the only thing keeping the young idiot standing at the time, Snape couldn't really blame him.

The scroll forgotten on the table, he went mentally through his stores, wondering if he had all the ingredients he needed. So many potions he needed to brew. Wondering if he should get more thistle roots tomorrow, he stood up.

There were still things to do before going to bed.

Moving quietly around the room, Snape extinguished the candles. A softly muttered word took care of the glowing embers in the fireplace. He glanced into the kitchen, pleased that things were exactly like he'd left them, before he moved on.

The night air brushed warmly against his face as he stepped out. Ignoring the sensation, he walked to the outhouse, lost in thoughts but still aware of his surroundings.

Thistle roots. Yes, it was good he'd saved some of the Veela hair as well as the last bit of the Bubotuber pus he'd brought with him. That was the biggest annoyance here. Hogwarts might be a dangerous place to stay, but at least he could get things delivered there. Unlike here, where he had to improvise.

It wasn't that bad, he mused as he got back inside, locking the door behind him and securing the wards. He rather liked challenges. Even the most rudimentary potion could provide that with his dwindling supply of ingredients.

He would deal with that tomorrow.

Finishing his evening routines, Snape put his wand on the table, and climbed into bed. The sheets were slightly rumpled, and he turned to his side, trying to straighten the linen.

His hand met with something that didn't belong in his bed. Pulling the thing from under the covers, he stared at the yellow-red striped sock. Of course. Harry Potter might not be as big an inconvenience as he could be, but he certainly was a slob.

The sock went on the bedside table, next to his wand. It would stay there until tomorrow morning, when he could take it back to the idiot with a firm request to stop leaving dirty clothes in his personal space. Maybe this time Harry would even listen.

He let out a snort.

Snape pulled the covers up to his chin. "Nox." As the room turned dark, he closed his eyes, refusing to waste more time thinking about foolish things.

Part 20

There had been talk about the laundry again.

Harry for one didn't mind the work. He didn't mind using rudimentary cleaning charms on the clothes either, but he knew he couldn't spend his every waking moment latched onto Snape.
So he would consider working tomorrow. Or maybe the day after. His robes weren't *that* disgusting yet; the charms would be enough.

Leaning back on the chair, he raised his cup to his lips. It was definitely relaxing to linger with the tea after lunch. Especially now that Malfoy was already upstairs and Ron was slowly collecting the dishes.

He tried to think of how to spend the rest of the day. So many possibilities, some even not including Snape. The weather outside was glorious, the unbelievably chilly spring turning into the warmth of the upcoming summer seemingly overnight. He could go for a walk with Ron, or maybe even go bathing with him. They could deal with the laundry as well if they went to the stream.

Of course he could also ask Snape if he needed to go and gather some potions ingredients.

Smiling, he drained the last of his tea. That sounded excellent, but maybe it was best if he didn't tempt fate just yet. He didn't want to be too obvious, didn't want to push too hard.

Things were so well between them right now. Like nothing had changed, except for that one thing. He couldn't find anything wrong with that, didn't want things to get complicated.

The kitchen door slammed shut behind Ron. Harry startled a little at the almost angry sound. Yes, he'd definitely better spend the day with his friend.

"I assume you will find some entertainment for the afternoon." Pouring himself another cup of tea, Snape glanced at Harry. It was almost as if he'd read his mind. He saw the questioning look and added, "I need to actually work on something."

Harry smiled. That meant that sooner or later the whole cottage would smell like herbs again. He liked it. "I can think of something to do." Maybe that walk or a bath with Ron. Then he would go to watch Snape brew stuff. He knew he wouldn't be allowed to help with the potion, but he liked watching Snape work anyway.

"Good." Not that Snape was complaining about Harry disturbing his privacy. This far, it was nothing he couldn't deal with.

He pushed back his chair and got up, already thinking about his work. He'd better get moving if he wanted something done before being interrupted.

The touch came without being planned. Just a slight brush of Harry's hand against Snape's back. It was such a familiar gesture Snape didn't even have the urge to cringe away from it. He'd already come to anticipate such foolishly affectionate and yet harmless gestures from Harry.

He glanced at Harry, who was twisted around in his chair, still holding out his hand. "Yes?"

"Nothing really," Harry said. He just couldn't keep his hands off Snape all the time. Sitting next to him at lunch, not able to touch had been difficult enough. "Just a thing." He made a little dismissive gesture.

"Why am I not surprised?" Not bothering to even glower, Snape took his cup and walked out of the dining area.

He had a lot of work to do, and knew that later on, Harry would probably sneak into his room again. It didn't exactly bother him, but he wanted to finish with the potion before spending the rest of the afternoon in bed.
Harry smiled softly, glad that Snape couldn't see his expression. He'd thought his gesture would at least earn him a glare, probably even scalding words. There had been none, as if Snape had got used to him being so close to him.

He turned around, still smiling, and reached out to his plate, only to freeze as his gaze met with a shocked blue one. "Ron?" He hadn't realized his friend had come back for more dishes.

Ron couldn't say anything. He opened and closed his mouth, but words refused to come out. The only sound escaping was a choked wheeze.

"What is it?" Harry had never seen him like this, like he was having a fit. "Ron? Are you all right?"

Wheezing a bit more, Ron waved his hand as if to brush such concern away. He was grasping a hold on the doorframe, unable to stop the spluttering for a moment. Then he managed to choke out, "Snape!"

Harry glanced over his shoulder to look at the door. No sign of Snape there. "What?" He had no idea of what Ron was talking about.

"You touched Snape! Like... Touched him." Ron waved his free hand in the air. He realized he sounded silly, but his brains were totally frozen.

"What? Oh. I..." Feeling heat rise to his face, Harry nodded. He'd thought no one would see. "Yeah, I did."

Ron was still trying to understand what he'd just seen. His best friend touching -- touching!! -- Snape's back, like it was the most natural thing to do, then smiling at him. Snape walking out without saying a thing or even glaring.

He had to pinch himself. Maybe this was a dream. If he was lucky, he'd actually fallen asleep in the Divinations class, and all this was just an incense induced nightmare. Remembering the tales his mother had told him when he was just a child, he wondered if he'd stepped through a magical portal or a mirror. Anything to explain what he'd just seen.

Grimacing with pain, he stared at Harry who was standing there, looking a bit embarrassed, a lot like he was panicking as well, and most of all...

"Oh no. No no no!" Eyes impossible wide, Ron stared at his blushing friend. This was insane. He should try to contact Dumbledore, so that they could get Harry to St. Mungo's as soon as possible. They had a good mental ward there. "Don't tell me you're..." He couldn't think of a word, choking at the one that tried to escape. "For Snape of all people!"

Harry had never let himself to say it, not even quietly to himself. Now, it was the easiest thing in the world to nod. "Yeah."

It was crazy! "You mean the guy you talked about is Snape? The hot nice guy? Are you out of your mind?" Maybe Harry had hit his head. Or maybe he was dreaming. He had to be! Ron pinched himself again, harder this time and winced a moment later. Oh Merlin! Why couldn't it be a dream?

"He's not a nice guy. But yes. I was talking about Snape. I like him." Harry was almost amazed of how many meanings that simple word held.

Ron was starting to feel an upcoming headache. This had to be a joke. But the look in Harry's eyes made it clear he was serious. "But it's Snape! He's so ugly!" There was a flash of something in the green eyes that made him grimace. Realizing it was real anger, he added, "And not just on the
outside." Even though it was bad enough. "That git is ugly on the inside as well." Sarcastic and nasty and evil!

"I know." It was a crude way to put it, but Harry agreed. There was darkness inside Snape, but it was something he could understand; the anger, the pain, the regrets. The knowledge of horrible things he'd witnessed and done. All of it. "He's ugly like me." He thought for a moment before adding, "And Sirius. Dumbledore." Remembering the haunted look in amber eyes, he went on, "And Remus Lupin. Professor McGonagall. All of us."

All who had fought and killed and battled with darkness, inside and outside.

That did not convince Ron. He didn't care what Snape had been through, this had nothing to do with that. This was about Harry fancying Snape, *touching* Snape.

He let out another strangled wheeze as he realized just exactly what he'd witnessed a moment ago. Not only Harry touching Snape, but Snape allowing it. When the hell had that happened? Snape letting Harry do that? Was the whole world going completely insane?

Harry had a thing for Snape. That was bad. Really bad. Mental bad. But this was worse. So much worse he couldn't even think about it first. When the thought hit him, he groaned, "Oh fuck, Harry! Please tell me you're not..." Completely loony. Stark raving mad.

Knowing perfectly well what Ron was thinking, Harry felt the heat on his face worsen. It made him roll his eyes, but it didn't stop him from blushing.

He hadn't thought of what to do when someone found out. Somehow he'd been so wrapped up inside his own private world with Snape that he'd completely pushed away the fact that sooner or later Ron would notice. It had been a vague idea that maybe someday someone might notice, and after that, he'd chosen to ignore the whole thing.

He had no idea of how to deal with this.

"Oh. My. Sweet. Merlin." Gasping the words out, Ron flailed with his arms. "You are! You.... Oh my...." The rest was horrified splutter.

Harry sat there in silence, watching as Ron processed the whole thing. He didn't think there was anything he could say or do to make this any easier to either of them.

"You... ew... you... Merlin, that's nasty! You..." Almost hyperventilating, Ron tried to grasp his thoughts and cram them somewhere he could never find them again. All the disgusting images just couldn't be true! Harry wasn't! Couldn't! Didn't!

He'd know if something like that was happening. He wasn't blind. Of course he'd seen the way Harry was deluding himself with Snape's humanity, but it hadn't seemed to be more than that. It couldn't be.

"Are you saying." Ron had to pause for a moment before he could continue. "That you have a... *something* on Snape, and you actually told him." He closed his eyes. Please, Harry say no!

"Yes. I fancy Snape and I told him about it some time ago."

Ron's eyes snapped open at the calm sound of Harry's voice. He couldn't believe it! "You fancy *Snape*" Yes. Harry was insane. Sirius would be devastated, but he could always go and see him at St. Mungo's. "Are you..." He was about to say 'insane', but silenced as he saw the determined nod. "Huh?"
Keeping a firm grip on his panic, Harry said, "Yes. I am. Er... We are. You know?" He wanted to say it was none of Ron's business, but that would have been just half the truth. In a way it wasn't. But he didn't want to lie to his friend. Didn't want to keep this part of his life a dirty little secret, because there were already too many of those.

Ron was quiet for a moment, trying to figure out just exactly what he meant by that. Did he mean he really liked Snape? He'd told him? What was he, suicidal? And why hadn't Snape hexed him by now?

But he was allowing Harry in his room. Sometimes even said non nasty things to him. Didn't turn him into a newt when he talked back or touched him.

His voice was tight as he asked, "You're not saying that you're..." He could see the answer in Harry's eyes. "You are. Oh my sweet Merlin!"

Harry wondered if he'd find this amusing later on. His mind was surprisingly clear. Probably because he was used to being panicked like this. "Ron? Do you need to sit down?" How strange that his voice wasn't trembling.

"Yeah. I'd better..." Yanking a chair closer to him, Ron sat heavily down. He did feel a bit woozy. It was definitely best to sit down.

He sat there, watching Harry. Staring at him, while his mind was racing. Finally he let out an explosive exhale. "Okay. I need to... You fancy Snape? And you told him? And... what? You two are now shagging or something?" He intended the last bit as a joke. A really weird and pervy joke that would make everything all right again.

He even managed a forced grin on his lips.

"Yes, I fancy Snape and yes, I told him." Harry shrugged. "And if you really need the details, then yes, we're shagging now. Definitely."

Ron stared. It was a joke! Ha ha! Yes it was! It had to be. He could see the slightly worried look in Harry's eyes, recognizing it even behind all the determination. "You're not joking."

"No."

Instead of ranting, Ron sat there, his mouth slightly open. He could tell Harry was telling the truth.

His mind was racing, going through moments from the past few weeks; remembering how Harry had been sort of happy, then sort of sad. Then sort of happy again. The joy after passing the Potions exam.

It went farther than that, to their first weeks here. Harry talking with Snape, going bathing with him, staying in his room at weird hours. Ron had wondered what those two could possibly do together. At least now he didn't have to wonder anymore.

"You're shagging Snape?" Ron whispered. It was too preposterous to say out loud, as if that would make it more real. "Really?"

Harry nodded. "Really." He'd thought explaining to Ron about his lies and silence had been hard. This was harder.

There was a humming sound in Ron's head, as if his brain was working overtime trying not to deal with the fact that his best friend was saying that he was shagging with professor Snape.
"You're shagging Snape." This time it was not a question. Ron simply had to say it out loud. He flinched as he saw the nod. "Okay, I'm...." He wasn't going to say he was going to sit down, since he was already sitting. Maybe he should go to the kitchen and find out if Eppy had any whiskey hidden somewhere.

Waiting patiently, Harry sat there, trying not to show his anxiety, trying very hard not to laugh. It was amazing how he could still see the humor in this, even though any laughter would probably be at least a bit hysterical.

Ron cleared his throat. "You... You do understand it's Snape we're talking about?" He saw yet another nod. "And you think he's.... sexy?" Why couldn't Harry shake his head at that? "Okay. Okay. You're insane."

"Probably." It wasn't as if Harry hadn't thought about that. Anyone willing to face the expectations people had about him was definitely insane, or at least masochistic. He smiled slightly.

The smile made Ron almost crumple. "You really are shagging Snape." It was just a whisper. He didn't even need any answer to that. "I'm... I don't know what to say."

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything." Harry didn't need to talk about it, didn't need any justification or Ron's blessing.

That was good, since Ron couldn't think of anything. He was not about to repeat any of the gawking. His best friend in the whole world had just said he was doing the wild thing with Snape, and there was nothing he could really say to that.

"Let's just sit here for a moment, okay?" He wanted to make sure Harry wasn't going to run again. They didn't need to talk about this -- he didn't want any details, Merlin, he didn't want to think about it -- but he wanted to be here with Harry.

Ron didn't think he could even stand up right now, not to mention finishing the chores. His nerveless fingers wouldn't be able to hold the plates.

There were dozens of questions popping up in his mind. How long had this been going on? Who had started it? Was Harry really serious? Did he really fancy Snape? Why the hell would anyone fancy Snape? He tried his best to keep his mind blank, for once failing.

He sat in silence, staring at Harry, watching him smile wryly. It was weird. Insane. Completely mad.

At least the humming sound was now gone, as was the sudden dizziness that had attacked him earlier. The silence felt real suddenly, and not a part of some twisted fantasy.

He wondered if he should try to say something, anything. Or at least force a smile on his lips. He tried to curl his lips slightly, but it didn't come out as a smile. Seeing the hurt in Harry's eyes, he dropped the attempt and just sat there.

Staring.

It had to be a mistake. A joke. Ron's brain focused on denial. It was so much easier than to actually believe what Harry had just said. It couldn't be real. It just couldn't be!

The footsteps nearing made Ron jolt with relief. It would be Malfoy. Having Malfoy here was good. He could glare at him, probably even say something snide to him. Anything was better than this awful silence.
Being so happy to see Malfoy should be almost as insane as what he'd just been told. He pushed the thought away. He was not going to think about Harry and Snape again.

The door opened slowly. Ron's expression fell as he saw the dark figure step in.

Not Malfoy. Why couldn't it be Malfoy?

Looking a bit absentminded, as if he was lost in thoughts, Snape stepped into the small dining area, his cup in hand. He let the door bang shut behind him, the flick of his wrist instinctive by now.

The loud sound made Ron jolt. He could only stare at Snape with a horrified expression on his face.

Snape glared. "I thought you were going to wash the dishes, Mr. Weasley." He wondered what this was all about but didn't ask.

He walked to the table, grabbing the teapot that was still there and poured himself another cup of tea. Finishing with his task, he looked at the two Gryffindors again. There was something wrong in the silence and the way Harry seemed to be avoiding his gaze.

"I..." Fearing he was going to splutter again, Ron bit his lip and glanced at Harry. He had no idea what to say. All he could think of was that Harry was shagging Snape and that it was definitely a disgusting mental image.

Harry knew he had to tell Snape what they had talked about. The shock so evident on Ron's face indicated he'd blurt out something sooner or later. He took a deep breath. "Snape?" His voice was quiet. "Ron and I had a talk about what's been going on lately. Between you and me."

He didn't elaborate. It was painfully obvious what he was talking about anyway.

"I see." Snape had known this would happen sooner or later. Even Weasley wasn't blind enough not to notice Harry's silly smiles or the way he spent hours in his room.

Maybe this was a good thing. Weasley would undoubtedly try to talk Harry out of it. Peer pressure might even work, and he'd stop this foolishness. Then again it was probable that Harry would simply shrug off whatever arguments Weasley had. He was the most stubborn young man Snape knew.

Deciding that he wanted nothing to do with this Gryffindor scene, he nodded. "Try to deal with it quietly. I won't condone any emotional outbursts about this matter." He was certain there would be one, but he'd let Harry deal with that. "And make sure that the dishes are done before Eppy starts preparing the dinner." With that, he walked out of the dining room.

Ron's mouth was open. He could only stare at the doorway.

It wasn't a joke, and Merlin he'd already began to believe it and now there was no way he could. "You..."

"I swear, Ron, if you say 'you're shagging Snape' one more time, I'm going to strangle you."

That made Ron smile despite himself. He shook his head. "No, no. I was going to say that you sure weren't kidding when you said he's not a nice guy."

All Gryffindors already knew that -- boy did they know that! -- but it was still weird to think of him being an evil and nasty person and think about the fact that Harry was...

Ron couldn't really imagine what it would be like to shag Snape, and he was very glad of it. "Is
he..." No, he didn't want to know. But he kind of had to ask. "Is he like that in bed? Evil and nasty?"

He knew how quiet Harry could sometimes be, withdrawn and melancholy, obviously feeling the responsibility over the war and everything. Was this because of that? Remembering the look on his face when they'd talked about killing, he wondered if this was a way Harry was punishing himself.

It would fit in with what he knew about Slytherins; taking advantage of others and doing strange things for some twisted and sinister agenda. Always scheming.

"No. He isn't. He's just..." Harry waved his hand vaguely. He didn't think Snape would like him to tell Ron about this.

"He isn't hurting you or anything?" The Slytherin dungeons had always made Ron think about chains and whips and those images were now haunting him.

Harry had to smile at that. "No. It's nothing like that, Ron." He wondered what Ron would say if he told him he'd never enjoyed sex this much before and that Snape's touch was actually gentle if compared to the frantic fumbling he was used to. "He's definitely not hurting me."

There was way too much information in Harry's smug expression. Ron grimaced, but didn't comment. He'd definitely have to think about this before saying anything else.

Knowing that the silence would become suffocating any moment now, Harry got up. "You want me to help you with the dishes?" He didn't think Ron could handle being left alone right now. His expression was still completely shocked.

"Sure," Ron said, shrugging. It would be good to share the chores with Harry. At least then he'd know where he was. Not that he was going to think of where he could go and what he would do there.

No. He was not going to think about anything.

Somehow the two of them managed to finish with the dishes without breaking anything.

The afternoon was once again filled with awkward silence and even more awkward attempts to talk about irrelevant things. After only one game, Harry gave up on chess and curled on the couch with a book instead. He had no idea what the story was about, his gaze unfocused.

He wondered if this would go on for long. Probably yes. He just couldn't understand why it was so hard for Ron to deal with this. It wasn't as if he was doing something completely stupid.

Being with Snape was nice and peaceful, something that didn't make him feel uncomfortable or anxious. He didn't want to explain it to Ron. Why wasn't it enough to just say this was what he wanted?

Swallowing hard, he pushed the thoughts away. He didn't want to resent Ron for being shocked. If he were in Ron's place, he'd probably be just as shocked himself, but it was hard to remember that right now.

The day crawled on slower than ever. It felt like an eternity before Eppy announced dinner.

Ron kept staring at Snape throughout the dinner. He couldn't concentrate on his food, too busy trying to figure out just exactly what did Harry see in him.

Greasy hair. Yes, it was still as greasy as always. Face as pale as always. Eyes black with no soft
emotions whatsoever. Snape was definitely the disgusting creepy professor they'd learned to hate; eating in silence, holding his fork and knife with ink stained fingers.

That made Ron shiver with disgust. How could Harry let him touch him with those hands? He had to be some kind of a masochist. He wouldn't go near Snape even if someone promised him all the Galleons in Gringotts.

It made him ill.

Keeping his expression calm, Snape took a bite from his sandwich. He ignored the way Weasley kept staring at him. The disgust so evident on the boy's face was familiar to him. It was no secret that people didn't like him.

He was fine with that. He didn't like people either.

He didn't care what Weasley thought. As long as he didn't make a scene, he could think whatever he wished.

If he disturbed his peace and quiet, there would be hell to pay. Snape was willing to allow Harry to invade his privacy, but he was not about to make it a habit with others. Certainly not Weasley or any other Gryffindor.

The silence in the room didn't bother him. At least Weasley knew how to keep his mouth shut; something he had been willing to call an impossibility a while back.

"Pass me the juice, please." Accepting the pitcher from Malfoy, Harry poured himself a glass and then concentrated on his food again. He didn't want to watch the silent drama going on around him; Ron looking all dazed and disgusted as he stared at Snape and Malfoy curbing his smirk, probably because he knew it would not please the Head of his House to see him enjoy himself so much at his expense.

The very knowing expression didn't surprise Harry at all. Malfoy could see what happened before him. His whole life as a Slytherin had probably been about watching others, playing with their secrets.

At least this wasn't something he could use as a game; Harry was pretty sure about that. It seemed Malfoy had some respect towards Snape, and he would never cross certain lines.

Harry had to wonder what Snape was thinking about all this. It was impossible to tell. He looked exactly the way he always did.

Seeing Ron make a disgusted moue made him want to kick his friend. So maybe Snape didn't care if Ron was freaking out, but he did. At least Ron could try to hide it better.

Maybe he would when the first shock faded away. In a week or two.

For the first time during their stay here, Ron volunteered to wash the dishes, rushing to the kitchen with an astonishing speed. Harry was relieved. He didn't think there was anything he and Ron could really talk about right now.

He waited for Malfoy to finish his tea and then take his stupid grin with him and leave. Leaving Malfoy here while Ron was still so stunned would not be a good idea.

There wouldn't be a comfortable silence in the living room tonight.
"Can I have a few words with you?" His voice quiet, Harry looked at Snape. He was pretty sure there would be a nod, but actually seeing that nod made him feel boneless.

He followed Snape to his room, not saying anything. There was nothing he could really say.

As strange as his new relationship with Snape had felt at times, it was suddenly even stranger. It had been easy to come to terms with what they were doing, when it had been just between them. Harry couldn't help wondering how others would label this and what Ron and Malfoy would undoubtedly be thinking.

Not that it would change anything. He couldn't live up to everyone's expectations anyway.

He just hoped this wouldn't make Snape turn away from him. It wouldn't be easy to ignore Ron's stares and the silent accusations.

They had talked about sex and Snape did seem to agree to the things that could well raise this above simple shagging. But it didn't mean this was easy. Didn't mean that Snape would be even close to comfortable about having someone he undoubtedly called a complete moron gawk at him and speculate about his private life.

He didn't know how Snape had dealt with relationships before. Wasn't stupid enough to ask either.

Staring into that strangely tired black gaze, Harry realized he didn't really know anything about Snape's past. All he knew was that he'd been a Death Eater once, doing some pretty disgusting things before turning his back on all that darkness and going to Albus Dumbledore for help.

There were things he'd figured out long ago. Snape's need for control over things hinted that there had been a time when he'd been completely helpless. A part of his sarcasm and obvious distaste had always been aimed at himself, even if it had taken Harry a long time to see that.

Then there were the scars. As always, the thought made his arm twitch, as if his body wanted him to brush fingers over the lightning bolt mark on his forehead. He resisted the urge. Yes, he was scarred, but Snape was even more so, and not only with his Dark Mark or the strange web of thin scars on his back.

Harry wondered if he would ever let anyone really close. It would probably take a miracle. He refused to think about it now, finding the thought uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry about Ron's behavior." He knew his friend would never apologize, but it felt right that he did. "He's just shocked."

Snape's expression didn't waver. "I don't care about Mr. Weasley's opinions as long as he keeps them to himself." A part of him was actually enjoying this, especially the horrified shock he'd seen on the young man earlier.

It wasn't as good as the panic over his Potions exam, but it was still very amusing.

"I never thought he'd find out about this," Harry muttered. It had taken Ron such a long time to figure out that there was something weird in what he was doing. He'd never seen the times he'd been working on secret Order business and therefore Harry had simply thought this would go unnoticed as well.

Snape stared at him, and then, very slowly, his lips curled up. The smile was laden with sarcasm, but it was indeed an amused expression. "You honestly thought he wouldn't notice? You've spent the last three days acting like you've just discovered sex, grinning like an idiot. Any blind Hufflepuff
would notice, Potter."

It made Harry blush. He hadn't thought he was that bad. "Really?" Not even trying to cover his embarrassment, he looked at Snape, flabbergasted by both his words and his expression.

"Really." Snape nodded.

There were dozens of things Harry could say, but he settled for a small smile. Stepping closer to Snape, he wrapped his arms around him. It was easier than ever, especially when the strong arms came around him a moment later.

He planted a kiss on Snape's lips. It was supposed to be just a chaste goodnight kiss, but somehow it got out of hand. Tracing Snape's lower lip with his tongue, he had to fight against the urge to stay here for a few hours after all.

"I should go." Harry forced himself to let go of Snape. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night." As calm as ever, Snape opened the door for him, and then watched him walk out of his room.

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Feeling completely rested, Harry lay in bed, staring at the familiar rafters that were barely visible. He didn't know what time it was, but it was definitely not past dawn yet.

He sighed. He wasn't really tired anymore but he could have slept for longer. Feeling that he wouldn't fall back to sleep even if he spent the whole morning in bed, he reached out for his glasses. Maybe it was the time to get up and meet the new day.

Being awake this early without being woken up by nightmares was a novel concept. Harry tried to remember what he'd dreamed of, but couldn't really recall anything.

Maybe there had been no dreams, or they had been simple, benevolent. Another novel concept; nights without doubts and terrors. He could only think of a few nights here when he'd tossed and turned, lost in haunting memories or dark thoughts. Most of them weren't his usual nightmares; they'd been spent thinking about the impossibility that had now somehow become reality.

He stretched a little, smiling.

This was quickly becoming a habit, the almost obscene happiness pulling his lips into a smirk once again. He loved the feeling, even if others might find his expression annoying.

It would be best if he went downstairs. He didn't want to wake Ron, it was too early for even him to be up. The whole house was probably sleeping. Lying in bed thinking didn't sound bad, but he was feeling a bit restless.

Harry put his feet on the cold floor and padded to the chair on which he'd laid his clothes. Finishing dressing up quickly, he walked downstairs. Now that he was up, he realized he did indeed need to do something, and trying to ignore the chill, he walked out to the outhouse.

On his way back, he noticed that there was now light coming from some of the downstairs windows. He guessed Eppy was already working in the kitchen. The other bright windows meant that Snape wasn't sleeping anymore either.
Sometimes he had to wonder just exactly when did Snape sleep, for he was awake whenever Harry visited him. He wasn't surprised there had been rumors about their Potions master being a vampire ever since his first year; the evidence supporting that theory did seem impressive.

The flickering light looked inviting. Harry smiled as he reached the door and decided he wouldn't be going back upstairs.

This felt strangely like back home. Waking up early, not being able to fall asleep again and going to see Snape. It was almost absurd how he sometimes missed that, missed their shared breakasts and the silent togetherness that was so simple when it wasn't complicated by other people.

He padded across the hall, not bothering to sneak. It didn't matter if someone heard him walk to Snape's room, even though Ron might still gawk and splutter.

Knocking softly, he muttered, "It's me." It was a silly habit, for they both knew he was the only one who would knock on Snape's door at this time, but he muttered the words out loud anyway. He waited until the familiar voice called him to enter and then pushed the door open.

"Good morning." A smile appeared on Harry's lips as he saw Snape. So this was indeed early.

Snape was sitting on his rumpled bed, half way through pulling his socks on. He hadn't changed from his night robe yet.

For some reason it made Harry hesitate at the doorway. "Sorry. Do you want me to come back later?" He didn't know where to look at, his gaze finally focusing on Snape's socks. They were an interesting shade of green. Very nice. He was not going to look at anything else.

Snorting, Snape finished with his left sock. "I see no reason why you can not stay here now." The tone suggested that he could find some if Harry continued to act foolishly.

Harry shut the door behind him. He didn't want to argue with Snape right now. Not with words, definitely not with a silence. There'd been enough of that with Ron last night, the unsaid things almost suffocating him.

It was no wonder he hadn't been able to sleep all that well.

He walked across the room, sitting down on Snape's bed. It was so familiar to him, he didn't even have to think about his actions.

The bed was nice and comfortable, wider and softer than the one upstairs. Harry sprawled on it, stretching his arms high above his head. "I think it's going to be a nice day." It didn't seem like it was going to rain, even though you never really knew out here.

"Good." Snape got to his feet and removed his night robe. He folded it and pushed it under his pillow, not even looking at Harry. "We have a lot to do today."

Harry couldn't process the words, his mind completely frozen at the sight. He still couldn't comprehend just how could Snape do this so casually, like his naked skin meant nothing. Padding around his room wearing just socks and a pair of underwear, he looked just as forbidding as he did when he was covered in black cloth from neck down.

He watched as Snape went to the shelves and grabbed a bottle, knowing he should probably avert his gaze as he recognized the deep green salve.

"Uh... Yes. A lot to do." Wondering if he was feeling sluggish because of the early hour, or because
Snape was slowly rubbing his forearm, Harry managed to choke the words out.

It was hypnotic; Snape's fingers glistening from the thick potion, the circular movement on his skin. Harry couldn't help staring. He was still not used to seeing this. The near nakedness was strange enough, but somehow he felt that witnessing this was even more intimate.

Considering the glare Snape cast over his shoulder, he thought so too.

Harry turned his attention away without words. Even if Snape allowed him to comment, he didn't know what to say. It was clear that Snape wanted to discuss about the Dark Mark just as much as he wanted to talk about his famous scar.

He listened to Snape put the bottle down and then walk around the room. It was enough to just be here, the atmosphere so peaceful and quiet and calm... The very loud grumble of his stomach brought Harry back from his musings. He couldn't believe his stomach could make such a loud noise!

Of course he hadn't eaten that well last evening. No wonder with Ron staring at Snape as if he was something disgusting Hagrid had brought to the class again. Harry had definitely not been hungry.

"Considering your appetite these days, I would have thought you'd wait until the breakfast is over." There was no censure in Snape's voice but he did cast a sharp look at Harry.

Wait till what? Harry looked at him questioningly, taking in the way Snape had still not put any clothes on. Seeing him like this always made his mind sluggish. "Huh?" He wasn't even embarrassed by the sound anymore.

Snape didn't say anything, he simply stared.

It still took a moment for it to dawn.

Shaking his head, Harry said, "I'm not here for... that." It felt a bit silly to sprawl on the still rumpled bed and say it, especially after ogling at the man. But it was the truth. "Just came over before breakfast."

The glare was definitely disbelieving. "Indeed."

Harry didn't know whether to be angry or sad about it. The churning emotions were both as strong, battling over control. "You really think I come to see you just because I want to shag you?" The anger won the first round, followed by, "It's not something you have to do. If you want to spend the day alone or don't feel like it, say so."

The last thing he wanted was this to be some kind of a duty. He dreaded it, knowing that Snape would probably do anything for the Order, and that would include sharing the bed with him. They had talked about that and he'd thought Snape had understood him when he said it was the last thing he wanted.

He had understood it, hadn't he?

The thought made him slightly nauseous. "You do know that, don't you?"

"Again with the high drama, Potter?" Amusement tingling all over him, Snape pulled on a shirt and trousers before grabbing a brush. He deliberately turned his back on Harry, gaze focusing on his reflection on the mirror. "I believe we've already discussed this once."

He was not about to have that conversation again.
Harry laughed. It was strangely freeing to let out the happy sound. "Sorry. Didn't mean to go all emotional on you again." He knew how uncomfortable that made Snape. "Will try not to do that again for a while."

"I'll be surprised if you manage that for more than an hour." Finishing with the brushing, Snape finally turned around. "All right, if you are not here for sex, get up so I can make the bed."

Seeing Snape glare, his shirt hanging open made Harry reconsider briefly. Then he hopped out of the bed. Changing his mind about shagging would look silly right now. Maybe later.

He swallowed as Snape strode closer to the bed. No. Definitely later.

They tidied the bed together, straightening the covers properly and then laying the duvet in its place. Harry liked the quiet work. He also liked sprawling on the quilt after the work was done, watching Snape finish with his dressing with some regret.

"I need to go through some things before breakfast," Snape said. He didn't bother to explain, simply motioning towards his shelves.

Even though Harry was hungry, he didn't want to go yet. "Okay. I'll wait." The bed was soft and comfortable. Lying here was better than going for breakfast with Malfoy's smirk and Ron's glares as his only companions.

He didn't wait for there to be an answer, so he wasn't disappointed when Snape went to work without words.

Breathing deeply, Harry lay back down, head tilted to the side. He liked watching Snape browse through the shelves, organize the jars and glare at the ingredients. It was such a familiar sight.

He noticed how fully Snape was concentrating on the jars, not bothered by his blatant staring. Somehow it warmed him more than anything.

A silly thought, reminding him of his earliest crushes. The giggly, bubbly feeling growing somewhere in his belly, almost like the coils of desire but still different, more overwhelming. After his first short relationships, the feeling had disappeared somewhere, replaced by the hunger. He'd missed it.

Watching Snape brought it back now. If he was completely honest with himself, he'd admit that it had been back for some time now. It had been hiding underneath other things ever since they'd come here. Maybe even longer. He couldn't say.

He liked the feeling; anticipation mixed with the pleasant buzz of contentment. Not so much a jittery sensation as it had been earlier, but peaceful somehow.

There was a word he'd never had thought to connect with Snape and being with him. But it had been like that almost from the beginning. In the quiet and comfortable rooms in Hogwarts, filled with silence, he'd felt completely at home. Not even the brief stays at the Burrow felt like that. There he was always reminded of what he didn't have. With Snape, he didn't have to think about that.

He didn't need anything more. He already had what he wanted. The sex was great, but this was great as well.

How amusing that after all those months of clinging onto the belief that true companionship should hold more than just sex and then giving up on the notion, he would now find it with this man. Someone who was about as romantic as a toad and probably even less inclined to contemplate such
things.

He let out a soft chuckle at that. Neville would definitely object his thoughts. That lead to thinking about Neville's face if he ever found out that he was with Snape, and he had to bite his lip so that the insane laughter didn't escape.

"I see the lack of food is affecting you again," Snape said as he realized Harry was shaking with laughter. He didn't want to know what it was all about.

Harry nodded, still grinning. "I know. Let's go and have some breakfast."

Since he was finished with his inventory anyway, Snape agreed. Eppy would have everything ready by now.

Breakfast was almost a garish contrast to the time they'd spent in Snape's room. It was like a continuation of the previous evening, with the awkward silence and the furtive looks. Harry forced himself to eat his sandwich even though the oppressive mood managed to drive all his appetite away.

Harry could see the slightly disgusted expression on Ron's face. He pretended he hadn't noticed, and a moment later it morphed into a strained smile. Looking up, he met the worried blue gaze calmly. Yes, Ron was irritating the hell out of him, but he couldn't really blame him.

He didn't want to be angry at Ron, especially when all he was doing was taking care of him. In a very annoying way, but still.

Sometimes he hated the way the attention was almost suffocating, but he was glad his friend cared enough to worry about him. It was a form of love he could never really hate.

Finishing his breakfast with a relieved sigh, Harry wondered what they would do today. Spending the whole day inside didn't sound at all tempting. He was torn between the desire to go back to Snape's, to watch him work and just be and the need to at least try to make things normal with Ron.

Fortunately, he didn't have to choose.

Snape let out a slight cough. "Am I reaching too far with my optimism if I trust you three to manage here on your own for a couple of hours?"

Even with the warning sound before the question, Ron almost choked in his tea anyway. He lowered his cup down, not looking at Harry.

Acting as if he hadn't noticed the spluttering, Snape added, "Since it's not raining, I am going to harvest some ingredients. You will try to keep out of trouble as I'm outside." This time it was definitely not a question.

"You're going out?" Ignoring Malfoy's quietly muttered affirmation to Snape's words, Harry stared at him.

Snape refused to even answer that. He was not going to repeat himself as if he was talking to imbecils, even though he was fairly certain that it would indeed be necessary. He cast a withering stare at Harry.

"I'm coming with you then." There would be no question about it. Harry was not going to let him go off alone.

Ron blinked. He'd been trying not to stare at anyone, but now he couldn't help gawking. Did Harry
really intend to go out with Snape? That was disturbing, even disgusting and it would also mean that he was going to stay at the cottage alone with the git. No way in hell! "Yeah. Me too." He glared at Malfoy.

Snape looked from Weasley to Malfoy, knowing well what that was about. Leaving those two alone here would be a disaster. Leaving Malfoy here alone was not possible either. He was responsible for him, and even though he didn't think anyone would get past the wards, he was not going to risk it.

For a moment he wondered if he could make Harry stay behind with Weasley. The obvious tension between them made it clear that it would be a bad idea. Of course Harry would probably follow him anyway, the stubborn, overprotective idiot!

"Then we shall all go," he said calmly.

To his surprise, there were no protests.

Draco was almost shivering with anticipation, a fact that would have irritated him immensely if he weren't so happy. Stepping out of the cottage, he took a deep breath, enjoying the fresh air. It had been days since he'd been outside, not counting the all too brief trips to the revolting outhouse.

He didn't even mind Weasley and Potter trailing after Snape with him. They were all walking in silence. It was refreshing, making this feel less like a deranged field trip.

The silence was broken later on by Snape's voice cataloguing things he needed. Without any comments, the three youngsters went to gather the various plants. Draco realized that he liked this better than the greenhouses at Hogwarts. There was actually room to move around here.

Harvesting was definitely more fun than sitting inside all day.

He didn't even mind when his shoes got dirty or when one of the branches slapped against his cheek, leaving it stinging. It was just so good to be out here. Concentrating on the quiet instructions coming from Snape, Draco tried very hard not to think about the things he would have done if he was back at Hogwarts. Especially Quidditch. Of all the things he'd left behind, he missed flying most.

Shaking his head at his foolish thoughts, he bent down to pick up a few roots. He wasn't going to ruin this relatively good moment by being maudlin.

At least it looked like it wasn't going to rain any time soon. That was a blessing.

Ron didn't seem interested in the plants. He walked behind the rest of them, hands shoved deep into his pockets. A few times he moved his leg as if to kick something, but the memory of a bite stilled his movements at the last moment.

This was weird, and not in a good way. Sure, the sun was shining and the birds were making an awful ruckus and there were no giant spiders -- he hoped -- or centaurs around. But it was eerie to watch the silent way everyone seemed to be so damn comfortable with this. Just when had Harry started to look so damn happy about collecting potions ingredients?

It wasn't something Ron was going to ask about. He was certain he wouldn't like the answer.

He wanted to be a good friend, but this was something he wasn't able to deal with. Not yet, probably not ever. Maybe it really was best to try to ignore the whole thing for as long as they were here, especially since it didn't look like Snape was really hurting Harry.

But when they got back home, he was definitely going to do something about the whole thing!
Maybe Hermione would know how to deal with it. Her plans were usually excellent.

Ron was glad he'd finally been able to make a clear decision about the whole thing. It enabled him to hold his tongue even as Harry smiled like a loon and Malfoy raised a mocking eyebrow at him. No. He was not going to say anything.

It was still relatively early as they returned to the cottage carrying armfuls of plants and roots and even a few eggs Harry had stumbled onto.

Looking around in the living room, Snape set the ingredients down on a table and said, "I believe it's best if we leave these here." His bedroom was definitely too small for all of this. Maybe he should simply brew most of the things here.

Not even waiting for a reply from anyone, he went to get a set of knives, a cutting board and cauldrons.

When he came back, he noticed that the teenagers had managed not to destroy anything while he'd been gone. Considering the way they'd sometimes behaved in his classroom, that was indeed a miracle. Nodding his dismissal, he went to stroke the fire. He had a lot to do, and hopefully the youngsters wouldn't do anything stupid while he worked.

It was probably too much to ask, but after the very successful harvesting, he at least knew that a few hours of peace between those three was possible.

"Is there something I can help with?"

Snape didn't think for a moment that Draco Malfoy's offer was altruistic. Maybe the boy thought it was a good way to show his allegiance or maybe he was bored of doing nothing. No matter the incentive, his assistance would be acceptable.

"Yes. Go and wash your hands first." Aside from Granger, who was undoubtedly the smartest student Snape had had for over a decade, Malfoy had the most knowledge about Potions. He was also passionate about his work, finding true magic in the brewing. That was the quality of a true master.

"Can I help as well?" Harry asked, already knowing that there wouldn't be much for him to do here. He didn't want to spend time with Ron right now, and thought that Malfoy would just snicker at him -- not out loud so that Snape would notice but he'd snicker nevertheless -- if he just sat here and watched.

Raising an eyebrow, Snape cast an incredulous glance at him before saying, "It's probably best if you don't come anywhere near the ingredients, Potter. I suggest you get the broom and sweep the floor. And get us some water."

The very familiar words made Harry smile, but he noticed how angry Ron looked. He walked to his friend, muttering, "That was a joke, Ron." He knew perfectly well that he was lousy at potions.

"I'm not laughing."

With that, Ron turned around and stomped upstairs.

Harry let out a suffering sigh, squeezing his hands into fists. This was going to take much longer than he'd thought.

A part of him wanted to go after Ron and try to explain to him what the words had been about, but
he didn't move from where he was standing. Nothing could really make Ron understand what was going on between Snape and him, of that he was certain. He couldn't put it into words for himself, so how on earth could he explain it all to someone else?

Definitely not looking at Malfoy, he sighed again and went to look for the broom. As an afterthought he grabbed a bowl as well. Snape had said something about getting them water.

The fire was burning merrily in the fireplace, heating the room. Before beginning with the ingredients, Snape went to open the windows, allowing a gentle breeze inside.

He wanted to brew potions, not have anyone collapse from heat stroke.

Weasley had already disappeared upstairs. That wasn't exactly a surprise. Snape was certain he would never brew another potion in his life if he didn't have to.

Some people simply weren't up to it.

Working in silence with Malfoy -- who was very good at preparing the plants -- and Harry -- who was excellent at carrying things around -- was not completely unpleasant. Snape noticed how there was a minimal amount of tension between those two.

He wondered if they would manage to push aside their old enmity and actually work together. It was worth exploring.

The thought reminded him of how they'd planned to talk about the war. Very soon, they would be returning to Hogwarts, and if they continued to act like idiot teenagers, they would be in grave danger.

Snape knew they would have to discuss it sooner or later, no matter how Harry might prefer not to. He couldn't let the physical intimacy cloud his judgement now. It was time they were all reminded of the fact that this quiet and peaceful way of living was nothing but an interlude in a very harsh life.

Working with the potions was simple, even easy with Malfoy assisting him. They didn't really talk, simply concentrated on the bubbling cauldron, the swift movement of the knife and the soothing sound of the broom brushing against the floor.

Snape let his mind wander. He didn't dwell too long on the past few days, finding such contemplations unnecessary. As long as Harry didn't do anything utterly stupid, he could handle the situation.

He was more concerned about the future, the war that was waiting for them back home. He knew that it would be a long, harsh war with casualties on both sides. People would have to make tough decisions, most of all Harry and young Malfoy. With almost everyone else, the roles were already written and accepted. Weasley and Granger would never even imagine joining Voldemort. Most of his Slytherins would have no other option.

It managed to irk him even now that he knew there was nothing he could do about it.

There had been some who might have turned sides if he'd had the chance to really talk to them. Most of those with mixed background definitely, maybe even some of the purebloods. There were many things that people in their world didn't know about the Death Eaters and their Lord, and at least some of those things would come as a complete shock to those following traditions.

It was such a waste, just like the war would be. He would have to make sure at least these two young men would be prepared for it.
After everything he'd witnessed, he had no doubts that Harry would manage. With the stubbornness and all the Gryffindor traits he was a perfect hero for their imperfect world.

He didn't know about the rest of them. The Order would have a lot to do before this was all over, even if they all depended on their great hero. Maybe if the Ministry finally committed itself to this war, things would be easier for all of them. Snape wasn't going to hold his breath. He knew all too well how the bureaucracy worked and wasn't willing to count on the Ministry or the man leading it.

Too bad, considering that with a force like the Aurors, they might actually have a chance on defeating the Dark Lord and his people for good.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by a soft touch on his arm. Blinking, he realized he'd finished with the bottling and was now staring straight into the distance.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked. He'd noticed the angry expression on Snape and didn't know what had brought it.

Shrugging the concern off, Snape said, "I'm perfectly fine, Potter. Now put the broom away and help me carry this back into my room."

He gathered the bottles and nodded at Malfoy who was already putting away rest of the ingredients. At least he could depend on him not to spoil the rest of the plants. There was still a lot to do before noon.

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Ron loved the way there was time to laze around after lunch.

It was never like this at school. Usually they spent all the lunch hour babbling or snooping around for whatever reason, and then had to hurry to class. Here, he could simply climb the stairs and then flop on his bed when it wasn't his turn to wash the dishes.

That brought a satisfied smirk to his lips. At least that was one thing Malfoy couldn't evade.

Sometimes, Ron spent the afternoon reading or practicing moves with the chess board. This time he didn't bother with either. It was enough to just lie here on his bed and stare at the ceiling. Especially when Harry was lying there on his own bed, imitating his pose.

They hadn't really spent much time like this lately. Every time they spoke, there seemed to be something weird happening; revelations about the Order or insanity about Snape. They never just were, like they used to be back at Hogwarts.

He missed it more than he could really say. Growing up was one thing. Growing apart was something he wasn't really prepared to do. No matter what happened after leaving school, he'd hoped things would be the same between him and his friends, especially Harry.

The way things had been going lately really pissed him off. He'd hoped their stay here would give him and Harry a chance to spend more time together. At first it had seemed as if he'd get his wish, but then everything had gone slightly insane and he wasn't sure what to think anymore. With a guilty feeling, he remembered how bored he'd been after a few days of the blessed relaxation, and now wished he'd never agreed to studying for the Potions exam here.

Hadn't that been Malfoy's idea? Ron let out a muffled snort at that. Of course it had been. Who else would have such stupid ideas but Malfoy?
"Is everything okay?" There was definitely a hint of a yawn in Harry's voice as he sat up to ask that.

Ron nodded, not bothering to even lift his head from the pillow. "Sure. Just thinking." That was the downside of all this free time. Too many chances to think.

"Yeah, it's too quiet here to do anything else," Harry said, stretching a little. "It would be really easy to fall asleep right now." He sounded like he didn't really like the idea.

"I know." It wouldn't be all that good to take a nap, Ron knew that from the experience. He'd just spend half the night awake then, feeling like he was all alone in the cottage.

He listened to Harry yawn again, and wondered what to say next. It was sad somehow; he'd never needed to worry about that before. Whatever came out of his mouth was good enough. Now he felt like he had to weigh everything carefully or else he'd plunge them into the world of weird silences and pain again.

When had that happened anyway? He had no idea. He really wanted to blame it on their time here and especially on Snape, but knew it was too simple an answer.

It was the one thing he really didn't want to think about right now.

Harry was making all kinds of sounds familiar from back home. That made Ron smile a little. Those scratching sounds, and half muttered words were always the same, his friend trying to get out of bed. In addition of not being a morning person, Harry didn't seem to be all that happy of getting up after a brief afternoon rest either.

"I should get up." It didn't sound that convincing, accompanied by another yawn.

Ron didn't even try to muffle his snort this time. "Yeah, right." He'd heard that one before.

For just a brief moment everything felt all right; the companionable bantering and the comfortable silence like the old times. Then Harry got up, not sitting on the bed for a while making more weird noises, but actually got to his feet.

It drove the mellow mood away, leaving behind an anxious silence that was full of anticipation.

"I guess you'll be going to see Snape then." Ron was definitely not looking at Harry as he said that. He'd seen the way his friend was looking at their professor earlier and was certain he'd be sneaking downstairs any minute now.

The only thing surprising him was that Harry hadn't simply gone to him right after lunch. It was an angry and bitter thought, but he reveled in it anyway. Then he felt slightly ashamed by it, glad he hadn't said it out loud.

Harry was relieved he didn't have to lie about it anymore. "Yeah. I think I will."

Even though he had kind of brought the whole thing up, Ron couldn't help shuddering with disgust at that. How on earth could Harry be so happy about going to Snape? He would never understand that. "Oh. Okay then." That meant he was going to stay upstairs. He'd already spent enough time avoiding Malfoy's smirks for one day.

Pretending to be intrigued by the rafters, he lay still and didn't watch Harry walk to the door. The less he thought about that the better.

As the door slammed shut, he shivered. Nope. He was definitely not going to think about anything
right now.

Harry sighed as he padded to the stairs. It had been nice to rest for a while and spend time with Ron, but he couldn't help noticing that it was easier to breathe now. Sometimes it felt like there were so many unsaid things swirling around them that it was impossible to find any air in the room.

One of these days, he was going to sit down with him and talk things through. But not now. He had other things in mind.

A grin flickered on his lips, the kind of expression that would undoubtedly make Ron splutter again.

This was the second time he was on his way to Snape's room today. Strange, but it felt like this morning had been ages ago. Harry wondered if this was how most people spent their vacations and if time seemed frozen to them as well.

It was almost a magical feeling, trapped in a bubble of suspended time, his mind already adjusted to the slow rhythm of life. Everything came down to basics. Eating, sleeping, lazing around and shagging Snape. He was definitely not complaining. Compared to the usual ways he spent the early June -- usually either battling against Death Eaters or recuperating from such a fight at the infirmary -- this was complete bliss.

A quick glance at the living room revealed that Malfoy hadn't even bothered to climb upstairs. He was lying on the couch, looking exhausted. Harry didn't wonder. Handling potions ingredients under Snape's supervision was hard work, and Malfoy probably found the chores even worse.

Since the Slytherin didn't even lift his head to look at him, Harry didn't bother to say anything. He simply went on to Snape's door.

Harry rapped on the hard wood. "It's me!" The words made him almost groan with disgust. Repeating himself like this was really stupid. No wonder Snape didn't hold his intelligent in high regard.

"Potter. What a surprise."

Smiling at the sarcasm in Snape's voice, Harry slammed the door shut behind him. It wasn't as if the man expected him to act formally. "Hello." Or say anything that wasn't completely inane.

Snape lowered the book he'd been reading. "Yes?" He sounded completely calm.

"I... Are you still busy or can we... Talk or something?" Harry knew he didn't have to stammer or circle the subject, but somehow he wasn't comfortable with just telling Snape he wanted to shag him.

There never seemed to be any need for small talk between them. At least Snape didn't expect any. It should have unnerved Harry, but it didn't, especially now that they had kind of circled around this the whole morning.

"In case you're actually interested in a real conversation, yes, we can talk." The glint in Snape's eyes said that he didn't believe that for a moment. "And if that was a very clumsy way of suggesting a sexual encounter, you really need to practice your seduction skills more, Potter." Placing the book down, he waited for the inevitable.

Why was it so hard not to blush even now that he had already shared the bed with Snape more than once or twice? Harry sighed. "All right, I'll practice." Dropping all pretense, he walked to Snape and reached out his hand. It was accepted without the word and it was so easy to pull Snape up into his arms.
Hugging Snape never lost its appeal. He simply wrapped his arms around him and held him tight. One of these days he was going to come here and just do this for hours, rest his cheek on Snape's shoulder and feel his arms circle his waist.

"Would it be possible for me to undress you now?" The words came out quietly, accompanied by a kiss to Snape's chin.

He never really knew what to ask. Snape's bluntness certainly suggested he could say anything to describe shagging. The most crass words would be frowned upon, but straightforward questions were always met with a serious nod.

"I must say that's slightly better." Snape nodded. "And yes. You may undress me if that's what you wish." There was no real question of that. Nimble fingers were already moving to his collar.

Snape was familiar with this by now, and didn't need to even think as he slowly started to undress Harry as well. As always, the young man seemed to enjoy unbuttoning both his robe and his shirt, his breathing sounding harsher as he finally pushed the shirt off his shoulders. It was still a source of silent amusement, to see him so lost in desire.

The simplicity of the kisses and touches never ceased to amaze Snape. When he pushed Harry on the bed, every caress was accepted with a sigh.

It was slightly unnerving, but Snape was willing to ignore the feeling.

Knowing they had no reason to rush, he simply lay there. Harry seemed to enjoy slow languorous kisses, so they spent long minutes kissing. It was a good way to slowly build the anticipation. Quite frankly, Snape was awed that Harry had the patience for such a thing.

Kisses were followed by more touches. Harry seemed to be eager to explore more, so Snape allowed him to roll him on his back and then crawl all over him. The kisses and caresses Harry bestowed on his skin were always a mystery to him, for they never went where he expected.

A soft nip on his collarbone. Then fingers tracing his ribs, the touch so light it was almost tickling. Without any sign of the grace evident in him as he soared in pursuit of the Snitch, Harry squirmed around the bed, trying to reach every part of his body.

Snape's hands returned the caresses whenever Harry was in reach, but otherwise he simply lay there. Eyes closed, he let the hunger grow slowly inside. There was no trace of the frantic need that sometimes burned in Harry's eyes, even when he slithered back up his body to kiss him and then roll them both over.

Rocking against him, Harry was building a rhythm that would inevitably lead them both into completion. Snape felt strong arms curl around his neck and obligingly lowered his head to kiss Harry's lips.

Then Harry managed to shock him again.

The movement was slight, but unmistakable. Harry was holding onto him, canting his hips. It made Snape want to bury himself in the warmth inviting him in.

Instead of taking what was so clearly offered, he pulled back a little and looked into Harry's eyes. The green gaze was so impossibly wide and full of trust it made absolutely no sense. How could the young idiot trust him like this? He didn't know whether to rejoice in the look or show him that such trust was almost always misplaced. It wouldn't be difficult. He knew dozens of ways to break a man, and was well aware that he could destroy Harry without ever even touching him.
Snape knew he could do nothing like that.

Harry let out a soft gasp, the sound audible only because of the strange silence in the room. There were no words, no exclamations of passion and pleasure. Only the sound of their bodies moving against each other and heavy breathing.

"Potter." The name came out surprisingly calmly. "What do you want?" Snape's hand was slowly caressing Harry's belly, but he would go no further without Harry's consent. Gasps and moans and movements were not enough. He needed to hear this was really what he wanted.

Harry stared at Snape, his pupils dilated with desire. "Anything." It didn't really matter as long as Snape kept touching him.

"You have to be a bit more specific than that." There was the familiar annoyance again.

"Whatever you want," Harry gasped. He wondered what it would take to make Snape lose his control and what the results would be like. It would probably be something spectacular.

Stilling his hand and moving away, Snape glared at Harry. "I refuse to take responsibility for your actions. Do you have any idea of what..." He cut his sentence, knowing he couldn't say that. Not now. "Never give such power to others, Potter. You never know what people are capable of."

It finally dawned on Harry that Snape was serious about this. It wasn't simple teasing or verbal foreplay.

He swallowed, trying frantically to figure out what to say. Damn the man! Why was everything always a test with him? "I mean it. I want whatever you want to do with me. Touching, tasting, shagging... I want it." There was a small pause before he added, "I trust you."

"Then you're an idiot." Such confidence in his benevolence chilled Snape. He could be a monster, had indeed done many monstrous things in his life, and here Harry was offering him his body to use. Even abuse.

It was amazing how even that could sound like a caress. Harry nodded. "So you've told me. But I do trust you. And I want you." Rolling to his side, he reached out for Snape. "All right. You want specific?" Mischief shone in his eyes, as he said, "I want you to shag me. Be inside me. Specific enough?"

Snape stared at him for a moment. He couldn't believe the words and the expression on Harry's face were actually amusing. There had to be something wrong with him. "Quite."

Things were definitely not going the way he'd thought they would, but they rarely did.

It seemed like Harry'd had enough of talking. With a twist, he rolled over, accidentally jabbing Snape with his elbow. "Yes. Quite. So how about it then?" Still moving, he brought them back to the position they'd been in, cradling Snape between his legs.

Snape's fingers slid through Harry's hair to hold his head in place. He looked straight into the green eyes, wondering what Harry saw when he looked at him. How could he ask this with nothing but mellow lust in his eyes? How could he trust him with this?

Slowly, Harry lifted his hand to touch Snape's cheek. "I really do know what I'm asking." He sounded almost too serious.

"Yes, I'm sure you do." There was a world of sarcasm in Snape's words. It broke the somber mood.
"I do!" Harry had the strange urge to stick his tongue out. Moving closer to Snape, he gave into the urge, and then let his tongue sweep against Snape's neck. "Of course if you don't want it..."

He knew the response even before Snape snorted. It was almost like a shared joke by now, the half disgusted half amused sound following every wheedling comment he ever made in bed. "I mean it. If you don't want to do that..."

"Do shut up, Potter." Snape could feel the lips pressed against his throat curl into a smile. He let Harry enjoy that little victory for a moment before pushing him back against the pillows.

He kept looking into Harry's eyes, waiting for him to hesitate or have second thoughts. There didn't seem to be any. Only the relaxed silly look and the hint of a smile saying he found this endearing but didn't want to show it. The expression always brought out an exasperated sigh from Snape.

Without more protests, he grabbed his wand and muttered a few words, summoning one of his potions. He'd wondered if they would need it, but had brewed a small amount anyway. Just in case.

He should have known it would be needed. Harry's actions were always rash, so why would it be any different in bed?

The jar was full of clear salve. With a practiced twist, Snape had the jar open, covering his fingers. His gaze was firmly fixed on Harry, waiting for a reaction.

Realizing what the potion was, Harry spread his legs wider, hardening even more at the thought of Snape brewing lubricant. Always so proper, prepared for anything. He'd stood by a cauldron and brewed this potion for them to use. The thought made Harry smile warmly as the questing touch was back.

Even though he had done this before, there was something new and odd in Snape's touch. Harry tried to figure out what it was, unable to grasp it. Then he couldn't think of anything as he convulsed on the bed, arching his back. Oh, this was good.

No fumbling, no hesitation. Panting, Harry realized that most of the things he'd got used to were definitely absent here. Snape knew exactly what he was doing.

His own harsh breathing sounded very loud in his ears.

He curled his hand into a fist. This was good. And bad! There was no way he was going to last till they got to the actual shagging. Reaching out, he grabbed Snape's shoulder, hoping he'd get the hint and knowing he'd say anything to make sure he did.

Satisfied with the smooth slide of his touch, Snape moved the way Harry so obviously wanted him to, bringing his lips back onto his. The preparations didn't seem to be enough. It was clear from the way Harry pulled him close.

Harry kissed him hungrily, sloppy open mouthed kisses devouring his mouth. Feeling Harry's tongue trail over his lips, Snape wanted to say something scathing about slobbering teenagers with no patience or self control, but the small sounds Harry was making were too needy, too nakedly honest. He didn't find them ridiculous after all.

It was actually simpler this way. He didn't have to wonder if his touches were pleasurable. The hitched breathing and the gasps made that quite obvious.

As he watched Harry close his eyes and move to the steady thrust of his fingers, words came to his mind. Old phrases he had whispered to others years and years ago. Always said either with an almost
They would not be a lie if he let the words out now. How remarkable. Harry was indeed extremely pleasing to his eyes. He did want to do this. Touching Harry did make him tingle with anticipation of things to come.

He felt no need for the words. They would sound false even if this once they were the absolute truth. Snape didn't want to act as if he needed a script. If they both wanted this, it was enough. The soft sounds Harry was making were definitely better than calculated obscenities or groans of false passion.

Realizing that there was nothing false in this moment, he shifted to the side, removing his touch. A disappointed moan escaped Harry, followed by something very close to a glare.

Snape sighed, seeing Harry was just lying there. "Turn around, Potter." Sometimes he wondered about his intelligence. On occasions like this, he had no doubts. Calling him an idiot was actually a compliment.

There was a firm shake of head as Harry stared at him. Those green eyes were full of hazy need as he reached out for Snape, trying to pull him back against him.

"I see that your libido has destroyed your higher brain functions." No matter how sarcastic and cynical, Harry was still a teenager. Snape was convinced he was too lost in his hormones to actually do anything without guidance. "It would be prudent for you to lie on your belly."

"No." Harry held onto Snape's shoulders, refusing to budge. "Now!" He emphasized his raspy command by wrapping his legs around Snape's waist.

Gaze burning, Snape complied, adjusting Harry's position slightly. If this was indeed what he wanted, he wasn't going to say no. He watched Harry carefully as he started sinking slowly inside him. Ignoring the way Harry tried to thrust against him, he held tight onto his hips. He was going to set the pace here and would make damn sure he was not injuring the overly eager idiot.

It was almost agonizingly slow. Inch by inch he pushed deeper into Harry, breathing steadily in and out, only the small vein throbbing on his temple revealing the strain he was under. The heat and tightness were intoxicating, making him want to bury himself completely with one thrust and then keep moving until he spent.

Gritting his teeth together, he continued the steady movement until he was completely inside.

Snape couldn't move. The grip Harry had on him was too hard, too tense. He didn't know which was worse, Harry's obvious delusions about his own sexual prowess or his own lack of control right now. It had been so long since he'd done this that he'd forgotten how thrilling the simple thought of letting go could be.

This might be slightly harder than he'd thought. Taking deep breaths through his nose, he lay still, waiting for Harry to either relax or tell him to stop.

He didn't have to wait for long.

Exhaling loudly, Harry let the tension ooze out of him. He didn't let go, holding Snape close. It was easy to lift his head a little and plant a kiss on Snape's neck. "You..." His voice had never sounded this thick before. "You might want to move. Like now!" There went his plan of staying in control.

"Are you certain?" Snape asked. The question was only half serious.
"Snape!" It was not a whine but it was definitely far from the angry growl Harry had intended it to be. "Come on!"

Snape's lips quirked slightly as he flexed his hips. The breathless whimper that escaped Harry was highly amusing. With his air of experience, he was still a teenager, overwhelmed by the sensations. He would probably want this to be hot and fast. Like most of the times they shared the bed.

Not this time. Rushing into an orgasm was like using frozen potions ingredients to save time. They'd make the potion all right, but it would not be the same, not as good as one made out of fresh ingredients.

Besides, he rather enjoyed watching Harry squirm and pant like this.

Not in pain and agony. Pleasure. Want. It was something pure, unadulterated; not a game or torture but a simple drive towards mutual gratification. The gasps escaping Harry and the dazed expression were genuine. Nothing calculated there.

It was a rush Snape had never even thought about. Such things had been utterly meaningless in his life, nothing more than foolish dreams that had died ages ago in the harsh light of the reality.

Control without even a hint of terror. No flinching away from his partner's gaze, knowing that this one time there was no scorn there. Again, this was almost ludicrous in its simplicity.

He kept the steady pace, sliding almost effortlessly inside the heat and not even bothering to control the slight smirk as Harry moaned out his name.

People who had wanted this simply because of Harry's fame were obviously idiots. Youngsters should still be dreaming about romantic impossibilities and not see the pleasure in the green eyes and exalt in conquest only. Was debauchery so usual in their world that they didn't even know when sex was not simply about someone's name? About his scar and the legend about him.

Snape thrust in again, letting that smirk blossom fully on his lips as Harry threw his head back. Coupling with a legend? A very stunned and perspiring young man who was quietly calling out his name and making this somehow even more enjoyable with his obvious rapture.

Teenagers were indeed brainless cretins.

Harry clutched onto Snape, letting out a throaty groan as the man undulated against him. This was pure agony, the slow motions driving him out of his mind. The pressure inside him was building just as slow as the thrusts, little by little taking over his whole body. Too slow. A teasing rhythm that would keep him lost in the need, never really driving him to the edge.

Body flushed with need, he tried to urge Snape on. To move faster, deeper, anything please!

When his wordless urging didn't seem to work, he let out the pleas, panting them out between intakes of breath. "Faster! Oh damn it, Snape! Move!" He swallowed the rest, not wanting to make a complete fool out of himself.

Snape didn't seem to pay any attention to his words.

Slow, controlled thrusts. The flex of his hips almost measured, obviously meant to drive him utterly insane. He could feel it now, his mind already hazy.

"You..." The growl died in Harry's throat. He couldn't even find a word to describe the utter sadism in Snape. He needed him to stop torturing him with this and just move! "You want me to beg?" He
was desperate.

He quite believed he'd say anything to have Snape stop this slow torment.

Snape stilled completely. His dark gaze bore into Harry's. "No. I never want you to beg in bed." There was determination in his eyes. "Understand?"

The very serious tone made Harry stare open mouthedly before he could nod. He was certain this was somehow profound, but the fluid thrust a moment later made everything else disappear. Letting out a definite squeak, he held onto Snape as he finally gave him what he wanted.

Deep, hard thrusts. Snape's expression never wavered as he slammed into him. Burying his fingernails into Snape's skin, Harry met every thrust with fervor, groaning out, "Yes!" It became his mantra like Snape's name had been just a moment ago.

His control starting to slip after he let go of that slow pace, Snape closed his eyes, unable to watch the completely wanton young man squirm underneath him. He couldn't just let go. That was not in his nature. Not now.

This wasn't simply about satisfying his own needs. He would make sure of that.

The soft gasps of need were muffled when Harry pulled Snape down to kissed him with fervor. He needed to feel him as close as possible, hold him tight as he convulsed helplessly in the grip of exquisite pleasure.

Snape was glad of the tight embrace, burying his face on Harry's neck as his hips continued to move erratically. Whatever control he had left was melting in this heat, driving him towards completion. It was suddenly too intimate, too personal to share, and he couldn't look into Harry's face until this was all over.

Everything became just a little hazy right then, the arms still holding him, the body that felt almost boneless underneath him. His own breathing sounded awfully loud in his ears.

He lay there for a moment before gently disentangling from Harry. The movement made Harry let out a disappointed sound that died a moment later as he curled against him. Snape wished the idiot wouldn't say anything, for he couldn't process any words right now.

This strange mellow feeling was simply too much for him. The orgasm rushing over him had not been an agonizing remedy for hours of suffering nor had it been a dark and chilling rush like a forbidden curse coursing through his whole body. It had been nothing spectacular.

And yet he was completely undone by it.

After a moment, Harry sighed, "Wow." He sounded completely satisfied.

Snape wondered if 'wow' was the next step from 'nice'. He would have to agree. For a sexual encounter, this had indeed been most satisfying. He didn't say anything, but let out an agreeing grunt.

From the sound of another happy sigh, he could tell that no words were needed.

Feeling Harry squirm closer again, Snape had to wonder if he wanted to lie here for long. He didn't really mind resting for a while after such a vigorous exercise, but every time they moved, he could feel the sticky moisture spread between them.

He waited for some time, simply holding the sweaty young man close to him. He'd come to realize
that Harry expected such behavior, and since it wasn't taxing in any way, he might as well indulge
him. This way Harry wouldn't make irrational comments about things he wanted to share.

"That was really great!" Grin evident in his voice, Harry muttered the words out. "Thank you."

Hearing the coherent words that went beyond monosyllables, Snape nodded. "No need to thank
me." After all, it was not an act of pure altruism; he'd enjoyed it as well. He stayed still for a moment
longer and then disentangled himself from Harry, knowing that it was time to go.

He ignored the murmured protests and got up, stretching a little.

"I do believe bathing is in order right now." Casting a disdainful look at the crumpled sheets, Snape
pulled a robe on. No cleaning charm would make him completely refreshed after that. The sheets
would need some washing as well.

Harry nodded lazily. He didn't really want to move, but knew that lying here for the next week or so
wasn't possible. "All right." Of course bathing with Snape didn't sound that bad either.

"Get up, Potter!" Finishing with dressing, Snape went to get clean clothes from the wardrobe.

Stretching, Harry sat up. It took him a moment to get out of bed, but eventually he managed to put
his clothes on.

"I'll go and get a clean robe." And some clean underwear. Definitely the clean underwear. "Wait for
me."

Snape cast a glare at him, but nodded anyway. "Do hurry up. I don't want to wait here while you and
Mr. Weasely engage in pointless chatter." He could see that happen, considering that Harry looked
like he'd just had very good time in bed.

He didn't let the smug thought linger.

"I will!" Trying to sound as solemn as possible, Harry paddled to Snape to plant a kiss on his cheek.
Then he walked out of the room, whistling a happy tune.

It made Snape roll his eyes in exasperation. Gryffindors! You never knew what they would do in a
given situation, except that it would be rash and foolish. He didn't exactly mind the soft caress, but it
did puzzle him. It hadn't felt condescending, or a demonstration of ownership.

He would probably never understand Harry Potter and his motives.

Harry hurried upstairs, glad that Ron wasn't in their room after all. He could smell sweat and semen
on his skin and there was no way his friend wouldn't know he'd been shagging Snape.

Of course he already knew, but seeing him like this would be worse somehow.

Grabbing what he needed, he rushed down the stairs. Snape was standing at his doorway, looking as
impatient as ever. Looking deliciously mussed. It looked good on him.

Harry grinned. He'd done that! And now he was going to bathe with the man. This was indeed a
good day.

The door leading to the dining area opened, and Harry caught a glimpse of Ron's shocked face just
as he stepped out of the cottage. It made him groan. He'd hoped they'd get out before anyone saw
them. Too late now.
"Aren't you going to tell Weasley where you're going?" The timbre of contentment in Snape's voice was laden with malice. "I'm certain he would like to know."

Seeing the redhead stare at him and Harry looking like he'd just eaten Longbottom's pet toad alive was still a source of amusement. Sometimes he wondered if Weasley had been born with that expression.

Harry cast an exasperated look at Snape. "Are you daft?" Heading towards the stream, he muttered, "You're having way too much fun with this!"

Deciding not to confirm the surprisingly accurate words, Snape simply followed him. He was amazed by the amusement the situation provided him every day. Maybe this contentment was one of the 'things' Harry had mentioned. It did feel slightly foolish, hence the association with Gryffindor values.

There had been no sightings of either other wizards or Muggles, but that didn't mean there wouldn't be any. As they reached the stream, Snape kept his attention on their surroundings, even as they finished undressing and waded into the water.

He was pleased to see that Harry didn't go too far from his wand either.

Snape relaxed slightly, allowing the warmed water to wash away the sticky moisture from his skin. He didn't reach out for his potions yet, not needing to get rid of the scent of Harry that still lingered. Peculiar. Usually he couldn't wait to wash any such scents and bodily fluids off his skin as quickly as possible, scrubbing until there was nothing but the clean tang of his showering gel.

"Can you wash my back?" Harry asked, offering Snape a bottle -- his own brew, he realized.

Silently, Snape grabbed the bottle and then scrubbed some of the potion on Harry's skin. He suspected the idiot would want to return the favor, and only raised an eyebrow when it became obvious that he did indeed. It was all right. As long as Harry wasn't going to do anything else in an open place like this, he could indulge in this foolishness.

The quiet companionship brought back the thoughts Snape had entertained earlier, as he had worked on the potions. This was too easy to get used to; the peace and quiet, Harry's presence that was surprisingly tolerable. He was certain that it was even more so to the teenagers. They didn't spend any time doing anything useful.

Such relaxation was not a completely bad thing. Snape remembered the way Harry had looked when he'd first come to his rooms in the dungeons, and was slightly surprised when he could notice a difference in the young man. He looked healthier these days. Stress and worrying did definitely nothing good for him.

But neither did lulling oneself into a false sense of security. If they spent the whole time here thinking about nothing but this moment, they were as foolish as Fudge was with his delusions.

He was certain they would manage talking about the war here. With Weasley's hot headedness and Malfoy's ignorance, it wouldn't be as easy as the Order meetings he'd attended to, but it would have to do.

He waited until they were both finished with the bathing. There was still a very soft happy look in Harry's eyes, and he didn't want to chase that away before it was absolutely necessary.

"Potter?"
Rubbing his hair dry, Harry cast a worried look at Snape. That tone was distressingly familiar. "What?" It usually meant that he wasn't going to like what came next.

Snape waited until Harry lowered the towel before saying quietly, "I believe we should start talking about the future. Malfoy will need to know the basics about our work and I don't think Weasley is aware of most of the things that have happened either."

He was well aware of how soon they would be returning to Hogwarts. No matter how peaceful it was here, they would have to do something to prepare themselves for what would be waiting for them. Who knew what had happened during their absence.

To Harry, the words were like a kick in the stomach. He stood there for a long time, blinking; hating the fact that they would have to do this now when everything felt so wonderful and yet knowing that Snape was absolutely right.

"All right." He couldn't help sounding reluctant. "When?"

Snape wasn't surprised by the tone, nor the question. He was already used to this side of Harry. No matter how much he would hate talking about the war, he never whined when he had a job to do. "Today. After dinner." They would all gather together to eat anyway.

"All right." Harry looked down on the ground at his dirty clothes. "I wish..." He wanted to say that he wished they could just forget about the damn war, but he couldn't. No matter how he hated this, he couldn't afford hiding from the fact that as soon as they returned to Hogwarts, he would also return to the Order.

He shrugged and then looked up again. "After dinner, then."

They gathered their things in silence and walked back to the cottage.

Closing the front door behind them, Harry tried to shrug the gloom off. He didn't want to spend the few hours before dinner brooding about something that was inevitable anyway. "So... You said something about laundering yesterday."

He would rather keep busy with doing laundry than moping around. It would just make Ron worry.

Snape nodded, opening his mouth to say that it was an excellent idea, and then abruptly closing it again as he saw Draco Malfoy step out of the living room.

This was too good an opportunity to pass. "Yes. Do you think that you and Mr. Malfoy could manage to deal with the laundry without incidents?" His raised eyebrow was almost a challenge.

Casting a glance at Malfoy, Harry said, "I think we can manage." He'd wondered when this would happen. He hadn't really been avoiding the Slytherin, but hadn't done anything to actually spend any time with him.

Maybe this wasn't a bad idea. At least there was nothing Malfoy could really say to make him lose his temper, unlike with some people he could name.

"Are you certain?" Snape wanted to make absolutely sure that he didn't tolerate any foolishness from them. His words were aimed mostly at Malfoy, even though he was still staring at Harry.

Harry knew that he really didn't want Ron washing his -- well, Snape's -- dirty sheets. "Sure. We won't do anything stupid." Like drown each other or go harassing any local animals. It would be all right.
Casting him a highly suspicious look, Snape nodded and then went to his room, leaving the two standing in the hallway.

Draco was still trying to catch up with what had just happened. He'd just tried to find his book and now he was recruited to yet another ghastly cleaning operation.

With Potter no less.

"Malfoy." Harry nodded. It was weird. He couldn't remember when he'd last said anything to him.

Not turning his gaze away, Draco replied, "Potter." He was slightly anxious, not knowing exactly what to say. To his rival Gryffindork, he could say whatever he pleased, but now that Potter was shagging Snape, things weren't as simple as that.

He decided to act as normally as he could, knowing that no games were tolerated here. Not that he would want to play any games with Potter.

"So, we're going to do laundry." Wincing at his clumsy words, Harry shook his head. "This will be fun."

To his surprise, Malfoy grinned at that. It wasn't a smirk or a leer.

"All right then. Go and get your laundry. I'll go and get ours." Harry walked to the stairs, not waiting for Malfoy to follow. Half way up, he turned to glance over his shoulder. "I should probably get Snape's as well."

"Probably, yes." This time the amusement was tinted with wickedness. A suggestive leer that still held no real malice. "Try not to spend hours there, Potter. It's already getting late."

It left Harry speechless. He'd never thought Malfoy would make such a comment to him, even with all the knowing looks. Blushing, he continued to his room.

Draco followed him to gather his dirty clothes, extremely pleased with himself.

He wasn't still completely sure how to act with Potter. There had never been anything but anger between them. Somehow that would have to change. If he was to survive the upcoming months, he couldn't afford to continue being Harry Potter's enemy.

The time spent here had shown him that there was a distant chance the hero of the wizarding world might be willing to let the past be. He would be fine with that.

Determined not to make things worse, he collected his things and then went back downstairs. He didn't say anything at Potter's slightly angry expression as he joined him a few minutes later. It wasn't difficult to guess what he'd been talking about with Weasley.

He didn't make another comment about Snape either, content to just stand there as Potter went to get more laundry. Seeing the way Potter had rolled the dirty sheets into a ball made his lips twist, but he didn't say a word.

Harry did his best to keep his thoughts away from anything but laundring as they walked to the stream in a slightly uncomfortable silence. He didn't want to think about how he'd been here less than half an hour ago, feeling insanely happy. Nor did he want to contemplate the following evening.

It was better to just work and not think about anything.
Working with Malfoy wasn't as difficult as he'd feared. He didn't mind his presence, and Malfoy didn't seem to have the urge to act like a total bastard either.

For the first time he wondered if he could actually learn to like Malfoy. It sounded ridiculous, but stranger things had happened. At least now he knew he could tolerate him, and that was more than he'd ever thought possible.

Draco was slightly surprised by how easily they managed to deal with the laundry.

It wasn't as uncomfortable as before with Weasley. They didn't have much laundry with them, and Potter did seem to know what he was doing. In no time, they had the sheets cleaned. The few robes they'd brought were slowly swirling in the charmed whirlpool of warm water and soap.

Looking up at the cloudless sky Draco sighed. He still didn't like the hard work, but right this moment this place didn't look too bad.

Harry glanced at Malfoy, a bit surprised at the wistful expression on his face.

It wasn't something he was used to seeing. The usual look on Malfoy was either a blank mask, or then when he was stalking Ron, a pleased smirk.

No, it was definitely not something Harry wanted to get involved with. He'd decided long ago not to interfere with anyone's privacy. As long as Ron was not getting hurt -- and confused wasn't the same thing -- he wouldn't do anything about it. Unless Ron brought the whole thing up.

"It's nice here." Draco watched the sun drop lower in the horizon. The air was clear, crisp. It wasn't really warm anymore, the wind blowing cool across the moors. "I wish I had my broom with me." It would be wonderful to soar through the air.

Harry blinked. Looking closer, he realized Malfoy meant it. What a strange thing it was, to stand here and share a sentiment with someone he'd always loathed. "I know. Me too." He'd always thought Malfoy's position in the Slytherin Quidditch team was because of his need to feel important. He'd never thought Malfoy might actually love flying as much as he did. "I miss Quidditch."

It was a tentative offering, a sentiment he was certain they both shared.

The smirk flashed to Draco's lips before he could censore his expression. "At least our teams will both be in trouble now." He doubted the Slytherins suffered as much from his absence as the Gryfffindors did from Potter's. They did train their reserve Seeker well, unlike the other team that had the tendency to rely solely on their great star.

It suddenly chilled him. For the resemblance between the game and the reality of war was uncanny.

He had no idea of the war strategies the Order of the Phoenix might -- should -- have, but he could bet most of them revolved around Potter.

In some deranged way it did make sense. Then again, if you had even an ounce of logic, it most certainly did not.

Draco had always known their world viewed Potter as their great savior, just like his father saw him as a threat. He'd never really thought what it meant until now; that the boy standing next to him would indeed determine their future.

"We're doomed," he muttered under his breath.
"Huh?" Harry frowned. He was sure Malfoy had said something, but all he could now see was an innocent expression. Shaking his head slightly, he returned his attention to the laundry.

Pretending to be stirring the sheets, Draco was still contemplating the war. He didn't really want to. It was easier to ignore the whole thing and concentrate on something he could play on a smaller scale. But there was a war, and he would have to decide what to do about the whole thing very soon.

He needed more time to think about that. It had been such a long time since he'd been convinced of his future as a Death Eater, but he wasn't going to embrace another path that took him to the Order. Not yet anyway. However, whatever he would do, his life would be determined by the outcome of this war. It would depend on Potter.

It was time to take a good look at his life, and then let go of whatever was left of the old enmity between them. He couldn't afford fighting with him anymore.

Life truly was insane. After all these years of resenting Potter, he was now going to have to see him as a hero like the rest of their world. It made him a bit light headed.

He would probably have to get used to the feeling.

Thank Merlin Potter didn't resent Snape anymore. The thought made Draco leer. No, he didn't sense any resentment whatsoever. But it was wonderful that the harebrained Gryffindor listened to the Head of his House.

Snape had managed to spy on Voldemort for years. He might be able to teach Potter how to win the war as well.

That thought made him feel better already.

Rinsing the laundry was hard work, leaving no time to dwell on deep thoughts. Harry noted that Malfoy didn't even try to stand back and let him do all the work. Even if that was probably because of Snape, he approved.

"Okay, let's try to roll them into a... yeah, like that." Nodding at the way Malfoy was already flipping the sheets around, Harry moved to help him. At least it was easy to wash the sheets and robes. They didn't try to escape into the stream like the socks and underwear seemed to do. In no time, they had a bundle of dripping but clean laundry that Malfoy levitated to the clothes lines.

Harry followed the Slytherin silently. He was still amazed of how naturally he used the magic on everything he was still used to doing by hand. There were so many things he wanted to ask Malfoy, but decided to wait until later. There would be plenty of time to ask him questions, just like there would be time to tell Ron about plans and battles he still didn't know about.

Grabbing the bag of clothespins, he sighed. This rather nice silence with Malfoy wouldn't last. Not beyond this moment, just like the calm safety had left him the moment Snape had mentioned the war.

It would be pure hell. Everything they would talk about would be painful, and not only to him. They had all suffered already.

Undoubtedly, it would only get worse.

Part 23

Before sitting on the couch next to Draco Malfoy, Snape placed a large bowl of chocolate on the
He had the feeling they were going to need the sugar rush soon, all of them.

"Do you think there'll be an exam later on?" Ron whispered loud enough for everyone to hear and then looked uncomfortable as he realized his quiet question hadn't been as quiet as he'd thought.

It made Snape shake his head slightly. "No, Mr. Weasley. There will be no exams later on."

The war would measure the survival skills hard enough; those who didn't die, passed.

Harry squared his shoulders as if he was steeling himself against something unpleasant and added, "We can't really practice defense here without someone noticing the Dark Magic used. Don't really want the Ministry or the Death Eaters here, do we?"

In Snape's opinion, both would be less than desirable.

No matter how he'd tried to plan for a lesson, he couldn't even pretend that he was teaching these idiots Defense Against Dark Arts. If he were, he wouldn't allow Harry Potter in his bed. He was simply going to try to start conversations that would hopefully keep more people alive.

"We are at war." At least that should be obvious by now. Then again from the startled look on both Malfoy and Weasley, maybe not. Snape took a deep breath. This would take longer than he'd thought. "Even if we can't practice defense, you should get used to the idea."

He paused again to let Weasley fidget and cast questioning looks at Harry.

As a teacher, Snape was usually impatient and curt, but he did know his subject. Be it first year potions with children gawking at the dragon scales and making faces at the newt intestines or advanced potions with various poisonous and corrosive potions, he always knew what to do, anticipated each and every way his students could ruin the potions and cause themselves harm.

That was what the word professional meant.

Potions were his true calling, his passion for knowledge and the art of brewing driving him on. It wasn't the only thing he excelled in; over the years he'd got quite good at recognizing various Dark Arts and his survival instinct had demanded that he concentrate on every possible means of controlling them and finding some kind of defense against them.

He was quite good at defending himself, and he'd been a teacher for decades. Why, then, was it almost impossible to actually lecture about the dark things waiting in the future?

"We've done this before, Ron."

It was actually surprising to hear Harry say that so calmly. Snape knew exactly how much Harry wanted to protect his friend, and had thought he'd just sit there in silence and listen.

Casting a confused look at his friend, Ron managed a weak, "Huh?"

"The Order meetings. This isn't different from them. We gather together and talk about the things that matter." Harry looked at Snape for the first time and nodded slightly.

Snape knew exactly where he should start. "There are many things we need to talk about, but I do believe the main issue we need to deal with is a probable Death Eater attack. It doesn't matter if you want to fight the Dark Lord's cohorts or not. You should at least learn how to survive encountering them."
The last bit was obviously aimed at Malfoy.

Before anyone could actually say anything to that, Snape went on, calmly recounting a basic raid on a selected target; beginning with the Apparating and going towards the moment someone sent the Morsmordre to shine in the night sky.

Snape hated it.

No matter how Lupin's self satisfied smile and Black's witless stare annoyed him whenever they had gathered in Albus' rooms to discuss about things that went on in their world, at least those two knew exactly what they were dealing with. Snape could see by the way Weasley was squirming that the boy had absolutely no idea of what it really was to fight in the war. Malfoy's shocked expression wasn't at all better.

It made his gut clench, yanking away the pretense of being a simple teacher and tearing away the illusion of detachment.

Recounting history would be easy, but pointless. Everyone knew about the way Voldemort had risen to power the first time. The story of the Order would be interesting, but not really helpful at the moment. Anything beyond purely theoretic was personal.

Snape knew that nothing he could say would shock Harry, whose expression was still calm, but the green eyes were full of the all too acute knowledge of all the horrors, just like his own. There was nothing he could really teach Harry about the war. Their long talks back in Hogwarts had shown him that the Gryffindor wasn't nearly as empty headed as he seemed to be.

Listening to Harry, muttering a few words between his rambling or confirming his thoughts wasn't intrusive. The mere idea of trying to make Weasley and Malfoy understand things felt like Snape was forced to show things about himself, and as always, such a feeling made him irritated.

He had to wonder if his incapability of dispassionate approach on the subject was why Albus had never considered him to be a good choice to teach DADA.

"I never thought that deciding between what was easy and what was right would mean a decision between doing nothing and killing," Harry muttered after Snape had snapped his mouth shut. The very accurate description of a Death Eater attack awakened too many memories. "But you know... Sometimes you have no choice."

Ron wanted to argue that, but for once he managed to stay quiet. It wasn't just because of the obvious rage burning in Snape's eyes, but the weary tone in Harry's voice.

Recognizing his own words, Snape made an agreeing sound, but didn't say anything. He could well see that both Weasley and Malfoy were having problems with the mere idea of a real fight, and wasn't going to make things easier on them by changing the subject. Picking up the last bit of chocolate from the bowl, he bid them good night and wasn't surprised when no one argued.

He did remain in the living room for a while, feeling hollow.

For once, Ron didn't try to make any comments to either Harry or Malfoy as they took turns in the outhouse and then went to bed. He wasn't sure he'd actually manage with words even if he tried. Crawling into bed was a relief, and he squeezed his eyes shut as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Harry on the other hand lay staring at the wall for a long time before sleep finally claimed him.

Everything was dark and beautiful, so quiet and peaceful it was almost unreal. The slight sliver of
the waxing moon low on the sky, barely illuminating the landscape.

There was a familiar feeling about the place, reminding of home. A safe place with good people; a house full of laughter and love.

Happy memories, of warm summer days spent out in the yard. Lazy afternoons, when lying on the grass watching the clouds was absolutely the best thing in the whole world. Home made apple pie served with ice cream as they all gathered in the kitchen after the sun went down.

Leaving was always difficult, no matter how one was used to such happiness coming to an end. Coming back was always a wonder. Such a simple place for simple joys, where one could forget all about the complications of the world.

Yes. There it was; the Burrow.

No sound could be heard at the moment. All the animals seemed to be asleep, the garden gnomes hiding somewhere behind the bushes. Even the Burrow itself seemed to be sleeping, shrouding its inhabitants in dreams.

Wind was blowing gently, swinging branches, making shadows dance. It was almost as if the world was moving slowly around the old house. Darkness surrounding it, embracing it. Darkness that would chase away all light.

The silence was abruptly broken by a yell. Words of a charm or a curse that sounded surprisingly familiar.

Somewhere in the distance a dog howled, the sound heartbreakingly sad. It was as if all the sorrow of the world was contained in that one piercing wail.

Then a glowing green symbol shot up to the sky, an emerald skull with a snake coming out of its mouth like a tongue, hanging above the small cottage and twisting as it revealed hooded figures running closer...

"No!" Harry sat up, his own scream waking him. His scar hurt worse than in years.

The images from the dream still sharp in his mind, he curled into a ball, trying to hide from everything. Strong hands were taking that comfort away from him, pulling the covers off of him, forcing him to turn around. "Potter? Are you hurt? Damn it! What is it?" The words were frantic, but the voice astonishingly calm.

Harry opened his eyes, his vision blurry. He could only see a pale blob surrounded by wisps of black something, but he would have recognized the voice anywhere. "The Burrow! Dark Mark over the Burrow! They're killing Weasleys." The words came out with a wail, as their meaning really started sinking in.

"Calm down." The hands were now on Harry's face, pushing his hair to the side and away from his eyes. "Breathe."

How could he calm down? How could anyone ever just calm down and breathe again?

"What's going on in here?" Blurry with sleep, but still recognizable voice drifted from the direction of the doorway.

Harry scrambled towards the nightstand and grabbed his glasses. Now he could see the worried looks on Snape and Malfoy. He was so disoriented, he didn't even wonder what they were doing in
his room. "I had a dream. And my scar is burning. The Death Eaters are attacking the Burrow. They're..." He didn't get any farther. His throat simply closed and he had to fight against choking.

A shocked silence followed his words.

He felt unreal, lost. The images were so vivid in his mind as if he'd witnessed the killings himself, standing on the small hill and watching the Death Eaters kill everyone. His hands were shaking, and he didn't even have the energy to feel amazement when two pale ink stained hands grabbed his and held tight.

Draco couldn't help it. He stepped closer to Harry, his hand moving slowly towards the scar that was burning angry red. "It could have been just a dream..."

Slapping the hand away, Harry snarled. "You don't know what they're doing to his family, Malfoy!" Killing. Killing, killing, killing... They were killing Ron's mom and dad. Killing Mrs. Weasley, who had held him when he'd been so scared. Killing Mr. Weasley who had been overjoyed every time he'd seen Harry, not because he was the famous Harry Potter, but because he could help him understand his beloved plugs. Bill with his long hair, earring and quick smile. Charlie who was so damn brave, working with the most dangerous creatures on earth. Perfect Percy. Fred and George, twins with one warped soul, and Ginny... "You don't know."

No matter what Snape had said the previous evening, there was no way anyone who hadn't been there and seen it happen could have any idea of what it was like.

"I do know." It was Snape, his usually pale complexion now waxy white. "I do remember what it was like." He was looking from Draco to Harry, his eyes looking more dead than ever.

Harry felt like throwing up.

"And I don't think they're killing the Weasleys. It's probably just a nightmare. I wouldn't be surprised if you have more of those after the things we talked about."

Snape should have expected this to happen. No amount of chocolate could stop the memories from emerging from where they had been buried.

It was enough to keep all of them from ever having a good night's sleep again.

Shaking his head, Harry muttered, "It felt so real..."

"Then it's probably a warning." Ignoring the way the hands he held tightened their grip, Snape kept his gaze on Harry's. "They want you to think they're killing your friends, so you would do something rash."

More than anything, Harry wanted to believe that. He wanted to believe Snape would never lie to him, would never coddle him, but he wasn't sure it applied to a moment like this. "Really?" Helpless pleading in his eyes.

Snape nodded, never breaking the eye contact. "If they were killing the Weasleys, I would know."

A soft sob escaped Harry, the sound between complete desperation and relief. "You would?" His mind was still foggy after the dream, but he did know what Snape meant by that. He turned his gaze to his lap, where his hands were still holding Snape's. As always, the wiry arms were covered with the long sleeves of his night robes. "You would."

"Yes. I would know." Ignoring Malfoy's presence, Snape nodded.
Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm down. He needed to think rationally and drive the foggy dreamworld away from his mind. For the first time he realized that Ron was nowhere in sight. Looking frantically around, he asked, "Where's Ron?"

"I think he went to the outhouse." Strangely, Draco's voice was bored. "Well, this will be a cheerful thing for him to hear when he comes back."

"No!" Harry knew exactly what Ron's reaction would be if he told him. "Maybe it was just a dream. Like Snape said." He wasn't sure he believed it, but right now it didn't matter what he believed. It was still about two weeks till the end of the spring term. They could not leave the cottage. If they told Ron, he'd go mad. "We can't tell Ron anything about this!"

Snape had to agree. "I do believe you're right. So none of us will mention this to Mr. Weasley." He cast a stern look at Draco, not at all surprised to see that there was no smirk on his face. He had clearly underestimated the boy. He was much better at manipulating people than he gave him credit for.

"Good!" Relaxing slightly, Harry still didn't let go of Snape's hands. His heart was pounding, the terror just below the surface. It had probably been just a dream, but it had felt so real.

After years of nightmares induced by very real events, he couldn't let go of the fear easily, but he trusted Snape was telling him the truth.

Downstairs, a door banged shut and a moment later the loud sound of footsteps echoed on the staircase. Harry fought to calm his expression before Ron got there. He didn't have time to think of an excuse for why he had the two Slytherins in their room, but hoped Snape would think of something.

Fast.

Ron stepped into the room, freezing as he saw the people in there. He looked worriedly at the scene before him. What the hell were Snape and Malfoy doing in their room? He pointedly ignored the way Snape was holding Harry's hands. "What's going on here?"

"Potter here decided to wake the whole house up with some stupid nightmare." Once again, the scorn in Draco's voice was perfect. "Squealed like a stuck pig."

Never before had Harry felt such gratitude towards the Slytherin sneakiness. "Shut up, Malfoy."

"Are you all right?" Ron pushed past Malfoy, not even bothering to glare. He was familiar with Harry's nightmares after sharing the dormitory with him for all these years. There had been times when he'd woken up almost every night, flailing and screaming.

Harry forced a smile on his lips. "I'm fine." His hands clenched in Snape's grip, betraying him. "It's nothing, really. Just... You know?" Once again he was glad Ron had never asked him to explain his nightmares. He didn't have the energy to explain anything now.

"Yeah." It was always a bit weird to nod at Harry when he said that, since Ron had absolutely no idea what he saw or felt, but he nodded anyway. Every time. "Okay."

There was a moment of silence. Draco tried not to stare at Harry, who was looking paler than usual. Next to him, Ron was definitely staring at Snape, who was still sitting on Harry's bed, holding his hands. It was the most unreal thing Ron had ever seen in his life, and considering all the things he'd seen during his years in Hogwarts he was definitely freaking out now.
"I assume we can now get more sleep." Letting go of Harry, Snape sat up. "Unless you need something. A sleeping potion perhaps?" He would have to dose it carefully, otherwise Harry would be sleeping till noon.

Harry shook his head slightly. "No thank you. I'm fine." He didn't want to take anything. He never did after a nightmare. There had been times the dreams had been so frequent he would have spent months in a drugged haze. "I'm sorry I woke you all up."

The only reply was a soft snort. Snape cast one more look at him, and then turned to walk out of the room, herding Draco Malfoy in front of him. He pushed the door shut behind them.

Finding he could breathe more easily now, Ron let out a deep breath and padded to his bed. "Can we turn the lights out?"

"Of course. Nox." Harry had never been afraid of the dark, and once again he found the lack of light calming. He pulled the covers tighter around him, suddenly cold. "Sorry about that."

He didn't know why he was apologizing. He hadn't woken Ron up. Still remembering the images of his dream, he stared into the darkness, hoping it had been just a figment of his twisted imagination.

"It's okay." A yawn broke Ron's words. He was still exhausted, and it was better to concentrate on being tired than in seeing Snape in their room. If he weren't this tired, he'd probably feel a lot more nauseated by the whole thing. "Night."

"Good night, Ron."

Harry put his glasses on the night stand before lying back down. He listened to Ron fidget for a moment before finding a better position. It was good to concentrate on the sound. Then it was quiet again. No sounds in the room.

He didn't want to close his eyes; didn't feel at all sleepy. He never did after a nightmare.

There had been so many awful nights, ever since his first year at Hogwarts. Dreaming of people chasing him, dark robed figures everywhere. Flashes of things really happening, memories of things past. Living through Cedric's death over and over again in dreams.

Sometimes Harry almost missed the cupboard. Cramped and a bit smelly with spiders on the wall and sawdust falling from the ceiling, it had still been a peaceful resting place. Back then, sleep had been a relief from reality. Now there didn't seem to be any such relief. Life was usually painful, and that pain never let go, following him into his dreams.

It was worst when he couldn't tell the difference between a nightmare and one of those dreams that simply reflected reality. He was so damn tired of being connected to Voldemort. Tired of having to witness things he and his followers did.

He hated when he couldn't do a thing about it. Seeing those horrible images usually meant that they were already happening. There was no way to prevent them.

Ron turned to his side, his breathing evening. Harry smiled slightly, glad that he could take this so easily. It had always been a part of their friendship; he'd never felt like he should burden Ron with his nightmares, and liked the way he seemed to still accept that. There were probably hours before dawn, and he knew Ron would fall asleep soon, snoring away the night before waking up all rested and cheery.

Staring at the damn rafters was getting really annoying, even though he couldn't really see anything
in the darkness. Even after all these years of insomnia and nightmares, Harry found the nights as tedious and long as ever. He simply lay here, trying not to think too hard about anything.

Of course it rarely helped. The silence usually invited thoughts in, making it impossible to relax.

Harry sighed, knowing this wasn't going to work. It never did. He'd realized that a long time ago, so it was pretty silly for him to even try now. That was why he'd wandered around the castle in the past. That was what had made him seek for company.

He didn't really want to bother Snape because of this, not when things weren't uncomplicated anymore. But it would be idiotic to simply stay here and fret about the nightmare.

Harry sat up slowly, reaching out for his glasses after a moment of hesitation and wondered why his mind was always making everything so damn complicating. There was nothing keeping him up here, away from Snape.

Moving quietly, he pushed the covers back and stood up, shivering as his toes hit the cold floor but trying to make as little sound as possible. He didn't want to wake Ron up.

"Where are you going?" Sounding a bit groggy, Ron lifted his head and stared into the darkness. He could see Harry standing by the door. "Are you all right?"

"Damn, you scared me!" Harry exclaimed, jumping a little. He'd been convinced Ron was asleep. "Um... I'm fine. Just... Not sleepy. I think I'll just go and... you know." He was pretty sure Ron didn't want to know.

"Oh." Sounding a bit disgusted, Ron mumbled, "Okay." He lay down again, pulling the covers up. It was late, and he was really too tired to even think about the creepiness of Snape holding Harry's hands.

For a moment he wondered if he should try to stay up and talk to Harry, but he wasn't really up to it. Maybe later.

Harry didn't say anything more. He quietly opened the door and then sneaked out.

It was dark, but he found his way to the stairs easily. He moved quietly, not wanting to draw any attention. He didn't know whether Malfoy was awake or not, but he knew he didn't want to face him right now. It was pretty weird to actually feel grateful to the blond Slytherin for his quick intelligence and the sneer that seemed to be a constant expression.

He had no idea why Malfoy had been so cooperative, but was glad for it anyway. It was probably because of Snape. Harry had never understood the Slytherin adage of loyalty before seeing how those two acted together.

No, he wasn't jealous. He could so clearly see that Snape felt it was his duty to protect Malfoy. Acting as the Head of his House really meant something to Snape. It was different between the two of them; what they shared was more personal.

Moving across the small hallway, Harry smiled. He still had no idea what this thing with Snape was about, knew no definition they could both agree on, but it didn't matter. He wasn't idiotic enough to force the issue. Whatever they had was fine by him and he was not going to drive Snape away by babbling about things like friendship. He didn't need to babble about something that was quite clear to him already.

The door to Snape's room was slightly ajar. It was somehow warming. Clearly, Snape was expecting
him. Not bothering to even pause at the doorway, Harry stepped in. "Hi."

"Good morning, Potter." Snape looked up from a book he'd been staring at with unseeing eyes. "Even though I don't believe that 'morning' is the appropriate word."

"I guess not." It was still dark, and the clock on Snape's wall did indicate it was 'night'. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Snape raised an eyebrow, nodding slightly towards the book he held. "Nothing important. Close the door and sit down. It's too early to be hovering there like that." He gestured at the bed.

The words brought up a smile on Harry's lips. He swung the door shut behind him and then walked to the bed. The covers were drawn to the side, and he hesitated for just a brief moment before crawling there.

His limbs felt heavy, the feeling unlike the weight that had seemed to crash down on him upstairs. He didn't know why.

Placing the book down on the table, Snape stood there with his back at Harry for some time. Then he glanced over his shoulder, a clear question in his eyes.

Whatever he saw didn't make him come any closer. Instead, he grabbed a pouch and started to work on something. Not saying a word.

Harry curled on the bed, snuggling against the sheets.

The light didn't disturb him; not even the flash of flames when Snape lit up the fireplace. He watched drowsily as Snape moved around the room, collecting items for a potion. He didn't know what he was making, and didn't really care. The scents filling the room were comforting, the sounds achingly familiar.

Voice quiet, Harry muttered, "I don't want to talk about the war anymore." He didn't even realize he was going to say something until the words were already out.

"Why?" There didn't seem to be any censor in Snape's question.

"Because..." Harry didn't have the proper words to describe the need to shut away all the horrors for just a little while longer. He had the fleeting thought it was cowardice, but right now he needed this time when the biggest issues in his life were chores and deciding just how much time he could spend alone with Snape. "Because I don't really need to."

Snape stood still for a while, apparently lost in thoughts.

"I won't forget what it'll be like when we go back even if we don't talk about it. I just want to have this..." It was too big a thing to describe, so Harry repeated it, this time more firmly. "I want to have this."

Hearing all the unsaid things anyway, Snape turned around. He wanted to argue on principle and point out that it wasn't just about Harry and his needs, but he couldn't say a thing. Explaining even the simplest things to Malfoy and Weasley had not been easy, and no matter how a part of him thought it was his duty, Snape didn't want to spend another evening like that.

Reality never went away. Both he and Harry knew it, and these weeks wouldn't change a thing.

He could see from the look in Harry's eyes that he wasn't far from begging, and before that could
happen, he nodded curtly. "I doubt there is anything new I can tell you about the war anyway." Surprisingly it didn't feel like giving up after all.

Harry's smile was radiant. "Thank you." Not talking about the war wouldn't take the horrors away, but it meant he didn't have to be anything but himself for a little while longer.

"You don't have to thank me, Potter," Snape snapped, disgusted by the gratitude he could feel as well. "Not on this."

He was not going to have this discussion with anyone.

Casting a half hearted glare at Harry who was still smiling at him, he turned back to the cauldron and the quiet comfort of simple work.

Not tired enough to actually fall asleep, Harry simply lay there and watched Snape work.

Part 24

Draco was sitting alone in the dining room, staring into his bowl of ice cream.

He'd sneaked back into the kitchen after dinner, glad that Eppy wasn't around. The place had been quiet, and his rummaging through the cupboards had sounded unrealistically loud in his ears.

It had been the first time he'd browsed through the various cupboards in the kitchen. At least no one had suggested he cooked yet; they probably understood that he'd never made even a sandwich in his life. For someone so good in Potions, boiling his own tea water would be overwhelming.

Finding all sorts of hidden delicacies, he'd decided to grab ice cream instead of other sweets. It kind of suited his mood right now.

"Happy birthday to me." Cynical laughter followed the words.

It was a far cry from his earlier birthdays. No presents. No party. Snape had congratulated him in the morning, but that was all. His eighteenth birthday, that would have been the biggest celebration; the signpost of his adulthood, the old pureblood tradition.

Here he was, celebrating the day without his family, all alone with a small bowl of vanilla ice cream. Feeling both lousy and relieved.

For no matter how saddened he was by the loneliness and the loss of friendships, he couldn't help thinking about what would have followed the celebrations if things were different; the gathering in the great hall of the mansion. The masked men surrounding him as he pledged his life to Voldemort.

He brushed his hand against his left arm, pushing the sleeve up and staring at his pale skin. No Dark Mark there.

Not now, not ever!

It wasn't such a bad exchange. Maybe he didn't have presents and people fawning over him, but at least he wasn't a slave either. The things they had discussed about a few days ago with Snape and the Gryffindors -- that Snape and Potter had talked about and he and Weasley had listened in shock -- only confirmed that he'd made the right decision.

He wished Potter's nightmare hadn't ended the tentative talks about war. No matter how incredulous
it had been to hear about missions for the Dark Lord as they really were, as cold blooded murder in
the dark, it had been better than to sit here alone and think about crawling.

Draco Malfoy would not crawl. He was glad it didn't seem like Potter would take pleasure in
humiliating him, for it had been the one thing he'd hold onto. Now and always.

He had made the right decision when he'd walked away from the Dark Lord and was now his own
man.

Smiling slightly he lifted the spoon and then licked it clean. The sweetness of the ice cream didn't
completely take away the bitterness. Nothing really could. He had lost too much to be really happy.
His vault was probably gone, his savings back in the huge vaults belonging to the Head of Malfoy
family. He had no friends, no home, no father.

"At least I still have my health." The amusement in his voice bordered on hysteria.

Merlin, how he wished he could stop thinking about all this crap, wished he had some plans for the
future, real plans that would work. Wished he'd found the liquor cabinet that Eppy had undoubtedly
hidden somewhere.

Getting really drunk would have been a very good idea. A tradition. Maybe he'd try to do it again the
next year. If he was alive.

Not a good thought. He wasn't going to start sniveling over his fate like an idiot. A drunken bout of
self-pity would have been acceptable. Without the assistance of a hard drink, it would just be stupid.

It was quiet in the cottage. The last time he'd seen Weasley, he'd been in the living room, dozing off
on a couch. He'd seen the looks Potter had been throwing at the professor earlier. Those two were
probably off somewhere.

He still couldn't decide what he thought about that. Even though Snape was his legal guardian now,
he didn't really care whom he was shagging. On the other hand, he was feeling burning jealousy
towards Potter. Why the hell should he have everything when he had nothing?

Another bad thought, driving him into anger instead of brooding.

Or maybe it wasn't such a bad thing. Dealing with anger was definitely easier than dealing with all
this maudlin. Crying wasn't really befitting to someone like him. Going to pick a fight -- and winning
-- was more dignifying.

Not that he would pick a fight with Potter. He'd given away that choice along with his almost perfect
life.

At least he had someone to bait here. Scraping the last of the ice cream from the bowl, he let a
wicked grin spread on his lips. He hadn't really done anything with Weasley after finally finding his
weak spot. Toying with him, using simple smirks had been fun. But perhaps it was time for
something else.

They had less than two more weeks here. Then the school term would end and everyone at
Hogwarts would leave and they would have to leave the cottage too.

No more Weasley-baiting. It would be a pity to leave such loose ends.

Draco pushed the bowl back. He couldn't care less about who washed it. He certainly wasn't going
to. It was his birthday and he was not going to work like a Muggle today. He would find something
good to do and forget all about his glorious future that had dissolved ages ago.

Sneer firmly in place, he got up and walked out of the dining room.

The door to Snape's room was firmly closed as usual. There were no sounds coming from there, but Draco could imagine exactly what was happening behind the closed door. Walking towards the living room, he wondered what Weasley had said when he'd found out that his heroic friend was getting cozy with their Potions master.

It would have been a sight to see; Weasley gaping like a fish on dry land, probably spluttering something inane. Nothing new there, really.

Moving quietly so that he wouldn't disturb anyone -- not that he really believed that they would hear him -- he went to the living room, not pausing at the doorway even as he saw Weasley sit on the couch. Usually he would have considered the intelligence of being here alone with him. Now, he simply didn't care.

He didn't want to stay upstairs all evening, hiding from everyone. Not today. His mind was already filled with disgustingly morose thoughts and he didn't want to dwell on them.

He wanted to do something that would take his mind off the bad things. Weasley -baiting worked every time, and maybe it was indeed time to up the score. Smirking didn't seem to get to Weasley anymore, so he'd have to think of something else.

This was his day, his life, and he was going to have some fun here even without drinking or a proper cake or a nice pile of presents.

Ron looked up from the chess board he'd been studying. Seeing the blond Slytherin saunter in made him glower.

This was about the last thing he needed right now. When Harry had disappeared again -- and he was not going to think about that -- he'd decided to have a game against the board, practicing some ideas he had. For some reason he hadn't been able to leave downstairs. He needed to see Harry would be all right.

No. He was still not thinking about it!

All he wanted was some peace and quiet, preferably shared with Harry. But no, Harry was off... And he was not going to finish that thought! And now Malfoy was walking across the room to stand at the window. Probably just waiting for a good moment to make his life even more miserable.

Ron tried very hard to concentrate on the chess pieces, but simply couldn't take his attention away from Malfoy who was undoubtedly going to do something evil as soon as he looked away. He just knew that.

"That looks interesting."

Although he'd expected some kind of a comment, Malfoy's soft words still made Ron startle. "Whatever." He was not about to do this.

Draco smiled at the sullen tone. This was exactly the thing that would take his mind off all the angsting. He moved closer to the board and let out a humming sound.

The sound made Ron's skin crawl. He hated that, hated the way Malfoy could make him react to a simple sound. Damn it! The git had spent the last weeks just staring at him. Why did he have to pick
this exact moment to start with the verbal taunts as well?

Draco made sure his leg brushed against the couch as he leaned over the board. The movement made Weasley jump. He was so predictable! He let out another soft sound, as if he was contemplating a move. As he was. Just not on the board.

"Look, Malfoy, whatever you're up to, I'm not interested." Ron hated the innocent expression in the grey eyes. "Go away."

He could deal with this like a grown up. Every time he wanted to kick Malfoy's arse, he'd just think of what Harry had said. That he wasn't worth such hate. Even if he was. He was worth every dark thought Ron had.

Instead of backing up, Malfoy cast a very knowing look at him and then let his gaze sweep over his body. The piercing look made him fluster, heat rising to his face.

He hated this! Hated this with such burning passion it made his whole body tingle with tension.

Very slowly, Ron pushed the board back a little and then stood up. He was going to make Harry damn proud and walk away. Right now. No matter how he wanted to smack that smirk right off Malfoy's face.

A soft chuckle escaped Malfoy. An extremely self satisfied sound that seemed almost deafening in the silence of the room.

Ron froze as if he'd been hit by the petrifying charm. There were so many things he could deal with, but this was not one of those. Malfoy was laughing at him. *Laughing*. He squeezed his hand into a fist.

It had been like this from the day he'd arrived in Hogwarts. Comments about his hair, his brothers, the poverty of his family. Malfoy and his goons following him and Harry around, always trying to cause trouble.

He could handle that; the anger, the nasty comments. It was all right if there was a Slytherin with whom they had rivalry. That was expected with someone whose whole family had been Gryffindors for decades. Such anger made him equal with Malfoy; he hated him back with fervor.

Laughter and this new icky staring thing were different.

They made him feel small. So damn small. Reminding him of his old and worn robes and small allowance. He hated that more than anything, the feeling of total insignificance he couldn't really even fight.

"Fuck you, Malfoy!" Ron was sick and tired of this. All the glances, all the smiles. Nothing tangible he could call out as evidence, but the mood between Malfoy and him enough to make him crazy.

There was no reply, not even the anticipated 'you wish'. Instead, Malfoy raised an eyebrow, the expression as provocative as always. A smirk still on his lips.

That did it. "If you're really so interested in me, then why the hell are you just smirking at me, you git?" Face livid with anger, Ron looked at Malfoy, feeling the need to hurt him grow again. "You're a coward, Malfoy, a fucking coward!"

He spat the last words out. It felt good to say it out. No more innuendo and weird looks. No more almost-touches or shivers of fear and disgust when he passed the Slytherin by.
Draco let his smirk melt into a genuine smile of triumph. This was what he had waited for, the balance of control shifting so completely there was nothing left to be gained anymore. He won, the game was over.

He didn't think Weasley knew just how badly he had lost it with his outburst, but it was enough for him to know that he had succeeded in what he'd planned all along. There was nothing else for him to really do but to throw him a blank, mildly disgusted look and walk away.

To his surprise, Draco realized that he didn't care about that anymore. The game had been fun, but the real excitement in it had been quite different from what it used to be.

He blinked. Was it a victory if he had ensnared himself in desire as well? Could he walk away now? It didn't feel right. He'd much rather take this to another level; finish with the game altogether and enjoy his prize.

After all, it was his birthday. He deserved a present.

Ron couldn't understand why Malfoy was still smiling. "What?" He was determined not to be the one to run away this time. He would stand here and fight, no matter what.

The only problem was, Malfoy wasn't fighting back, wasn't following the rules. Instead he was walking towards him. If he tried to kiss Ron again, he'd punch him in the face so hard he knocked him out!

So close that one step would bring his chest against Weasley's, Draco stopped, and then sank gracefully to his knees. His hands were on Weasley's fly before the redhead could stop gawking for long enough to protest.

"What the hell are you doing?" No matter how hard Ron tried, it didn't come out as an outraged scream. His throat was closing in. It was hard to breathe.

And Malfoy was still there, on his knees, touching him.

It was the most disgusting thing he had ever felt, worse than Malfoy's lips against his. That touch on his skin, reaching into his pants and grabbing him. Those knowing lips curling into an awful knowing smile as he pulled his prick clear from clothes.

Ron wanted to kill Malfoy. Until this moment, he had simply wanted to hurt him, bad. The red hot rage filling him had nothing to do with punching the git. He was about to do something far worse. Reaching out with his hands, he intended to push Malfoy away and then grab his wand. No words would be more unforgivable than what Malfoy was now doing to him.

He was not going to take this any more.

Instead of shoving Malfoy away, his hands touched his head almost hesitantly. Ron gaped in horror, unable to comprehend what was just happening. Why weren't his hands obeying him? He was not brushing that blond hair back. Was not!

"Ngrh..." He moaned, sounding embarrassingly like he was actually enjoying what Malfoy was doing. This was so wrong and disgusting! He was certain the sound had started as a very firm 'no'!

Maybe he was under the *imperius*. That had to be it, for he couldn't move, couldn't get away from the touch. He didn't know how Malfoy could manage the Unforgivable without touching his wand or murmuring the word out, for those deep red lips were now touching his thigh. His naked skin.
The incredibly soft mouth brushing against his hip. The hint of teeth as Malfoy nipped his skin. Teasing him with slow licks. Moving excruciatingly slow to his groin.

He was not hard. Was not hard. Would not harden under the questing fingers and those lips and... "Sweet Merlin!" A sob escaped him as his body proved him a liar.

No matter how hard he tried to escape, he was rooted here. His treacherous fingers were now curling in Malfoy's hair, holding his head in a tight grip. It didn't seem that Malfoy minded.

Malfoy had done this before, he could tell. There was no hesitation, no teeth scraping against his tender flesh. His hands knew just where to touch, how hard to squeeze, his mouth a hot and moist cavern enveloping him over and over again.

Ron felt like crying. He didn't know why he was doing this. The sensations overwhelming him couldn't be enough, he couldn't be starving for sex this bad. Not bad enough to like what Malfoy was doing to him. This wasn't sex; this was something else, domination or a game. He didn't want to play, but he just couldn't move away.

Tightening his grip on the strangely soft strands of hair, he pulled Malfoy even closer, slamming himself into that mouth. Anger was battling with arousal, and he wanted Malfoy to know who really was in charge here. Wanted to see him splutter and gag, wanted him to beg for mercy. Wanted him... to never stop this.

Soft sounds escaped Malfoy, reverberating against his erection, forcing a groan out of his mouth. He didn't know what the sounds were about, but could imagine them to be mocking words. They made his hips twist faster, to shut him up. Whatever to make him quiet.

A hand came to steady him, and Ron looked down to see Malfoy's grey eyes looking straight back at him. The expression in his gaze stole his breath away.

Even on his knees in front of him, Malfoy was still smirking at him. His lips might be wrapped around his prick, but his whole being was still thrumming with amusement. Ron could see it, he could see how Malfoy was shaking. With laughter no doubt.

Then he realized that it had nothing to do with laughter. Malfoy was holding his hand under his own robes, rubbing himself while sucking him off.

"Fuck!" Jerking violently, Ron pushed himself into Malfoy's mouth and came, not caring that he was probably hurting him. Malfoy could suffocate for all he cared.

No such luck. Instead of a blessed silence, he could feel Malfoy gasp something and shudder against him. Collapsing against his legs, Malfoy slumped there, breathing hard, his every exhale caressing his thighs.

"What the..." Almost unable to choke the words out, Ron demanded, "What the hell did you just do, Malfoy?" Tears pricked behind his firmly closed eyelids, and he had to blink to make them go away. It worked, but seeing the world again was even worse than crying. Looking down, he could see a sated smile on Malfoy, his gaze twinkling with mischief, lips swollen and stained with his come.

Ron wanted to throw up. He probably would have, but he felt so empty inside while his whole body throbbed with contentment.

Straightening his back, Draco lifted his hand to brush against his mouth. He couldn't believe he'd actually done this, and that Weasley had simply stood there. "You taste good." The words escaped him, but he didn't mind. As long as they were accompanied by a smirk, everything would be just
He could see by the widening of Weasley's eyes that it was totally unexpected for him to say something like that.

Slowly, he rose to his feet, making sure that he brushed against Weasley's body moving up. He could feel the Gryffindor shiver. "We must do that again." Realizing that something was keeping Weasley from moving, he planted a kiss on his flustered cheek. It was a soft peck, nothing more.

Draco had got what he wanted, so there was no reason for him to linger. He'd have to clean himself and change his clothes. It had been some time since he'd come in his robes, but he could still remember how disgusting that would feel if he didn't get moving right now.

Maybe if he used a charm and some water from the pitcher next to his bed, he wouldn't have to go launder again.

Happy birthday to him indeed!

Mind already on simple cleaning, he turned around and walked out of the room. He almost collided with Potter at the door, but didn't pay any attention to him. He felt too good to even gloat.

Harry frowned at Malfoy and turned to Ron, annoyed words already on his lips. Seeing his friend, he could only stare. His mouth fell open and he stood there, taking in the way Ron looked completely disheveled. His lower lip was bruised as if he'd bitten it, and his clothes were...

"Um... Ron? You might want to..." Nodding at his midsection, Harry tried very hard not to smile as Ron started to fumble with his fly.

Then realization hit him, wiping away the beginning of the smile.

Ron tucked himself in, his hands trembling as he zipped his trousers. Bile was rising to his mouth, and he felt like he was going to throw up any moment now. He didn't know why. After all, it wasn't he who had just sucked prick. And swallowed.

The thought made him shake even harder, and he buried his face in his hands, groaning as in pain.

"What the hell happened here, Ron." Anger bordering rage, Harry stepped closer. He was going to kill Malfoy. "Ron? Are you..." He couldn't ask if he was all right. That would be stupid.

Even with the question unasked, Ron nodded, still hiding behind his hands. "Oh fuck!" Well, not really. Not fuck. They had not fucked. It had just been a blow job. One he had enjoyed tremendously.

Malfoy. Sucking his prick like he was born to do that. And he'd let him. Held him tight as he'd moved deeper into that mouth. Stared at him as he came.

He gagged. "Oh, fuck, Harry! Fuck!"

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Part 25

There were many things Snape had done during his years as the Head of Slytherin. Nothing could really surprise him anymore. Gryffindors weren't the only ones drawn to dangerously stupid acts, even though his Slytherins usually stopped to consider the matters before acting foolishly.
This past school term had been full of shocks on more levels than he could really count. As a matter of fact, he tried very hard not to think about most of them. Sadly, this was something he couldn't ignore.

He stared at the young man standing before him, wondering if there was something in this cottage that made teenagers act even more stupidly than usual. Maybe there was a curse or even something wrong with the water, but it did seem like the youngsters were completely overwhelmed by their hormones. The evidence before him supported his theory fully.

He took a deep breath and thought about the things he had just heard, wondering if he was the only person on earth to whom they actually made sense.

Probably. But then again he had grown up playing these same games. With that in mind, he glared at the young man.

"So you claim that while you did perform oral sex on Mr. Weasley without actually asking for his permission first, he never said no, nor did he try to fight you."

Draco's ears felt hot. He wasn't used to hearing that from Snape. "Yes, sir."

It made no sense, really, for he knew Snape must have seen and done things he could only imagine. But talking about sex with him was still strangely embarrassing.

Looking disgusted, Snape got to his feet and walked to the shelf on the other side of the room. Draco didn't follow him with his gaze, staring at the floor was much more comfortable.

"Are you willing to repeat that after taking some Veritaserum?" Snape's expression said that he'd better have no objections to it.

The memory of days of grogginess and a very unpleasant taste in his mouth attacked Draco, almost making him shake his head. He never wanted to experience that again. But of course he would if Snape wanted him to. "Yes, sir."

With someone else, the softly spoken words would have been enough. Snape never valued the show of honesty above a good truth potion. Without a word, he held the stopper out and nodded as Draco opened his mouth obediently. One single drop fell on Draco's tongue.

"Did Mr. Weasley say anything that indicated that he wanted you to stop?" Snape asked, relieved by the way young Malfoy promptly said no.

The answer was the same to all his questions. No, Malfoy hadn't used any curses or charms to subdue Weasley. No, he hadn't threatened him or restrained him in any way. No, he didn't understand what the fuss was all about.

That last bit had been painfully obvious from the beginning. Even though Malfoy was excellent in showing whatever emotion he wanted, the shock had been genuine. Snape was certain of that. The Veritaserum was simply proving his words.

"Drink this." Snape handed Malfoy a glass of water. The serum he'd given him was diluted enough to last for only a few minutes, so soon they would be able to discuss this matter without Malfoy's eyes glazing over.

It was good, since they had a lot to talk about.

Herding these idiot children towards adulthood? Not likely. Snape wondered if one had better luck
with sheep; if nothing else you'd still get roasted mutton for your troubles.

There was a certain resemblance between teenagers and whatever mindless animal he could think of, both controlled by hormones. At least animals had instincts and ingrained survival skills.

He let out a soft sigh. Not all teenagers made a complete mess of it. Harry for instance had been able to discuss it before jumping into his bed, consequences be damned. It had not been the easiest conversation ever, but at least they had managed to avoid this sort of a mess.

Of course with someone like Harry, there would probably be other kind of trouble later on.

Snape would have to talk to young Malfoy about the difference between them and the Gryffindors. He should have done it immediately after they'd arrived here, but he had never thought the boy would take his game anywhere near actual sex. He should have better taste than this.

Having a sexual encounter with a Weasley was definitely not high on his list of things to be envious of. After watching the redheads line up to Gryffindor year after year, he'd been glad to know he'd never have to deal with them personally.

Let Minerva deal with them. She had better patience for empty headed pranksters.

The well known animosity between the Malfoys and the Weasleys should have been enough to prevent something like this from ever happening. Snape had to wonder what had caused Malfoy to even think about Ronald Weasley in any sexual way. Nothing in their history suggested that there was such an attraction between them.

He also wondered why Weasley hadn't said no. There had been previous incidents where the redhead had been more than happy to use physical force against Malfoy. What had made him stand there and allow a touch that was so obviously distasteful?

Shrugging that thought away, Snape concentrated on young Malfoy who was looking a bit green around the gills, but completely aware of his surroundings.

He didn't need to find out about Weasley's motivations. His job was to make certain this never happened again.

Upstairs, Harry was sitting on his bed, careful not to say anything as Ron paced back and forth. It made him feel a little dizzy, but he couldn't blame him for needing to walk out all his nervous energy.

This was better than the gagging. Or the cleaning charms Ron had insisted on putting on his prick earlier, wincing every time he released the charm.

The silence was a good thing as well. Earlier, there had been ranting and raving and a very awkward moment when Snape had escorted the very puzzled -looking Malfoy away. Harry had hated the way Ron's voice had broken when he'd stopped calling the Slytherin names and started to berate himself.

It made him feel so helpless. Even after the very disturbing things they had talked about in the Order meetings -- mostly the inner circle -- Harry still didn't know what to say to a friend who had sort of been assaulted even though not really.

His decision not to say anything at all and just sit here was proving out to be the right one. Ron was definitely calming down a bit. After a few more walks from the door to the window and then back again, he slumped down on the bed and buried his face in his palms.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry asked, hesitation in his voice. He didn't think he'd want to talk
to his best friend about something like this. Not when it was all new and raw.

He had always thought sex was a private matter, not something to gloat about. He'd never shared
tales or snickered at anyone behind their backs, not even when a partner had turned out to be lousy in
bed. Definitely not when someone he'd shagged had spent the next day giggling with other girls from
their year, telling everyone that she had shagged the great Harry Potter.

Ron lifted his head from his hands just long enough to shake his head firmly. Then he slumped back
into his previous position.

"Is there anything I can do?" Hoping there would be an angry quip about slamming Malfoy with the
obliviate -- or a fist -- didn't really work. Harry watched Ron shake his head again. "Okay."

There was a long silence, broken finally by a muttered cleansing charm Ron once again aimed at his
groin. Then there was more silence, followed by yet another charm.

Harry was certain the charm wouldn't be such a good idea, but he didn't want to repeat his offer to
take Ron down to the river to bathe. He could understand how he didn't want to spend any time
naked even with his best friend.

They both jolted as someone climbed the stairs and then slammed the door next to theirs shut. Since
there were no other sounds, Harry let out a sigh, relaxing again.

He hated this feeling of helplessness, knowing he wasn't really helping. Ron looked like he'd rather
not talk about anything, probably wanted to be left alone, and he wondered if he should just do that.
He didn't know how to ask. Any platitudes of resting now and talking about it tomorrow would
sound hollow.

"I... Do you want to come downstairs with me? I need to talk to Snape." Harry knew that he would
know what to do next. Even with his very annoying habit of favoring his Slytherins, Snape wouldn't
be partial in this. That had been obvious from the way he'd looked at them earlier.

Surprisingly, he hadn't looked angry, but simply resigned. His words had been curt as he'd told
Harry to take Ron upstairs. The way Snape had taken action had been a relief. Harry didn't want to
deal with something like this right now.

This time Ron managed a few words out, sounding like they came from between clenched teeth.
"No. You go ahead. I'll stay here."

"Okay." Maybe it was better this way; him talking to Snape without distractions and Ron being able
to have some privacy. "I won't be long."

There was no reply to that.

Getting to his feet, Harry walked past Ron, glad he didn't flinch at his closeness. A thought hit him
and he asked, "Do you want me to get you some sleeping potion?" It wouldn't really change
anything, but he doubted nothing could right now.

Ron didn't say anything. He simply nodded.

There was nothing more to say. With one last look at Ron, Harry left the room and padded
downstairs.

He didn't really know what to think about what had happened now that the first wave of anger had
passed. Ron had said Malfoy hadn't forced him into anything, said he'd liked it even though it had
been disgusting. It made no sense at all, but maybe to Ron it did.

He'd seen so many weird things during his life, he didn't really want to speculate on people's preferences. But the way Ron was so clearly horrified by his own actions right now was quite alarming.

Feeling crummy, Harry headed towards Snape's room. The very familiar guilt was nagging at the back of his mind, reminding him of all the times he'd shrugged off the weird looks between Ron and Malfoy.

He should have done something to prevent this.

The problem was that he couldn't think of anything he could have really done, except spent more time with Ron perhaps. Shaking his head slightly at his silly thoughts, he decided not to say anything about them to Snape. The man would undoubtedly tell him he wasn't the center of the universe and not everything revolved around him.

Which was true, no matter what some people in the wizarding world might want to think.

Going to talk to Snape like this was strange. It made him feel like he was somehow outside the normal circle of friends, acting like he was responsible for Ron instead of just being a mate.

He didn't want to be responsible for his friends. Didn't want to be reasonable and see that there might be more to this than Malfoy being a total bastard who was using Ron, but his years of being coaxed towards the legend that was the Boy Who Lived prevented such willfull blindness.

Harry didn't know whether to thank or curse Dumbledore for it.

It was quiet downstairs, and Harry hesitated a moment before walking to Snape's door. This was so different from his usual trips here. For a second, he had absolutely no idea how to act right now. Then he shrugged the thought off as imbecilic. He never needed to pretend with Snape.

"Yes, come on in, Potter," Snape's voice answered to his knock. He sounded annoyed. No surprise there.

Harry pushed the door shut behind him, but didn't step farther in to the room. This was not the time to stay here and relax. "Not exactly a good evening, is it?" Never mind platitudes.

"No." Shaking his head, Snape let out a weary sigh. "I would definitely not call it good." The things he had to deal with... He shrugged the thought off and asked with a firmer voice, "So how is Mr. Weasley doing?"

"I don't really know." Now that he didn't have to worry about Ron seeing, Harry let go of the calm mask and grimaced. He had an awful headache. After a few badly slept nights, he really wasn't up to this right now. "I think he could use some sleeping potion."

"More nightmares?" Reaching out for the small bottles on the shelf, Snape cast a knowing look at him. He didn't need to see the curt nod to know he was right.

"They're not as bad as... You know." Fondling the offered vial nervously with his fingers, Harry refused to look up.
He didn't want to get into this right now, not when there was something more important waiting for him upstairs. He didn't want to start yet another conversation about Voldemort killing people. The nightmares didn't feel like those dreams, they felt almost like regular bad dreams, like ones he'd had years ago back at Privet Drive.

Harry hated the relief that flooded him when he realized that now there was no chance of them even considering having a conversation about the war. Quiet evenings spent together in the living room were an impossibility now that Ron was having a nervous breakdown upstairs and Malfoy was probably in his room drugged to his eyeballs.

Snape saw that Harry wasn't going to continue, so he said it out loud himself. "They still don't feel like prophetic nightmares? Or like when the Dark Lord kills people?"

"No." With a note of finality Harry shook his head.

Raising an eyebrow slightly, Snape said, "This will be enough for both you and Weasley. A good night's sleep is an excellent idea. You can have a talk with your friend tomorrow, when you've both rested."

He knew for a fact that this was a conversation he would never have. Trying to talk to Weasley about simple things was bad enough, talking to him about matters of sexuality would be too much. "Unless of course you think I should..."

"I talked to young Malfoy. He is..." There was not really a term Snape could use that Harry would comprehend. He wasn't certain he did either. "He assures me that your friend never told him to stop." Seeing the anger in Harry's eyes, he added, "Under Veritaserum."

Harry wanted to say something nasty at that, but he knew he really couldn't. "I know. Ron said he didn't say no." He still had no idea why.

There had always been some weird tension between Ron and Malfoy, but he'd never thought it had anything to do with sex. Ron said he liked girls, and even with the silly hair, no one would mistake Malfoy for a girl.

"They are both over age of consent. As of today, Mr. Malfoy is also regarded as an adult by the pureblood traditions. He did nothing illegal, even if his behavior can easily be viewed as slightly immoral."

"Oh. Okay." Harry hadn't known that. It was Malfoy's birthday? That explained some things, but it still didn't make things right.

He didn't think anything could, really.

When Snape didn't say anything, he muttered quietly, "I still don't get it. Why would Ron just stand there and... You know. He doesn't like Malfoy like that. Or at all. So why didn't he just..." He really didn't mean to blame his friend. He just wanted to understand him.

"I assume Mr. Weasley was overwhelmed by Mr. Malfoy's actions." For once Snape chose not to add anything about Weasley's obvious mental capacity and how anything could overwhelm him. "Neither has been aware of what the other one was really saying or doing and that lead to this highly
unpleasant situation."

He wished Poppy would include these kinds of things in the sexual education classes. Then again he could understand why she didn't. The class was probably a nightmare even with the basics; teenagers with hormones.

"You're probably right." It made sense, and this way there would be no real blame on anyone.

"Yes." Snape nodded. "I have explained to Mr. Malfoy that such games are not acceptable and he has assured me he will not continue them. To be quite honest, he was completely stunned by the way his actions could be interpreted. To him it was nothing but harmless pastime."

That had been the easiest thing to comprehend; the almost arrogant blindness in the young man, reminding him of so many other people who believed that everything was simply a game.

Harry didn't know what to think of the way Snape talked about this as if it was somehow expected. "You don't seem very surprised."

"I'm a Slytherin. You know what else I used to be." As usual, there was a distinctive self-mocking tone in Snape's voice as he said the last words, as well as a note of finality forbidding any comments. "Nothing really surprises me anymore." At least power games and sex. Those he understood all too well.

"Oh." Harry had no idea what to say to that. The whole idea was somehow disturbing. There were lots of rumors around, about both the Slytherins and the Death Eaters. Most very good fodder for nightmares.

"I can't really lay all the blame on him," Snape mused out loud. Seeing Harry's raised eyebrow, he added briefly, "I have known Lucius Malfoy since we were both teenagers. He is not what one would call a lenient parent. Or a friend."

A brief silence followed the words, as Harry's eyes lost their focus. He felt nauseous, understanding all too well how Snape would know such a thing. He tried not to think about it too much.

It was impossible to block out the images flooding his mind. He knew the way Voldemort's people treated others. Why not their own as well? Games of violence and dominance sounded about right. Mind games and control overshadowed by sheer physical brutality.

This was not the time for this. He needed to concentrate on Ron. But he couldn't help wondering just how many things he'd misinterpreted about this man.

Looking straight into Snape's eyes, he said, "I know you're still thinking you made the wrong choice when you helped professor McGonagall. But I for one am really glad you don't ever have to go back to those bastards." He had to say that out loud.

Snape swallowed at the all too calm tone. The honesty in the words was almost overwhelming. Harry sounded like he really did care about what happened to him, and not just in the annoying Gryffindor way that made his teeth ache. "Yes." It came out quietly.

He was certain he should be angry at the solemn way Harry was looking at him. There was no way the idiot would have the slightest idea of what he was talking about, but the obvious outrage in the green eyes was unsettling. There was no pity in them, and he could tell that Harry was indeed...

Maybe there wasn't even a word for it. At least not in Snape's vocabulary.
"Yes, well, I'll take this to Ron then." Holding out the vial, Harry shifted his weight from one foot to another. He could see a very awkward silence approaching and couldn't really handle another one of those right now.

"Remember there are two doses of the potion there." Without waiting for any reply, Snape gestured at the door, a clear indication that he wanted to be alone. "Good night."

"Good night, Snape."

Holding the potion tight in his fist, Harry walked out of the room.

He didn't linger downstairs, even though he had to wonder if Ron wished to be left alone. Probably not. After all, Ron didn't seem like a person who wallowed all by himself. With his brothers and Ginny and all the other Gryffindors, he was probably more used to having lots of people around him all the time.

Once he reached the small hallway upstairs, Harry cast a long look at Malfoy's door. He was annoyed at the Slytherin, but couldn't help pitying him as well.

He had to wonder how they'd be able to live here from now on. It would probably be awfully awkward.

Sighing, he went to see how Ron was doing.

Nothing had really changed, even though he had been gone for some time. Ron was still sitting on his bed, looking disgusted. His hand was squeezing his wand tight as the door opened, and Harry knew for sure that if it had been someone else coming in, Ron would have hexed them without hesitations.

"It's just me!" Harry said quietly. He hated seeing Ron like this. "I got you the sleeping potion."

He had never liked the idea of muffling all the pain in potions, even though he'd never tell Snape that. It just felt like the absolutely wrong way out of his problems, a coward's way. This time he was determined to have Ron drink the potion and get a good night's sleep. His friend looked like he was going to crumble any moment.

Since there was no indication Ron had really heard his words, he walked slowly to him and handed him the vial. "Here. Drink half of it and you'll sleep like a baby."

Ron grabbed the vial with trembling hands, looking miserable. "Thanks, Harry." He stared down at his hands, not making a move to actually drink the potion.

"It'll be all right." Knowing he sounded really lame, Harry shrugged. It didn't really matter as long as it told Ron that he was here for him. That was the important thing.

After a moment of silence, Ron looked up at Harry. His eyes were brimming with tears. "I just... I'm sorry I'm making such a mess. I bet you wish I was back at Hogwarts right now." He hated the whining sound of his own voice, but couldn't help himself.

He had seen the way Harry had been so damn eager to go to spend time with Snape. He'd also had a lot of time to sit alone in their room and think. It was obvious that Harry didn't need him here, probably didn't want him here either. Harry's life would be so much easier if Ron was back at school with Hermione.

Everything made him feel like he was just a great nuisance, some kind of a weight Harry was
dragging around out of obligation. He hadn't been a very good friend lately. Harry didn't need him, not anymore. He had his secrets and the Order and Snape. Why would he still be interested in hanging out with him?

The black miasma of self-pity was swallowing him, and there was nothing he could do about it. Everything seemed to be totally lost now.

Harry's hands curled into fists. He could only stare at Ron, white hot rage flaring inside of him. Allowing it to show on his face, he growled, "Don't be such a bloody git, Ron!"

The anger penetrated the misery and Ron flinched as he saw the way Harry looked at him. "I..."

"I know what you meant, and I'm telling you, you're wrong! You're my best friend, Ron. My best friend. I don't care if you do stupid things. It doesn't change the fact that I want you here."

Harry saw Ron nod slightly before squeezing his eyes shut tight. He was quiet for a moment, knowing that Ron was fighting against tears, giving him all the time he needed to compose himself. When Ron let out a shuddering sigh, he added, "You should take the potion now. We can talk more in the morning."

"Yeah." Voice rough, Ron raised the vial. He hesitated for a moment. "You don't have to sit here with me, you know. I mean... You can go and... You know?" He couldn't say it out loud.

"Just drink the damn thing, Ron." Exasperation and amusement were clear in Harry's gaze as he nudged his friend. "I'm not going anywhere."

He sat there patiently until Ron lifted the small vial to his lips. Seeing him start to sway, he grabbed the vial and put it on the table just as Ron collapsed on the bed.

The sun was setting outside, the shadows growing inside the bedroom. Harry didn't care about them. He didn't need the light. Sitting next to his sleeping friend, he thought about how insane everything felt right now.

He hadn't realized how bad Ron was feeling, how his stays with Snape had left him completely alone. He'd never thought that Ron would have doubts about their friendship. As if he would just dump him now that he was kind of seeing someone.

The old guilt was growing inside Harry. He could recognize it well, but it didn't help him to chase it away. The truth was that he did want to spend his time with Snape now. Like Ron had once wanted to spend all his free time with Lavender, sneaking into the Astronomy tower to have a moment of privacy with her.

It wasn't the same here. He didn't want to make Ron miserable by leaving him alone, because unlike when he'd simply spent more time with Hermione when Ron had been seeing Lavender, Ron couldn't really hang out with anyone else out here.

Feeling a strange mixture of both anger and pity towards Malfoy, Harry wondered if the Slytherin would leave Ron be from now on. Something made him think he would. It was probably the look in Malfoy's eyes as he'd followed Snape earlier.

The next days would tell. Right now, Harry wasn't sure about anything.

He'd never cared much about confusion, even though living in the wizarding world taught people to at least tolerate it. Life was just too complicated, not only now, but always. He wished he could define things more easily, have things he could be certain of.
Harry sighed as he lay down on his own bed. He should never have allowed the happiness to lull him into feeling that everything was going to be all right. It never was.

Not in his world.

Feeling the familiar emptiness gnaw at him, he reached out for the vial. He'd promised Ron to be here, so he would, but he couldn't just lie here awake thinking about things, or he would be heading to Snape's room in a few minutes. Spending time with him was better than a potion.

But he had given his word to Ron.

The liquid looked dark in the faint light coming from the window. It tasted dark as well. Earthy, moldy. Harry preferred the natural taste of it instead of the sweetened concoctions Madam Pomfrey usually offered. The taste exploded on his tongue, making him feel the strength of the brew rush through his whole body.

A familiar feeling, like the moment after the most unforgivable of curses, when every part of you felt more alive than ever. The strongest, most frightening feeling Harry knew. It even surpassed the awfulness of feeling completely empty.

Then there was nothing but darkness.

Part 26

The days that had somehow seemed endless were suddenly running out.

With a sinking feeling, Harry was beginning to understand that they were indeed going to leave this place. At first it was 'at the end of June'. Then it became 'next week'. It was a shocking realization, one that drove him into Snape's room before he could even finish the thought.

Coming back to Ron that evening had been harder than he'd thought. No matter how his friend pushed him to go and do what he wanted, he knew that the whole topic was a source of disgust to Ron.

Harry couldn't help him with that.

Lying in his bed, listening to Ron's snoring, he was trying hard not to imagine what else could go wrong. He knew from experience that such thoughts were inviting more trouble, as if somehow his worries might come true. There weren't many things he could think of.

Before, they had managed to live rather nicely together, even with the small tension between Malfoy and Ron. Now they could barely sit down and eat at lunch and dinnertime.

It had been simple to stay with Snape, the togetherness a dream come true, when he didn't have to worry about anything else. That had changed as well. No matter how glorious it was to wrap himself around Snape and relax in his bed, Harry couldn't help remembering that Ron was upstairs, feeling crummy about the whole situation.

He was trying to balance his time between Snape and Ron and doing his best not to look like he was conscious about the whole thing. He didn't want Ron to feel like a burden, while he couldn't stay away from Snape either.

Every time he'd slipped out of Snape's room, he'd thought about the day they'd have to leave. It had made everything feel bittersweet. He was all too familiar with the feeling.
Now that he couldn't think of their stay here as endless anymore, he felt frozen, hoping he could freeze time as well. He didn't want to leave. This had been the best time of his whole life; there had been peace and quiet, he'd been sharing his life with someone important with no multitudes of idolizing fools anywhere. No nasty comments thrown at him by those who hated his fame.

Even with the tension and the occasional nightmares, the nagging urgency of the meetings and the horrors of the war were somewhere far away. It made Harry want to stay here forever in a kind of neverending haze where there was no fear and no death.

Would the reality of life ever be like this? Maybe, if they were really lucky and managed to win the war. But that would be the aftermath. He didn't want to even think about what would come first.

He didn't really want to think about anything right now. Too much thinking would only bring the bad dreams back, and he had already had enough such dreams to last a lifetime.

It was too bad Snape had made it quite clear he wasn't going to actually share a bed with him when they slept. He was certain that might keep the nightmares away.

Rolling over, he pushed that out of his mind. No good to dwell there either. He wished he could just turn his brain off and stop thinking altogether.

Harry knew that none of the things he tried never really worked, but he tried counting sheep anyway. Some time during the long hours, the sheep turned into Bludgers, flying across the deep blue sky, taking him away with them.

The morning sun woke Ron earlier than usual. Stretching his arms, he lay there, glad that it was yet another morning. Five more to come.

It brought a happy smile to his lips, the first such joyous expression for a long time.

The days couldn't go by quickly enough. Ron was starting to think about all those things he'd managed to ignore thus far, mainly his family that was probably really pissed at his disappearance. There would probably be dozens of howlers waiting for him back at school, most of them from his mother.

He missed his family, all of them. It would be good to be with Fred and George again. He'd need a good laugh after all this gloom.

There were others too. Seamus and Dean and Neville. It was strange to share a room with Harry and not have those three with them. Even though he probably shouldn't tell her, he missed Hermione as well. There was still that small achy feeling somewhere deep in his mind when he thought of her like this, reminding him of things he'd been so sure of, but that hadn't happened after all.

He sometimes wondered if Hermione regretted the way things had gone too, but had never asked. They were friends, and that was enough.

Life was good when it was simple. His simple friendship with Harry and Hermione. The awfully complicated but still so simple classes. Lunch breaks at the Great Hall and the freezing autumn evenings when he'd go and watch the Quidditch practices with his friends.

This whole mess was nothing like the things he wanted from life.

Sitting up so that he could rest his head against the wall and look out of the window as the sun climbed higher, Ron allowed himself to think about all the things he hated right now. The angry burn was better than the weird lost feeling that had tried to succumb him only days before.
He hated this place, the suffocating silence here. Hated Snape, who was taking his best friend away for some dark and sinister reason that couldn't be as easy as shagging. Hated Malfoy, who never looked him in the eyes again and stayed in his room most of the time.

Most of all, he hated not knowing what to do or how to act. Things had changed from school so much, he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to be. Gryffindor, seventh year student trying to finish the school with some of his dignity intact? Harry Potter's best friend? A man with no money and only a few scattered thoughts about what he was going to do with his life?

Was this really what it was like to grow up? He didn't know. He hoped not, because he didn't want to live the rest of his life feeling like this.

It would be good to go back to school. Even with the studying it would be better than this damn confusion. Fred and George would be there at Hogsmeade, staying in their little apartment over the shop, and he could go visit them when reading stuff about Transfigurations and Arithmancy got too tiring.

He would never have to go anywhere near Snape again. That thought alone brought a smile to his lips. No more going to the dungeons for Potions lessons. He wouldn't have to listen to him belittle his House or his friends.

He didn't want to think about Malfoy even to rejoice in getting rid of him.

Even the slightest of reminder of the git made him want to cast yet another cleaning spell on himself. It hadn't been a good idea in the first place, and he never wanted to experience the pain of peeing like he had a few days ago.

"Bloody hell." Muttering quietly, he pushed the covers away and got up. He was not going to stay here all day trying not to think about the unthinkable. Besides, the thought of peeing made him realize he really had to go. Now.

Ron got dressed in silence, careful not to wake Harry up. He was just going to the loo. It was probably too early for the breakfast yet, and thought he might as well let his friend sleep for a bit longer.

When he left their room, he made a lot of noise stomping to the staircase. Almost like he was trying to scare a snake away. In a way, he was.

The trip to the outhouse was brief and fortunately there was no one else there. He never let go of his wand, though, determined not to be surprised by anything or especially anyone. It made his business at the loo somewhat awkward, but he was not about to put away his wand for even a second.

Mornings were always Ron's favorite time of the day, but here they were nothing but a pain in the arse. Slipping back into the room he shared with Harry, he wished his friend was awake already so they could talk or something and then go to breakfast. He hated the silence.

Waiting wasn't exactly his favorite thing either.

The sun was already high in the sky as Harry finally stirred. As usual, he squirmed for some time, trying to block the offending light by pulling the covers up and then muttering incoherently. Ron waited patiently, knowing that very soon he'd let out a sigh and then sit up, his hair standing on end.

That was just stuff he knew. Familiar stuff from back home. Something he doubted many people knew. Not about Harry Potter. They might write all kinds of crappy things about him in the papers but they didn't really know. Like he and Neville and Dean and Seamus knew.
He couldn't help smiling smugly at the thought. No, even Snape didn't know, now did he? He didn't think so! After all, Harry didn't sleep in his room, he just... Better not think about that right now.

"What's so funny?" Yawning, Harry sat up, his hand automatically brushing his hair away from his face.

Ron shook his head. He didn't think Harry would find it amusing. At all. "Nothing." He just hoped he managed the innocent expression better than his brothers.

From the glare Harry threw at him, he had to say that he probably didn't.

This was good, like the mornings back home, when Ron sometimes had to hurry Harry up so that they didn't miss breakfast. He was so used to Harry's grouchesness that it didn't even register anymore. The tired and somewhat harried look in his eyes did, but he knew better than to address it.

No need to make things worse by talking about them now. They were just two friends talking about whatever before breakfast. Ron preferred it like this. There'd been enough serious talk already.

As they strolled downstairs, Ron allowed a disgusted smile to spread to his lips. Yeah. They had talked about things all right. Harry telling him that Malfoy wasn't going to do anything stupid anymore, assuring him it had been a big misunderstanding in the first place.

Yeah, right. Like Malfoy had tripped on his own shoes and just accidentally landed on his feet, his mouth connecting with his... Not that he was ever going to think about that again! And he still didn't believe it.

But since both Harry and Snape seemed to believe the git, he wasn't going to say anything about it, especially not to Snape. The whole idea of actually talking to him about anything that had happened between him and Malfoy chased away Ron's appetite. He didn't need to talk to anyone. Malfoy was leaving him alone, and that was enough. Seeing him hanged from his private parts would be better, but Ron knew that was very unlikely to happen.

Schooling his expression before Harry could see it -- he didn't want to make him worry again -- and say something, Ron stepped aside and let Harry walk into the little dining area first. It was a reflex by now. Just in case.

"Good morning, Potter. Mr. Weasley."

Sighing, Ron murmured, "Goor morning professor Snape." Without really looking at the two Slytherins already seated at the table, he followed Harry and took a seat.

He didn't say anything else during the breakfast.

Keeping his gaze on his plate, Draco refused to even look up when the door opened. He'd heard the way Weasley had stomped around upstairs and once again had done his best not to accidentally meet him in the hallway.

Snape's words had been clear. He was to stay away from Weasley from now on. He didn't really need to see the glare to obey; his own mind was holding him in check all by itself.

He had thought he would never again succumb into senseless self flagellation and remorse. He had thought wrong.

This whole guilt thing was beginning to annoy Draco. When they'd first got here, his whole world had been turned upside down. He'd lost everything he'd ever held important and had gained very
little in return. Wallowing in angst and something very close to self pity had felt only reasonable.

Now he was simply hating every minute of this.

He hated the silences in the living room, the way Weasley flinched every time he was near. He wasn't sure which was worse, the angry and disgusted fear shown in his presence or the very distinguished flicker of guilt he felt every time he saw Weasley.

Stupid Gryffindors! He still couldn't understand their reasoning, even though Snape had indeed explained it to him, twice. It had just been a game, a chase, a hunt. He hadn't forced Weasley into anything. That was the most annoying part of the whole thing.

He had not forced himself on Weasley!

It made him want to scream at Weasley. Tell him he was so damn sorry he'd got down on his knees and sucked him off and how terrible it had been so traumatizing to Weasley that he'd almost choked him as he'd come down his throat.

How the hell could the Gryffindors make that into a rape? It was not! He was not like that!

Draco could be lots of things, but not a rapist; he didn't need to force anyone. With his looks and ancestry, he could have almost anyone he wanted. If Weasley had told him to stop he would have. There had been plenty of opportunity for that. He could have said something or simply walked away, he could have hexed him while he'd been on his knees.

He didn't have to stand there and act like he enjoyed every minute.

It was a very sound reasoning, but for some incredible reason it didn't take the guilt away. Whatever he did, it was always there, mixed with anger and a memory of real desire.

He couldn't even see his game as a victorious one now, mostly because what he'd done was still haunting him. Not only the ice cold feeling of having done something wrong, but the hunger. The very tangible want he felt towards Weasley. He might be annoying and hurtful, but Draco couldn't say he wasn't hot.

Not his usual style, no, but kind of shaggable anyway.

Draco reached out for his glass, not really looking at what he was doing, and pushed the thought out of his mind. So what if he kind of found Weasley attractive? He was never going to go anywhere near him. No matter how good it had been to actually have sex with someone, this lousy aftertaste was enough to steer him away from anything but his own hand for a while.

He was never, ever going to even try to do anything with a Weasley. Or another Gryffindor. They were stupid and childish in their innocence and he was definitely better off without them.

Snape let his gaze sweep over the table, focusing on Malfoy for a moment before looking at Weasley. Both were concentrating on their toast so hard it looked almost painful. Swallowing all the nasty words that wanted to escape, he sighed and then turned his attention to Harry.

At least this one wasn't a total nuisance. There was a knowing look in the green eyes, accompanied by a slight moue of displeasure on his lips. Snape could relate to that. Why on earth did these foolish children insist on complicating everything?

This would have been so much simpler if those two idiots could show similar restraint and mental prowess as Harry did. There were more important things than personal angsting over foolish games,
but neither Weasley or Malfoy did seem to recognize the fact.

Due to their appalling behavior, his plan to actually enjoy the peace and quiet had almost dissolved, turning the tentative relaxation in the cottage into brooding. Now his days were filled with nothing but finding new ways to brew the vital potions with the ingredients he had left and shagging Harry Potter.

It was not something he would call unpleasant, but it was definitely not productive. The time they had spent here was a dangerous daydream and they shouldn't forget that the reality out there was far from peaceful.

Snape was aware that Harry had never tried to deny this was temporary, and he had to resign to the fact that it would have to be enough. There was no hope left that Malfoy and Weasley would concentrate on anything important, leaving everything to those who had the mental strength to look beyond their own pathetic needs.

Sharing a look of disgust with Harry, he shook his head slightly and then poured himself more tea.

Part 27

The door banged open unexpectedly, sending Snape twirling around with his wand in hand. He scowled as he recognized the young man at his doorway, the hex on his lips turning into muttered, "Idiot."

"Sorry about that."

Harry hadn't even bothered to knock, barging in like his bum was on fire and pulling off his shirt before the door slammed shut after him.

He flung the shirt on the empty chair -- for once not missing -- and went straight to his fly, not saying a word. Toeing off his socks while he was squirming out of his trousers was hard enough without using mental energy to start a conversation.

"I see you're as patient as usual." Snape didn't sound like he really minded. At least he hadn't been holding anything fragile when Harry's completely thoughtless behavior had startled him. He lowered his wand. "To what do I owe this..." Raising his eyebrow as Harry fumbled with his zipper, he sneered, "Honor?"

He didn't hurry as he walked to the door to lock it. No one else would ever come here unannounced. Or willingly. Malfoy practically lived in his room these days, and he was certain Weasley would rather commit a ritual suicide than come here.

"Do you know what day it is?" Pushing his trousers down and then almost tripping on them, Harry ignored the sneer. He was too busy getting naked and the sneer was an everyday occurrence already.

For a moment, Snape contemplated on hexing the idiot anyway. Of course he knew what day it was. Surrendering to the faintly amused and faintly annoyed emotion that seemed to attack him whenever he was dealing with Harry, he simply stated, "Yes, it's a week from the Summer Solstice." Less than a week to full moon.

"It's our last whole day here!" Harry declared, his eyes slightly wild.

"Yes, that too." Shaking his head at the way Harry snuggled against his pillow -- and yes, he'd noticed how Harry was now completely naked -- Snape stood there, waiting for the young man to
actually make some sense. "The school term will end tomorrow, just as it has ended these past six years. Did the importance of the date somehow elude you until now?"

Harry refused to say anything.

"I see," Snape said, even though he wasn't completely certain what this was all about. Did Harry mean he wished to spend the day in bed with him, or was this some juvenile emotional scene because of their departure the next day? He was willing to bet it was both.

"We'll go back home tomorrow." It was slightly annoying to feel nothing when he called Hogwarts home. Harry had never associated any other place with that word, but he'd come to suspect that it would be ridiculously easy to think of this small cottage as home.

Snape nodded at that. "Yes."

He could see how the idea didn't please Harry at all. It was not surprising; there would be things waiting back at Hogwarts neither wished to face.

When Harry simply lay there, hugging his pillow, he added, "I assume you're not keen on leaving all this behind." He kept the phrasing as simple as possible, letting Harry interpret it as he saw fit.

"No." Sounding both angry and sad, Harry shook his head. "I'm not. It's so damn peaceful here, and sometimes I feel like the whole circus back home will be too much."

"It will not be easy to return to the reality, Potter, but we have to. As tolerable as this has been, we all know things can't last like this forever."

Harry flinched, closing his eyes for a moment. He knew Snape wasn't simply talking about their stay at the cottage and the strange peace that surrounded them here. There had definitely been a slight emphasis on the word 'things'.

The words were tearing apart his hopes to continue seeing Snape back at Hogwarts. Oh, they'd spend time together dealing with Order business, but it would not be like this. "Yeah. I don't want to talk about that now."

He didn't want to talk about something that would only lead to a fight. He was too tired and feeling way too sad to be able to confront Snape about anything.

"What is it that you want then?" As questions went, Snape's was mostly rhetorical.

"I want to spend the day here." It wasn't exactly a request. "Until dinner. Or at least lunch. Preferably dinner." Harry clamped his mouth shut. This wasn't the time for idiotic babble.

He wanted to stay here, in Snape's bed and stop worrying about stuff, maybe take a short nap or something. Pretend that this was where he belonged.

Snape glared. "Don't you have some things to do?"

"No! I want to do this. You can either stand there and glare or you can join me here." Looking like he would enjoy either option, Harry flopped onto his back, letting the sheet slip slightly.

It wasn't a challenge, but Snape took his time making his decision anyway. He had lots of things to do today, but he'd also expected something like this to happen. "If those are the options, you'll have to settle for a glare for a while."
Harry smiled. He'd known all along that he wouldn't be tossed out. "That's okay." It was, really. He hadn't slept well, and lazing around in Snape's bed sounded like a perfect idea. Of course having Snape there with him would be even better, but he'd take what he could get.

He refused to feel guilty about this; he'd spent the past days mostly upstairs with Ron, now it was time to be with Snape. He could always spend time with Ron after they returned to Hogwarts, when they'd be the only two people living in the Gryffindor tower while trying to pass the N.E.W.T.s.

There had been a moment of panic right after the breakfast, when Ron had made a stray comment about this being their last whole day here. It had come as a complete shock. Still holding his half empty cup of tea on his lips, he'd just stared at his friend.

It had not taken him more than a second to decide what to do next.

He knew Ron had understood perfectly how he'd spend the day; it had been fairly easy to tell by the disgusted expression. Not even bothering to say anything about the look, he'd swallowed the rest of his tea, cast a warning look at Malfoy and rushed after Snape.

Watching Snape organize his bottles and vials, Harry was glad he'd come here. During the few steps between the dining room and Snape's door, there had been half a dozen things swirling in his head. He'd wanted to crawl into Snape's bed and stay there forever; wanted to latch onto the man and never let go. In a moment of complete insanity he'd even thought about chaining himself to the staircase so that he wouldn't even have to think about leaving.

He was glad he'd had the will power to simply jump into Snape's bed. The last thing he wanted was to make some kind of a scene and act like an idiot.

Other than something Snape would call a hormonal idiot, that is.

"Have you and Mr. Weasley done any packing yet?" Refusing to look at the bed, Snape continued organizing his potions, slowly wrapping the most fragile vials into a bundle of soft cloth before placing them into the small chest.

Harry nodded. "Yeah." They had, sort of. All they had left were the clothes and the magazines and the books. Not that he'd tell Snape that.

He could tell that Snape wasn't convinced, but he was glad there were no scathing remarks. He didn't want to go packing right now. With his few belongings, it wouldn't take long. "We're almost done."

Casting a highly suspicious look over his shoulder, Snape wasn't surprised to see a faint flinch. He chose not to comment on it. If Harry wished to leave everything to the last minute, that would not concern him. "I see."

He could see that his words still made Harry look slightly worried and was immensely pleased by the reaction.

"We're sort of working on it."

Snape didn't even bother to glare again. Harry might be the hope of their world, but as a liar he really was hopeless. Ignoring the quiet muttering, he grabbed another vial and wrapped it up. Unlike the youngsters, he needed to actually concentrate on packing.

He didn't really have anything else to do. His supply of ingredients had dwindled until all he had left was a pile of heather roots. They didn't need any more potions, the wards would hold until tomorrow and all the chores he could think of were simply an excuse.
Most of his own possessions were already neatly in the trunk, and with this line of bottles finally safely in the small chest, all his valuables would be safe. He could leave the rest of the packing until after dinner.

Snape glared at the few bottles on the shelf. It wasn't like him to procrastinate like this. He had things to do and he should concentrate on them instead of contemplating something foolish.

Spending the day in bed with Harry sounded awfully frivolous, but he'd done worse things in his life.

His body certainly wasn't appalled by the idea. Snape almost snorted at that; his body had got used to the sexual encounters, just as it had been conditioned to crave food at certain hours.

Everything was already changed, this one day wouldn't really matter in the scheme of things. There was nothing he could really do with his time, so he could as well waste the day in bed.

At the same time, his mind was rebelling against the thought. Indulging Harry would only make tomorrow harder.

"Snape?" Not really knowing what he was asking, Harry sat up. He didn't care that the sheet was slipping again.

He hated sounding so damn insecure. This was already familiar to him, and he shouldn't have to question his right to be here, he hadn't questioned it for weeks, not until now. The way Snape was standing with his back turned to him wasn't a good sign, and he couldn't help to worry.

Snape didn't react to the quiet sound of his name. Instead he finished packing the potions before turning slowly around.

There was no point in asking Harry what he really wanted. Time spent with him meant having a sexual encounter, unless they were sitting on the living room couch. Then it meant silly smiles and slight touches whenever they were alone.

"You really don't have anything better to do with your time?" He didn't even need to see the firm headshake to know the answer.

He was absolutely certain Harry was lying, but since this was the last whole day they would spend here, he had no real reason to deny him this.

After tomorrow, there would not be any time or opportunity for them to do anything like this anymore. That was probably why Harry had chosen to come here.

Not that Snape was surprised by that kind of emotionalism, especially now.

The idiot wouldn't need him after they returned to Hogwarts, not really. Harry would have too much to do to miss him. It was probable he'd spend some time being maudlin because of these past weeks, but it wouldn't last. Harry would get over it before long; he would undoubtedly find someone else to sleep with.

The euphemism almost made him smile. They were not *sleeping* together.

He knew it wouldn't take long for Harry to stop even thinking about him. In far less time than they'd spent here, he would come to look back at this and wonder what had made him crawl into bed with his nasty Potions professor.
Snape spared no thought of how he would feel about the whole thing. He'd never asked for this, so he wouldn't miss it when it was gone. It was as simple as that. The whole affair had not been as disgusting as he had feared and sharing bed with Harry had not been utterly unpleasant, but he could live without that.

It would not take any effort to leave this behind.

Snape let his gaze trail over Harry's naked body that was barely covered by the sheets and rolled his eyes. Harry might be foolishly brave, but he was still only a teenager.

"Very well. You can stay until..." He considered it for a moment, and then surrendered. "Until dinner time."

It made Harry smile wistfully. Yeah, until dinner time. Like they could share the things until they left here.

His smile widened as Snape closed the lid on the chest that now held his potions and then moved away from the table. It was clear that there would be no more packing done here for some time; the dark fire in Snape's eyes spoke of more pleasurable things. "Good."

Refusing to consider that leaving here would indeed be the end, he moved to the side a little and then reached out with his hand to help Snape to unbutton his robes.

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**Part 28**

Eppy was standing at the doorway, looking as forbidding as ever. She surveyed the dining room before entering. Carrying the tray to the table, she banged it down, not even wincing as the spoons and cups rattled against the plates.

The sound was surprisingly loud in the utter silence.

Pushing his food around the plate, Harry tried not to pay attention to the very uncomfortable atmosphere in the room. He wasn't at all hungry, unlike Ron, who seemed to be shoveling his food with fervor. He just couldn't eat, dreading the moment they'd have to leave this place and go back into the real world.

It had felt like such a long time when they'd left Hogwarts; months away from the bustle of their everyday life. Even when they'd already spent weeks here, it had felt like an eternity. The weather had gradually changed when spring turned into summer, the days feeling as long and relaxing as ever.

Harry had known all along that they'd eventually go back to Hogwarts, had been aware of the date for some time now, but now that the day had arrived, he was stunned.

They were really going to leave.

Reality. That was what Snape had said. As if all these weeks spent here were only a dream. Harry wanted to argue that, but couldn't. The peace and quiet had been lulling him into the false notion of security. Like this was a refuge from everything that was wrong in his life.

A dream. A really nice dream. But all the good dreams ended when you woke up.

He'd always felt amused by people who lived in their own illusions, and now he found out he'd been immersed in one as well. The peace and quiet here were nothing more but a mirage, his time together
with Snape a fantasy.

That was something he didn't want to think about. Things would change when they were back in Hogwarts and he would have to decide what to do next. There would be exams and Order meetings. Their world expecting him to be something he could never truly be.

Snape would have a job to do and he would go back to his life. The solitude of the dungeons, the annoyance of grading papers, his old passion, brewing potions. Would there be any chance for him to be a part of that life?

It was clear that Snape didn't think so.

Next to him, Ron leaned back, letting out a satisfied sigh. Harry didn't have to wonder why. He already knew how glad Ron was to get back to where he belonged.

He missed his family and was probably bored to tears already. He wouldn't miss this. If anything, he'd probably try to suppress everything that had happened here from his mind.

It wouldn't be too difficult. There would be lots of things to do back at the school. People to talk to.

Harry pushed his food around. Yes. There would be lots of people who would expect things from him, the whole wizarding world waiting breathlessly for him to save them from Voldemort. The Ministry, Dumbledore, reporters and multitudes of ordinary wizards and witches all seeing him in a different light, but sharing one thing; the interest. The conviction that he was indeed going to be the greatest hero of all times.

He hated that. To him, this felt like a place where he could belong. He liked everything here; the small cottage, the silence. If he had more time, he'd try to really befriend the snake. See if he could de-gnome the whole garden and maybe even plant something. Keep a crup. Go swimming on lazy summer afternoons. Spend quiet evenings doing nothing special, then retiring, snuggling close to Snape.

Simple wishes, none of which would come true.

Stifling a suffering sigh, he stabbed at his food with the fork. He didn't want to sit here and pretend he was eating. He would have preferred staying upstairs or in Snape's room. But Snape had insisted they all came here to eat.

He could see the reason behind it. Leaving the small room had been hard enough. He'd have to focus now, to eat, or at least pretend he was indeed eating. Then stay in the living room until the floo opened and they would have to leave.

Harry noticed Malfoy didn't have much of an appetite either. He could well guess why. Returning to Hogwarts wasn't easy for the Slytherin either. At least Harry knew what would happen when he went back; Malfoy didn't.

As if sensing his stare, Malfoy looked up at him for a second before returning his attention back at the plate.

He looked oddly hesitant, almost apologizing. No trace of his arrogance evident. There was no fawning and cringing either.

Ron might hate him, but Harry wasn't sure he could. Not when he could so clearly see that Malfoy was definitely not gloating.
It was too much for Harry to think about right now. Later on, he'd probably spend hours wondering what to do with Malfoy and how they could use his knowledge in the fights, if he agreed to work with the Order.

But not now. Thinking about strategy like that would have to wait. Harry was concentrating on surviving the day.

Maybe it had been stupid to grow so close to Snape. He'd never been so painfully aware of that as he'd been earlier, when he'd pulled his trousers back on, knowing that this was indeed the last time they had shared the bed. The thought had driven him to hug Snape and it had been one of the hardest things ever to let go.

Harry couldn't regret any of the moments he'd spent with Snape, but was well aware that lusting after the man would have been so much easier to bear than losing this.

He sighed, pushing his food around the plate again. He wished this was over with, at the same time dreading the moment they'd really have to leave.

Ron was the first one to lower his utensils. He wiped his mouth on a napkin -- instead of his sleeve -- and sat back, waiting for the others to finish. He seemed impatient, eager to leave already.

Not that Harry could really resent him for that.

It was useless. He wasn't going to finish his meal. He hadn't taken more than a few bites anyway. Harry cast a sideways look around the table, seeing that Malfoy had barely touched his food either.

Their last dinner here, and the memory of it would be of complete misery. Reminding Harry of all the uncomfortable moments they'd shared, almost drowning all the joy he'd experienced.

He pushed the thought away. There would be enough time to angst over the whole thing later on. He didn't want to spoil their last moments here by wallowing.

The kitchen door banged open, making everyone jump. The silence in the small dining area had become almost a vacuum. The loud sound was startling, even though it was expected; it was a very efficient way for an old house elf to make an annoyed entrance.

Muttering to herself, Eppy gathered the plates. She seemed to be making more noise than usual, almost careless with the cups as she piled them on the tray.

Her ears were twitching nervously as she waited for Draco to push his plate closer, the delay obviously annoying her more than usual. The endless stream of barely heard muttering turned harsher. None of the words were really recognizable but their meaning was clear.

When the tray was finally laden and the old house elf had wiped crumbs and spilled liquid from the table with a rag, she stood there, staring at everyone.

It was clear that there was something she really wanted to say.

Harry was certain there would be a scolding. She'd held her tongue so often, she was bound to let it all out now that they were leaving.

Instead of letting out a string of annoyed words, Eppy just stood there, her ears twitching faster. Her long nose was joining the twitch, making her look like she was trying some kind of an ancient dance of irritation. Then she opened her mouth as if to say something.
Nothing intelligible came out. Raising the rag to her face, she started to cry. "Eppy doesn't want you to go!" Her whole being shook as she finally wailed the words out.

Looking shocked, Harry stared at the crying house elf. He blinked as she blew her nose on the already moist rag. "Um... Eppy?" He glanced around the table, noticing that all the others looked as stunned as he was.

She didn't pay any attention to him. Shaking even more, she wiped her face in the rag. "Eppy doesn't want you to go! Eppy doesn't want to stay here alone with nothing to do! Eppy doesn't even mind you making a mess!" Another moist sound as she blew her nose again.

"Eppy?" Harry tried to catch her attention. He had no idea what to say. Maybe he could assure her that he'd talk to Dumbledore about her or maybe he could ask if the Weasleys could use a house elf. Maybe Remus would know someone who'd need a grouchy helper like Eppy.

Before he could actually voice any of his thoughts, Eppy crumpled her rag and shoved it under her tunic. Her ears lifted slightly as she muttered, "Eppy is a damn fool!" Casting a glare around the room, she grabbed the tray and wobbled out of the small room.

Leaving four stunned wizards staring after her.

Harry sighed. He knew exactly how Eppy felt. He didn't want them to leave either.

"I trust no one else has the need for such a display." Pushing his chair back, Snape got to his feet. He glared until he saw the teenagers shake their head. "Good. It's time we left this place. Go and get your trunks." The black robes billowed as he left the room.

It reminded everyone of the way he always entered the Potions class.

Harry hated it.

They were going to leave. There was nothing here for them anymore, they all knew it. All the trunks were already packed, and it almost seemed as if the small cottage was about to fall asleep again.

Ignoring the glare Ron threw at him, Harry let out a sufferingsigh. Then he pushed his chair back. "I think we'd better get our stuff." He knew he sounded resigned, but couldn't help it.

He walked silently out of the dining area, knowing he wouldn't be coming back. The firmly shut door on the opposite side of the small hallway was beckoning for him, but he knew that this time he wouldn't be welcome. With another sigh, he turned to climb up the stairs.

Everything reminded him of the ending of an era. Their room was empty, there weren't even lonely socks under the beds anymore.

Grabbing his trunk and hauling it up, he didn't look back when he walked out of the room. He'd had such nightmares in here, but also good nights, and he hated to leave.

He was going to do this right and stay in control. It had already been so damn hard to kiss Snape goodbye, knowing it was probably the last kiss they'd share.

The thought made him want to drop the trunk and run to Snape's room. Even as his fingers flexed, ready to lose their grip on the handle, the door downstairs opened, and Snape marched across the hallway into the living room, pushing his shrunken trunk into his pocket.

Harry froze on the stairs. They were about to leave this all too brief moment of peace behind, and
he'd needed to hold onto it for a moment longer. And now it was too late.

He should never have agreed to share things with Snape for as long as they stayed here. He'd ignored the implications then, so damn sure that he'd manage to continue this back at Hogwarts. Even now, there was a faint glimmer of hope somewhere at the back of his mind, driving him insane.

They hadn't spoken about it, not the way they'd always been able to talk about everything. Snape had seemed content with the silence, and he'd been too damn scared to say anything. He had no idea why. It would have been best to tell Snape he wanted more of this. That he wanted more.

Afternoons spent in bed. Arguing about things. Spending quiet evenings doing nothing special.

Harry heard Ron stagger down the stairs behind him, and forced himself to move. One step at the time, he walked downstairs and then into the living room. Resisted the urge to say something stupid when he saw Snape sit on the couch with Malfoy next to him.

"Did you make sure you didn't leave anything under the beds?" Snape asked. He knew how messy Harry could be, and could only guess how much worse Weasley was. Considering the way he left his magazines and books laying all around the house, he was probably a complete slob in his own room.

There were two identical nods.

Snape handed a small vial to Harry, "Sprinkle a few drops over your trunk. That should be enough." The instructions came out with a clipped tone, as if he was back in the classroom.

He could see the flinch his words produced and suppressed a sigh. This would be painfully awkward. Maybe he should have stayed in his room instead of distancing himself and focusing on what would happen next so that Harry could have made the unavoidable big emotional scene there. In private.

This would have to do. Harry would undoubtedly say something incredibly Gryffindor now that they didn't have any time for one final tumble in bed. Then they would go back to where they belonged, and very soon this would just be a distant memory for all of them.

Not a completely disgusting and appalling memory, but a memory nevertheless. He would not try to bury it under work and pretend as if this had never happened.

How curious.

When he'd agreed on hiding here with his students, he'd known it wouldn't be easy, but he'd had no idea of how foolish the three would turn out to be. It was incredible, considering he knew just how stupid teenagers could be. But he'd never thought of this.

That's why it would be good to return to his dungeons. Away from Ron Weasley's haunted expression and the horrified looks he always seemed to throw at him. It would be peaceful in Hogwarts; no students, no time to simply sit idly and watch gnomes stampede all over the garden. No surprisingly intelligent conversations with Harry.

He refused to even think about what else he wouldn't be sharing with Harry Potter.

It would be a good thing to stop this madness. Returning to Hogwarts meant returning to the routines he had followed for decades. To the world where he was a teacher, a member of the Order. He would continue his work in peace and would let the others do the same.
It was getting darker outside, the clouds that had gathered over the small cottage releasing a warm shower of rain that tapped the windows in an almost soothing pattern. The ticking of the clock sounded unusually loud, as all the four men sat in the living room, waiting. When the floo finally opened, Harry, Ron and Draco all jumped slightly at the wooshing sound.

"All right. Get ready to floo out of here." With a last glance around the room, knowing that he for one had not left anything behind, Snape got to his feet.

He watched the teenagers move sluggishly towards the fireplace. The sight made him sneer. There were some things he was definitely not going to miss from his stay here.

"Ready, sir," Draco muttered from under his breath. He was torn between wishing they could stay and wishing they would go already. If they really had to leave this place, he preferred doing so without any last minute hysterics from Weasley.

Ron cast a glare at the Slytherin, but didn't make any comments. "I'm ready too, sir."

There was an awkward silence.

Since this was unavoidable, Snape turned to look at Harry, who was still standing by the couch, looking reluctant to move.

The gaze that met his was full of sadness. Snape had been expecting that, wondering when he would break. But amazingly there was a hard expression on Harry's face, indicating that there would be no sniveling and hysterics.

"I wish we could stay here," Harry said.

To his surprise, Snape could relate to that. He knew what would wait for them at Hogwarts; not only routine and familiarity. "I know you do. But it's time to go." It came out quietly.

He didn't even bother to try to sound annoyed for Weasley's and Malfoy's sake.

Nodding, Harry looked down, not saying anything. He knew they'd already said goodbye, but he wished he had the courage to simply lean forward and kiss the annoying man one more time.

He had an awful feeling that once they left the cottage, he would somehow lose Snape completely. It was an irrational fear, but he couldn't help it. He always lost everything dear to him. Why would this be any different?

On the other side of the room, Ron was trying hard not to gag. He kept glaring at Malfoy, glad that they would finally be rid of the Slytherins. He for one would not be missing this place. The sooner they got back to where they belonged the better.

He watched with anticipation as Snape walked closer to the fireplace. Hopefully the trip back to Hogwarts wouldn't take as long as their voyage here. There was no need for the secrecy anymore, the hiding here was over.

"I'll go first." Not bothering to explain the obvious reason for that, Snape waited until everyone nodded. "Try not to make a total mess of the flooing."

The faint smile on Harry's face was more pained than happy.

"Fawkes' Nest!"
The flash of green took Snape away and the room felt bigger somehow, as if it was easier to breathe. Ron smiled broadly, ignoring Malfoy. Then he met Harry's gaze and the smile died on his lips.

"I'll go next." Harry's voice was hollow. For once, he didn't care what would happen between Ron and Malfoy. He couldn't stay here for a moment longer.

Taking a better hold on his shrunken trunk, he went to take some of the floo powder.

He did his best not to think of anything as he tossed the powder down and said the code word for yet another safe house.

The floo network sent him flying across the distance, making him dizzy once again. He didn't usually pay attention to the sensation, used to it after all the times he'd flood between the dungeons and the common room. Now he was feeling light headed. Had to be because of the months he'd spent not using the floo.

Coughing, Harry stepped out of the fireplace. Expecting to see only Snape standing alone there, he froze for a fraction of a second as he saw a dark figure sitting on a couch while Snape was almost next to him. The next moment his hand was reaching for his wand, the words of a curse already on his lips. It was an instinct, even though he did know that if there had been a real danger, Snape would have taken care of it.

"It's all right. It's just me." Soft words rang in the room, the voice slightly alarmed.

"Hermione?" Lowering his wand, Harry grinned. "What are you doing here?" It was the first really happy moment today; seeing her was great.

Hermione stood up and came to hug Harry. "The Headmaster sent me. He thought it was best to spend the night here. Everyone's busy back home, packing and planning on the move." She paused for a moment, drawing in breath. "It's good to see you again!"

"Good to see you too, Hermione." Harry smiled as he let go of her. The weeks at the cottage had been great but he had really missed her.

A moment later, Ron came out of the fireplace, coughing slightly. His face was beet red. Harry wondered if Malfoy had said something to him. It didn't sound plausible, but you never knew with him.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, moving to hug him too. There was no hesitation in either one of them; they just held on to each other for a long time.

Harry watched those two with a smile on his lips. It had sometimes felt weird to spend time without Hermione around. The part of him that was still incredibly happy about his friendship with Ron and Hermione deemed everything to be all right again. The thought made him glance to his left, to Snape, who was looking at the two hugging Gryffindors with a slight sneer on his lips.

Yes, everything was back to normal.

Harry hated it.

"Potter." Seeing that Harry was focusing at him, Snape moved closer to him. "According to Miss. Granger, the Headmaster wishes to see me right now. You and Mr. Weasley will stay here with her for the night and return to Hogwarts tomorrow. I shall leave immediately with Mr. Malfoy." He thought it would be best not to leave the boy with the Gryffindors.
It made Harry freeze inside. He had known that going back to Hogwarts would change things, but he wasn't ready to part from Snape yet. "Oh." The small sigh was full of disappointment.

"Yes." Snape nodded. He was actually glad that Albus had sent him the message. This way there would be no big emotional scene at Hogwarts. Harry could stay with his friends and he could go back to the life he'd built for himself.

He waited patiently until young Malfoy came out of the fireplace. Telling the boy what they would do was easy. Malfoy never objected to what he said.

"Good bye professor Snape." From the tone of her voice, it was clear that Hermione had not forgotten that Snape had saved McGonagall's life. She managed to sound completely calm, respectful. Not exactly the way they had addressed the Potions master in the past.

The muffled grunt Ron let out could be interpreted as a farewell too. He didn't pay any attention to Malfoy.

"Good bye, Miss. Granger. Mr. Weasley." Ignoring the hesitant smile and the second grunt, Snape turned back to look at Harry.

It always amazing him how bad Harry was at hiding his emotions. No matter how he tried to look calm and composed, his eyes always betrayed him. Snape hadn't expected to see such amount of sadness there. Like he was actually losing something that was precious to him.

They would still be comrades in arms, no matter what. Weeks of physical intimacy couldn't change that. He doubted Harry would even think about their time together after he'd settled in with his friends again.

Harry smiled a wobbly little smile. "Tell the Headmaster about my dreams." He saw the instant nod. It didn't really make him feel any better. "I'll be... seeing you, then." It came out as a hesitant question instead of the quip he'd aimed for.

"I don't doubt it at all," Snape said, missing the level of sarcasm he'd aimed for. He didn't have the energy to even sneer. Right now, he just wanted to get back to Hogwarts and try to forget all the lunacy he'd got himself into during the past few months. No matter how impossible that might be.

A quick nod towards Malfoy was enough, and a moment later they both disappeared into green flames, leaving the three Gryffindors alone in the room.

Trying to keep the pain out of his face, Harry stood there, staring into the empty fireplace.
"Thank Merlin!" Letting the praise out as a relieved sigh, Ron turned his back to the fireplace.

It had been wondrous to see the two Slytherins floo out of here, out of his life. Spending a couple of months cooped up in a small cottage with Malfoy and Snape had been really awful, but maybe now he could put the whole thing behind him and try to forget all about it.

He noticed the strange silence in the room at the same time as Hermione cast a questioning look at him. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that Harry was still staring into the fireplace.

"Hey, Harry." Ron nudged his friend. He was prepared to see his friend startled, but instead, Harry just turned around, looking gloomy. He didn't need any explanations for the expression. Moping after Snape? Probably.

He'd have to talk to Hermione about that. As soon as possible.

Forcing a small smile onto his lips, Harry sighed. There was no use in wallowing in dark thoughts right now. "I'm all right." The lie was instinctive, slipping out before he could even think. He knew Ron wouldn't believe it.

The very knowing look on his friend's face confirmed that.

Harry didn't want to talk about it right now. He knew that now that Snape was gone, Ron would undoubtedly want to talk about him. It was something he had to deal with later on, but he couldn't do it now when he wanted nothing more than floo after Snape.

He pushed away that as well. Their fantasy life at the cottage was over and it was time to step back to reality. "Is everything all right back home?" He could already tell by Hermione's relaxed expression that his nightmares had been just dreams, but he couldn't help asking.

She nodded. "Everything's fine. Nothing's really changed." Grabbing Ron's arm, she led him to the couch.

Harry followed them silently, sitting down on an armchair, collecting his robes around him as if he was feeling cold.

Frowning a little, Hermione added, "Oh, except that Dumbledore gave us the Potions exam. And..." Her expression wavered for a moment.

Harry was instantly filled with dread. "What?"

"Hagrid," Hermione smiled, "Proposed to Madam Maxime. He didn't say what the answer was, but he's been made the official spokesman between the Order and Beauxbaton board of directors." She could still remember his happy grin when he'd told her about it. "We gave him a big party before he left to France."

Relieved, Harry sagged back on the chair. Hagrid was in France? He'd miss him, but at least he was far away from the future battlezone. That was excellent news. "I say, that's marvelous! Do you think they'll invite us to the wedding?"
They all chuckled at that. It would be a sight to see. Hagrid all nervous in a tux, probably insisting that Fang acted as a witness to the ceremony and the happy couple cutting a wedding cake that was shaped like some kind of a magical beast.

Hermione regained her composure first, casting a fond look at Ron, who was still laughing. "We did lose the House Cup, though. Came in second. Ravenclaw won."

That made Ron stop laughing. He frowned for a second, but then shrugged, "Well, as long as we beat Slytherin, everything’s all right." The thought of Malfoy hearing this made him feel better.

Of course thinking about him also made him think of Snape. He wondered if he should wait until he and Hermione were alone to bring up the whole mess Harry had gotten into.

He didn't like the tired look on Harry's face, so he kept his mouth shut. But he would definitely need to talk to Hermione about it later on! She could find out if Harry was under some kind of a spell. He knew he was reaching, but couldn't accept the possibility of Harry really being insane enough to fancy Snape without any kind of an outside influence.

"What else..." Hermione thought for a moment. "My mum says hi. Your mum and Sirius send their love. Fred and George asked me to bring you a 'surprise', but I decided that wasn't a good idea."

There was more grinning at that.

"Can you imagine what they could have sent us? The last time I talked to them, they were busy with transformation potions for soda." There would definitely be things to explore when they got back home. Ron was certain of that.

The Canary Custard was already an oldie. Now that the twins were able to concentrate fully on their insane ideas, they were developing new products that made the Custard pale in comparison.

"I know." Refusing to say anything about the things Ginny had told her, Hermione went on, "Professor Pahicna left a week before the exams. No one knows where she went, but there were lots of rumors."

Neither Harry nor Ron was surprised at that. Actually, if she'd been able to finish her job as the DADA teacher, both would have probably fainted with shock.

"We all passed the N.E.W.T.s. Even Neville managed to pass the mandatory Potions exam. You should have seen his face. I was sure he was about to have a heart attack!"

Ron cringed as he saw the strange mixture of longing and amusement on Harry's face. He could bet he was thinking about Snape's reaction to that. It was quite disturbing. Why did that greasy creep have to invade every moment? This was supposed to be just about him and Harry and Hermione, not about disgusting Slytherins.

And he was not about to think about Malfoy!

"Oh, and you both passed the Divinations N.E.W.T.s."

Harry looked puzzled. "Passed? But we haven't even taken the exam yet." He wasn't really looking forward to the whole thing. There were more important things to do than to predict his own death from the tealeaves.

"I know." Hermione sounded half amused, half outraged. "But professor Trelawney had a vision about you passing the exam, so..." She spread her arms. "She gave Ron the same as always, and
because she thinks this may well be your last chance to enjoy anything in life..."

"Let me guess. I got a perfect score." It wasn't exactly surprising to Harry. He didn't really care;
Divinations was a hoax anyway.

She nodded. "Yes. She gave Parvati and Lavender the same as well." Considering that she knew
they hadn't really studied for the exam and had got the grade mostly because they worshipped their
teacher, she was still unable to feel anything but disgust about the whole thing.

Pushing the surprisingly bitter thoughts out of her mind, Hermione asked, "So, did anything
interesting happen while you were staying away?" She was eager to hear everything about it. Even
though she'd been busy back home, she'd missed her friends awfully.

It had been the worst spring ever. She hadn't been able to concentrate properly on the reading,
spending most of her time working with Terry to keep everyone in line and studying. Thinking about
her partner always made her feel calm, the serious Ravenclaw had been an excellent Head Boy and
the Ravenclaws' success in the House Cup was mostly due to him. Hermione believed they indeed
deserved it.

Not that she'd ever tell Ron about that.

Ron thought of all the things he could say about their stay at the cottage. Maybe tell her about
the snake. Hermione would be fascinated, he was sure.

Or maybe he'd tell her about Eppy and her grumpy ways. The horrid outhouse. All the quiet
afternoons he'd spent with Harry, doing nothing special, just enjoying the solid friendship between
them. The way they had studied for the Potions exam and passed. She'd like to hear that.

Without a thought, he blurted out, "Harry's shagging Snape." He couldn't help it. The whole thing
still sounded weird.

Seeing Hermione's shock made him feel slightly better. At least the whole world hadn't gone insane.

"Ron!" For a second, Harry wanted to either slap his friend or retort with 'Ron is shagging Malfoy'.
He didn't think Hermione could handle that, though. She was already looking like she was going to
have an apoplexy.

It wasn't exactly a good sign.

"You.... Harry? Is that true?" Choking the words out, Hermione stared at him. "You're... involved
with a professor?"

Harry thought for a moment. "Yes. Well, technically, Snape's not my professor anymore, but yes,
I'm... involved with him." He didn't know of a better word to use.

He was glad she wasn't repeating 'you're shagging Snape' as Ron had when he'd first found out. She
had more style than that.

"You... You're..." She had some problems getting the words out. "Involved with Snape?" Then her
eyes widened even more. "You're shagging Snape?"

Harry groaned. Careful not to look at Ron, feeling like he'd strangle him if he saw him grin, he said
calmly, "Yes."

There was a completely shocked silence as Hermione just stared at him. Trying to collect her
thoughts, she turned to look at Ron. "Do you think he might be under the Imperius? Or maybe drugged somehow?" Her voice was deadly serious.

"I don't know." Ron had wondered about that himself. There had been no way for him to find out while they'd stayed at the cottage. "He did drink some Draught of the Living Death, but I had that too." It hadn't turned him into a total git.

No. That had happened a moment before drinking the potion. On both occasions.

Sighing, Harry shook his head. "No. I'm not drugged or cursed or insane." He cast a glare at Ron. It was starting to annoy him, the mistrust his friend was showing.

"You and Snape?" It was clear that Hermione had trouble to believe anyone would like to be associated with Snape like that. She had seen and heard lots of strange things, first as the Gryffindor prefect and then as the Head Girl, but she'd never heard of anyone ever even having a crush on their Potions master.

A goofy smile spread to Harry's lips, even though his chest kind of felt tight. He wasn't sure if he should nod at that, but it just sounded so right. "Yes. Me and Snape."

Hermione didn't want to believe what she was seeing, but she couldn't deny the fact that Harry actually looked happy. "Oh." Still, she had to glance at Ron. "And this is not a joke?" One never knew with the Weasleys.

"Merlin, I wish it was!" Ignoring the way Harry looked at him, Ron sighed. "No. It's not a joke."

After thinking for a moment, Hermione still found it impossible to believe. She could see Harry and Ron were both serious about this, but it still sounded ridiculous. Harry and Snape? "Why?"

Harry had no idea how to explain this to her. It had been a pain to go through this with Ron, and he'd been there to see at least some of the changes between him and Snape. "I..." He remembered the talk he and Ron had shared ages ago. "I got to know him outside the class. In Order meetings."

As he'd suspected, there was a hint of confused resentment in her eyes. She was probably thinking exactly the same as Ron had, wondering about all the things he had kept from them. Fortunately she didn't say anything.

"He's honest. At least to me. He's never lied or sucked up to me." The insults and sarcasm wasn't all that big a deal. Honesty was imperative.

"Yeah. He really doesn't coddle you." Ron's voice had a slight edge. "He's still the same nasty git we all know and hate. Our greasy, nasty severe Snape." Realizing he'd accidentally made a pun, he grinned.

"Severus." Hermione couldn't help correcting it. Her gaze was still fixed into Harry and she had to admit she liked what she saw, even though this whole thing sounded preposterous. There was no trace of the haunted look in his eyes, even though he did look slightly sad. "'Verus', like true or real, right?"

Harry nodded. He'd never really thought about that, but of course Hermione would say something like that, she paid attention to every detail.

"Yeah, yeah. Drop two letters from his last name, and you get 'ape'. So what?" The way Hermione didn't seem to be completely disgusted by this whole thing was making Ron angry. Was he the only one with brains here?
Knowing that Ron was still shocked about his relationship with Snape, Harry refrained from hexing him. "I like him." It was as simple and as complicated as that.

"I see." Hermione really did see it. There was a definite change in Harry's tone when he talked about Snape; like he wasn't a complete monster. She could remember Snape stumble and then fall on his knees, holding professor McGonagall tight against his chest. No. He wasn't a monster. "And does he like you?"

There had never been any sign that their dreaded Potions master even tolerated Harry.

Ron had never thought of it this way, he'd been too caught up in the stupid drama his life had become. Waiting for the answer, he wondered what Harry would say because he honestly didn't know.

It was something Harry wasn't too happy discussing about. He knew things had changed now that Snape was back at Hogwarts, and when they returned to the school as well, he'd have to work hard to get everything back the way they'd been for such a short time.

Making proper strategies for the future would have to wait. If he concentrated on sharing things with Snape, Hermione would undoubtedly notice how empty that made him feel.

"He doesn't hate me."

He wasn't sure it made any sense, at least to his friends who both knew what Snape was like in the classroom. How could he really explain how someone like that could be so damn important to him in a way that didn't make him sound like a complete idiot?

To Hermione, that was enough. "Okay." The calm satisfaction in her friend was more telling than words. She smiled. "Good."

Harry swallowed. This acceptance was making this worse somehow. If things were different, he'd be overjoyed. But not now.

It had been a good idea not to tell Ron that there was a distinct possibility that his thing with Snape was over. Why complicate things unnecessarily? He doubted Ron would have understood when he himself didn't understand it either.

"You are both insane!" Shaking his head with disgust, Ron stared at his friends. He'd been certain Hermione would see it as insanity, just like he did.

Harry and Hermione shared a knowing look at the familiar words and then smirked at Ron. It was almost as if they were all back in the library, browsing through the heavy volumes and memorizing charms. The memory was so clear it wiped away the past months and carried them back to a simpler time.

"Oh shut up!" Ron was unable to keep the smirk from spreading to his lips as well. He didn't want to turn this into a joke, but had to admit that maybe now wasn't the time for a serious conversation. They could talk more later.

Seeing Harry look relieved when he simply stuck out his tongue at Hermione, he knew it was the right decision.

The conversation veered back to the more mundane topics after that, Hermione telling more about the life at Hogwarts and Ron making a few comments about Eppy. Harry stayed mostly quiet, watching his friends and enjoying the comfortable atmosphere.
Things were going to be all right. It was good to see Ron look so happy, a striking contrast to the past few days.

One less thing for him to worry about. He could well guess what was waiting for him back home; not a long summer vacation, but hard work with his exams and then with the Order. He was going to be too busy thinking about the war to really concentrate on his friend's problems.

He almost hoped he would be too busy to concentrate on his own problems as well.

As Ron disappeared to the loo, Harry stretched his legs padding to the window. He was glad Hermione joined him a moment later, not needing any time to wallow. There was nothing to see out there, the landscape hidden in the darkness, but he wondered where they were anyway. Not far from Hogwarts, he thought.

Ron's delighted yell rang in the hallway. "Indoor plumbing! Thank Merlin!" He sounded so happy Harry had to grin at that.

At Hermione's questioning look, he muttered, "There was just an outhouse at the cottage." He sounded wistful. He missed even the outhouse with the smell and the insects and the magical light that didn't always burn as bright as you wanted it to.

They could hear the sound of the toilet being flushed, accompanied by another delighted yell.

"I'm so glad you two are back." Smiling happily, Hermione leaned against Harry. "I've missed you."

Harry wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders, squeezing slightly. "I've missed you too, Hermione!" It wasn't a lie, even though he had been too busy to really miss anyone when they'd been gone, it was good to see her again.

They stood there together for a moment, listening to the faint sound of water being ran in the bathroom.

Clearing his throat, Harry muttered. "About Snape... You didn't seem shocked about... You know. Him being a guy." Not that Harry had expected her to be. But she should have at least been slightly stunned. Or even surprised.

Hermione laughed. "After watching for weeks as you invented all sorts of excuses to go near the Hufflepuff rooms and then disappear somewhere with Justin, that was not a surprise."

That was a bit disappointing. Harry had thought no one had noticed that unfortunate affair, mostly because of the way it had ended.

"Why? Did Ron have problems about you seeing a man?"

"No." Harry shook his head. He didn't bother to add that Ron's problems were about the identity of the man, not his gender.

He didn't want to talk about this anymore. Maybe later, when he knew what was happening, he'd sit down with Hermione and babble for hours. Not yet. Not when he had no idea when he'd see Snape again.

There would be other things to think about now.

It was already late, but none of the three Gryffindors felt like going to bed yet. Scrounging through the kitchen -- where Ron let out more delighted yells as he saw that the cupboards were all full --
they collected a huge snack and then retired to the living room to eat.

By a mutual agreement they didn't return to the subject of Snape and shagging.

Feeling still slightly hollow inside, Harry tried his best not to let any of his misery show. To his surprise, it wasn't really hard. The sharp and funny comments Hermione made about everything that had happened while they'd been away made him smile a genuine smile, and he was glad things were well back home.

The light banter was familiar and it was easy to concentrate on that. Even when all three started to nod a little and their conversation was blurred by yawns, they stayed in the living room, reluctant to break the companionable mood.

It was Hermione, who finally suggested they retired for the night. She was still used to the daily rhythm back at the school, and her body was screaming for her to get some sleep.

Being something close to real gentlemen, Harry and Ron told her she could use the bathroom first. Ron ruined it slightly by muttering comments about saving them at least some warm water, but Hermione pretended not to hear it, just winking at Harry over Ron's shoulder.

It was good to have her friends back.

There was enough room for them all to sleep alone, but out of habit, Harry and Ron shared a room. It was somehow comforting to hear the sounds of someone else breathing; the familiar nocturnal sounds that had been with them for seven years.

Harry wondered if he'd ever get used to sleeping alone.

After Ron had finished with his prolonged ablutions, Harry went to grab a shower. He stood under the warm spray for a long time and then washed quickly without paying much attention to the bottles on the ledge. He didn't want to get all moody right now.

He stepped out of the large bedroom long enough to wish Hermione good night. Yawning, he realized he was actually tired. No wonder after a more or less sleepless night.

Exhausted, Harry collapsed on the bed, glad that they could sleep late the next morning.

Dreams came and went that night, never clear or long lasting, confusing images and flashes from things he'd read and heard. Not exactly nightmares, but strange enough to make his sleep restless.

The dreams haunted him through the night, but when he woke up, he didn't remember anything about them.

Part 2

It was past dinner time when the three Gryffindors were finally able to floo into Hogwarts.

Waiting for the floo to open again hadn't been too bad. They'd had a lot to talk about, things to reminisce. The cupboards in the kitchen had been refilled during the night and Ron was still ecstatic by the fact that the bathroom inside was fully functional. Everything was just fine.

Harry watched Hermione disappear into the fireplace and sighed. Staying here for the night had been a prolonged transition between a dream and something that could well be a nightmare.
The exams, the war. Leaving Hogwarts behind. People milling around him, expecting him to actually know things about battle strategies, reporters haunting his every step. Well wishers and those who hated him for his fame.

It was definitely not something he was looking forward to.

He tried very hard not to think about the other things waiting for him at Hogwarts. Or not waiting. Hermione had been unable to tell him anything more about Dumbledore's summoning, so he didn't even know if Snape would be at the school.

Harry hoped he'd be there, but considering how the universe always seemed to enjoy watching him fall on his face, he wasn't too optimistic about it.

"I think you should go first." Gesturing at the fireplace, Ron stood back and waited. He didn't feel comfortable leaving Harry behind alone.

Harry tried to smile in response, but couldn't produce more than a twitch on his lips. Grabbing some of the floo powder, he stepped into the fireplace and stated, "Hogwarts!" Then he felt being pulled through space.

He managed not to stumble as he stepped out of the fireplace, coughing as his lungs objected the soot flying around him. The hero had returned! What an undignified way to come back to the one place he'd always considered as home.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm just out of practice." Harry managed a smile. He brushed the soot out of his robes without much enthusiasm.

Hermione looked doubtful, but let it go. A moment later the floo let out a wooshing sound, and then Ron stepped calmly out.

It was quiet in the huge Entrance Hall, no sounds of people coming from the staircase. Harry found that somehow unnerving, he was used to the silence, but not like this when it was still daytime and he wasn't sneaking around in the darkness, hiding underneath his invisibility cloak.

"So what do we do now?" Somehow even the air here felt different. Better. Ron was feeling all energetic. "Should we go and see Dumbledore, or do we just go upstairs?" He wondered if there was anything to eat in the Gryffindor tower. Probably not. Maybe they could call Dobby and have him bring them a snack.

A bit surprised that there was no one here to greet them already, Harry looked at Hermione.

"I don't know. About you, that is." She shrugged. "You'd probably better go to see the Headmaster." It was always the safest thing to do.

That made Ron stare. "What? Aren't you staying?" Bugger! Just when things were looking normal again.

"No. I need to go home. My mum and dad are waiting." After everything that had happened, Hermione was surprised they hadn't objected to her one extra day at school. Ever since they'd found out about the war in the wizarding world, they'd been acting overly protective. "They're... They worry." She didn't need to say anything else, they all understood that. "But I'll be back in a week or so."
She was a part of this. University would have to wait, there was no way in hell she'd abandon her friends now. This was her world as well, so the fight was hers too.

Harry stepped closer to her, hugging her tight. "I hate to see you go, but I understand why you have to." Hermione's parents were really nice, and he knew they missed her. "Owl us."

"I will." She hugged him back, wondering just when exactly had he become so mature about things. As she let him go, she could see that Ron was still disappointed about her leaving. "Stop sulking, Ron. It's only a week!"

Her exasperation was so familiar from their hours of studying together, Ron could do nothing but nod. The memory of spending time in the library did make him shiver too. Hiding the shiver by stepping closer and then pulling Hermione into a bone crunching embrace, he said, "Say hi to your mum for me!"

"Of course."

Harry and Ron watched her straighten her robes. They both sighed and then smiled at each other. For a short moment it had been like they were back in a less complicated life, when they had been together all the time, the Gryffindor trio.

Hermione grinned at the two of them, knowing exactly what they were thinking. "I'll see you in a few days then." She knew her parents would be worried about her future, and she needed these few days to try to calm them down.

"Take your time." It was strange, how wistful the notion of loving, worried parents could always make Harry. "We'll be fine. You make sure your family can handle you doing this now." He doubted the Muggles had any idea of what a war in the wizarding world really meant. It was a thing to be grateful of.

Nodding, Hermione hugged him, and then hugged Ron again. Grabbing her bag, she stepped back into the fireplace. "Diagon Alley!"

With a green flash she was gone.

Ron let the smile ooze away from his face. He was feeling crummy. Not sad, but tired. He hadn't slept too well and considering the dark smudges under Harry's eyes, he could bet that he hadn't either. "So you think we should go to see Dumbledore?" Going to the Gryffindor tower and to his bed sounded like a much better idea.

"I think so." Rubbing his neck, Harry looked at the stairs, wondering if they could postpone this. He wasn't in the mood for a meeting. "But..."

The sound of urgent footsteps stilled his words. A moment later a very familiar figure appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Professor McGonagall!" Ron wasn't surprised to see her here. Remembering how she'd looked when they'd left the castle, he wondered if she had some message for him from his family.

Minerva McGonagall nodded curtly. "Mr. Weasley. Mr. Potter. Good to see you again." She paused for a moment before adding, "Please follow me." Her expression was tight, hiding any true emotion but her posture radiated anger and something else. Something darker.

"Yes, professor," Harry said meekly. Casting a worried glance at Ron, he padded up the stairs.
He couldn't help wondering what had caused such a welcome. Sure, the Head of their House could be abrupt, but usually she had a few kind words to them, especially after not seeing them for such a long time. A cold knot of fear started to coil in his stomach.

The slightly mellow and wistful mood had disappeared, leaving both him and Ron with the notion of doom.

There were so many things that could have gone wrong.

Trying to keep a firm hold on the panic, Harry followed McGonagall through the corridors, up the stairs. He knew already where they were headed. Exchanging yet another worried glance with Ron, he worked hard not to let his imagination paint various disaster scenarios in his mind.

"Phoenix!" Snapping the word out, McGonagall stood waiting until the gargoyle started to turn. Then she stepped on the stairs, letting them carry her upstairs with her two Gryffindors following in silence.

The door to the Headmaster's office was ajar. Still, McGonagall rapped her knuckles against the solid wood before pushing the door open. She stood back to let her students enter first.

As Harry stepped in, he cast a wary look at her, flinching as he saw the way her expression hadn't changed a bit. It looked like she was keeping a very tight control over some overwhelming emotion.

"Ah." The Headmaster's voice greeted them. "Come in, come in. I've been expecting for you." He sounded hushed as always.

Harry looked around the dimly lit room. He was accustomed to seeing at least a few members of the Order here most of the time. With only the Headmaster standing next to Fawkes who was dozing on his perch, it felt like the place was empty somehow.

It made him almost squirm with tension. This was not good. Not good at all.

Dumbledore looked weary, his hat was slightly askew, his gaze dull and lifeless. "Mr. Weasley. Your father is here, waiting for you." He gestured at the other end of the room, and as if planned, the door none of them had actually noticed there before opened, showing Mr. Weasley.

"Oh. Okay." Something seemed to make Ron hesitant, as if he could feel something wasn't right. He walked to the door slowly.

"Minerva. I think you should go with him." It was said gently, with some hint of regret.

She simply nodded, herding her student towards the doorway.

The warning feeling was prickling at the back of Harry's neck. He could still remember his dream, the vivid sense of warning and fear. "Is everything all right?" He glanced at the Headmaster.

The expression on the old man's face froze him.

He didn't even realize that the door had closed behind Ron. All he could see were the clear blue eyes that had unnatural seriousness in them.

"You'd better sit down, Harry." Holding out his hand, Dumbledore guided him towards a chair. The gesture was ominous. "There are some things I need to tell you."

Harry sat down obediently, not thinking his legs could hold him up. Whatever had happened was
awful. "What happened?" Images of terror flashed through his mind, the cold feeling grabbing his stomach tighter. "Snape?" There was only puzzlement in Dumbledore's eyes, but it was a brief relief. "Where is Sirius?" It was the worst thing he could think of.

If Voldemort had realized that he was living with Remus, the Death Eaters would have attacked him, the only person in the world he loved as a parent, unconditionally. He was quite sure he would lose the sometimes tenous grip on his sanity if he lost Sirius as well; it would be too much.

Harry's mind was filling with mindless babble.

"He is fine. Harry! Sirius is fine."

Dumbledore's voice seemed to pierce the panic. Harry looked up, feeling enormously relieved. The expression on the wrinkly face brought the panic back, though. "Then what happened?"

Sitting down on the couch, Dumbledore sighed. "Last night, the Death Eaters launched several attacks on our people. They attacked the grounds, Hogsmeade, Ottery St. Catchpole and..." He paused for a moment, shoulders hunched. "They also attacked some Muggles, including your aunt and uncle's house."

Harry stared. His eyes felt hot, burning, but he could not blink.

"I'm sorry, but... Your aunt was killed in the raid." There was nothing but sympathy in Dumbledore's voice.

Air was suddenly thick, too thick to breathe, and Harry concentrated on taking in air, careful not to suffocate.

"There were no casualties on the grounds, even though I'm afraid Hagrid's hut burned to the ground. Some of our people were also injured." What a clinical way to describe utter chaos that had reigned in the castle. "Remus Lupin was stabbed with a silver knife, but he is recovering from the wound at St. Mungo's."

There was a memory of a howl ringing in Harry's ears, replaced by soft humming. As if the silence was too much.

He shook his head, trying to chase away the strange sensations. Focusing his gaze on Dumbledore, he tried to understand just what exactly he'd just heard. Aunt Petunia was dead, killed in their mindless war. And Remus had been stabbed. Hagrid had no home. People were hurt. "But..."

Something wasn't right here. He cast a look at the now closed door on the other side of the room. Why would he need to be alone to hear this? Ron could have been told this too.

Dumbledore's words came back, and with them, the suffocating feeling almost overwhelmed him. "No. Oh no!"

Ottery St. Catchpole. The Burrow.

The Death Eaters had attacked the Burrow.

"I am sorry."

"Oh no! No, damn it, no...." Bile was rising to Harry's mouth. This couldn't be happening. This was a dream, a nightmare. Any moment now, he'd wake up and things would be the way they had been. He didn't want to hear any more.
Waiting for an opportunity to cut through the pained words, Dumbledore sat there. Then he said quietly, "I know how much the Weasleys mean to you. I truly am sorry."

Harry was lost in the confusion. He'd seen Arthur Weasley; he was all right and so was Ron. But the Death Eaters had attacked their home, Voldemort had attacked people he loved.

Unable to recognize the steely tone as his own, he asked, "Who?"

"I'm afraid they killed Fred Weasley, and Penelope Clearwater-Weasley. Charlie Weasley is at St. Mungo's. He is in a curse-induced coma."

Fred? It didn't make any sense. Fred was dead? How could Fred be dead? He was a part of George, the other half of the duo that had always seemed inseparable. And Penelope? She and Percy hadn't been married for even a year.

He had been there, at the wedding. He had been there, watching the usually so reserved young man smile brightly at his bride. It had been a small ceremony with only the family and a few close friends. He had been invited there. And now she was dead.

Like Fred. And Aunt Petunia. All dead. Charlie lying in the hospital, cursed. Maybe lost forever. Gone, like so many others.

Because of him.

It was always because of him, his fault that people around him died and went away. There was something in him that made all his loved ones targets.

He stared at the old wizard in front of him, waiting for the rest of it, because there were always more awful things happening. Still because of him.

Dumbledore's voice was gentle as he leaned closer to Harry. "I'm sorry. Your godfather is still in St. Mungo's with Remus. He would probably want to be here, but..." He spread his hands, refusing to finish the sentence.

They both knew what he meant anyway. Sirius wasn't mentally fit to leave Remus' bedside right now.

"I understand." Harry nodded. "Was there anything else?" There was no sign of any emotion in his voice, the syllables dropping coolly out of his mouth. He felt an odd detached fascination at the whole thing, amazed to be so in control when the whole world spun out of sanity and reason.

Maybe it was best to let the boy go to the Gryffindor tower and drown his sorrow into his solitude. Dumbledore knew that even though Harry was still technically a student, he would look through his fingers if a certain strong willed house elf happened to visit the dormitory with something stronger than simple tea.

This was the time to mourn. All Harry's friends were gone, his family out of range, so he would have to deal with this on his own.

It made Dumbledore wish there'd been another way. To raise the small baby with the lightning-shaped scar in a wizarding family with parents who would love the boy, to give him a real childhood, a real life. His decision had been the only one possible, but he still regretted it sometimes.

"No." Shaking his head, Dumbledore watched Harry walk to the door. This was not what he'd envisioned all those years ago when Hagrid had brought the small bundle to Privet Drive. He'd never
thought the boy would grow up to be so alone.

Even he could not see everything, wasn't omniscient. A fact that pained him now more than he could say.

Before Harry could open the door, Dumbledore said quietly, "I will be here if you ever need anything." Not that he really thought Harry would come to him. He'd never taken that option.

Harry didn't even glance over his shoulder. He simply walked out of the Headmaster's offices.

Everything happened slowly and without a sound. The staircase rolled back down, the gargoyle turning as soon as he stepped on the stairs. He moved as if in a haze, not bothering to wait till the huge statue was back in its place again.

He didn't really think about what he was doing or where he was going. Leaving Dumbledore's offices had been a reflex, a need to run away from a place that was destroying him. Now he had nowhere to run.

The corridor stretched before him. Suddenly he was reminded of all the other nights he'd walked through the hallways, his vision usually blurred by the thin fabric of his invisibility cloak.

It was quiet in here. Lonely. All the other students had left and even though there were still teachers here, they were probably too busy in their own chambers. There would be no one in the dormitories, no sounds of his friends breathing in the dark, no one to watch, no one to talk with. Hogwarts, his home, seemed as empty and uninviting as a tomb.

Harry swallowed. He couldn't take another step. Couldn't stand even the thought of going to the dormitory, where all the shadows couldn't hide him from the pain he felt inside. Ron should be there with him, they should be together angling over the exams. Instead, his friend was with his family, the Weasleys all gathering to mourn together.

While he was here all alone.

It was as if the whole world was turning into ice. His world. The world that had never given him a chance. Everything he'd ever cared about had turned into ashes.

He didn't want to be here. Couldn't handle being all alone, not again. He missed his family; Sirius and Remus and Ron and most of all...

"Come on, Potter." A quiet voice came from somewhere behind him. "Come with me."

Harry spun around, shocked to hear the familiar dry tone. "Snape!"

He couldn't believe he was actually seeing the man. Snape was supposed to be doing something important somewhere. This wasn't vital, this was just overwhelming pain. He was used to it.

Mouth open, he could only stare.

A soft sigh echoed in the corridor. Surprisingly, the sound held no impatience. "Come with me. You can spend the night in the dungeons."

That sounded so good. The dungeons, his dungeons. Harry nodded, unable to think about anything beyond the fact that he was going to the dungeons with Snape. Focusing on that, he took a few steps down the corridor, hesitantly at first, but then with more confidence as he heard the footsteps following him.
Snape stayed close by as Harry staggered towards the dungeons, making sure he would be there if he fell. There was nothing he could say to change things right now, so he stayed quiet.

His mind was in turmoil. This was not what was supposed to happen. The deaths and Harry's state were tragic, but expected; the Death Eaters were bound to attack one day. What better way to devastate the enemy than to do it right now when things looked almost good? This was exactly how Lucius and his Master would have orchestrated the whole thing.

It made Snape so mad at himself and the Order. They had all known something like this would happen, yet they'd been unprepared. He'd been too busy working on the *personatus* potion. The others had been too busy celebrating.

Hearing that people had been killed hadn't exactly been a shock, but he'd been unable to stay in the dungeons. Not because there was anything he could do for those who had passed away, but because he knew how this would hit Harry.

He had come here as soon as he'd been able to. Learning that Black was away at the hospital, he'd surmised that there might be a chance of Harry needing someone right then. Seeing the young man stand all alone in the corridor with a completely shattered expression had been worse than his worst fears. It had filled him with something very close to real anger. The defender of their world, the exalted Harry Potter? What a joke! A young man left all alone in the night to mourn.

Such a weird thing. Snape had acted on instinct, as if the notion of protecting Harry was so ingrained into his mind that he couldn’t really do anything else. He was honest enough with himself to know that was just half the truth. He had acted before he could really reason his actions.

Coming back here tonight had very little to do with protecting the figurehead leader of the Order. It was about making sure Harry survived through the night.

They had to wait for a moment as the staircases moved slowly to lead downstairs. Snape could sense someone staring at him and since Harry's gaze was still out of focus, it had to be someone else. Looking up, he saw Minerva McGonagall standing on a parapet, looking down with a sad expression on her face.

He nodded gravely, but didn't say anything.

When their staircase finally arrived, Harry stepped on it without looking up. His mind was blank, everything around him a blur. His feet moved slowly, taking him down towards the peace and quiet of the dungeons. It was a route he knew by heart.

The hallways down there were dark and empty. A softly spoken word from Snape lit a few torches along the way but Harry didn't care. He simply walked on, with the sounds of their footsteps echoing hollowly in the corridors. It was easy to concentrate solely on that.

So easy, that Harry almost walked past the door leading to Snape's quarters. A hand on his shoulder led him through the doorway.

Silence. Darkness. Familiar scents all around him. He swayed a bit, finally feeling like he was safe. Warm arms came around him immediately, pressing him against soft robes.

Harry was starting to shiver. It was insane. The dungeons might look cold, the Potions classroom freezing during the winter, but it was actually quite warm in here. Especially when Snape was holding him so close.

"Take off your robes." His voice uncharacteristically soft, Snape added, "Let's put you to bed."
That was a good idea, it would definitely be warmer in bed. Harry moved woodenly, trying to get rid of his clothes as quickly as possible. Sleeping sounded good. Maybe when he woke up, all this pain and insanity would be gone, fading away like a bad dream.

Snape watched him struggle with his robes. When it started to look like Harry would just get entangled in his clothes, he helped him to undress. The robes fell to the floor, neither man caring enough to actually pick them up.

When Harry was in his underwear, he stood there in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do next. He glanced at the chair he’d slept in so long ago, wondering if Snape had meant that he would spend the night there. He'd settle to that if he had to as long as he didn't have to go to Gryffindor tower and be completely alone.

"Come on."

Harry looked up. He didn't say anything, just allowed Snape to guide him to his bedroom. He'd only been here twice, months ago, first helping exhausted Snape to bed, then peeking in a couple of hours later to see if he was all right. It hadn't been like this, though.

His mind was focusing on details; the bare walls, the large wardrobe with doors carved full of intricate symbols, the small table by the bed, a chair not far from it. At least there was a plush carpet here, it felt nice under his bare feet. The bed wasn't as wide as the one in the cottage. Not as soft either. He allowed Snape to push him down, sighing as the heavy blankets were pulled up to his chin.

Lying there, he watched Snape walk out of the room. He wanted to call him back, but simply couldn't find the strength. Eyes wide, he stared at the doorway, wondering what he was supposed to do right now. It was still so damn cold.

The sound of toilet being flushed came from the bathroom, followed by water running down the drain. Then soft footsteps approached the door. Harry sighed with relief as Snape walked back into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

He couldn't turn his gaze away from the man. He watched him place his wand on the nightstand and then undress. With slow movements, Snape folded his clothes over a small chair before walking to the bed. When the mattress dipped, he moved a bit to the side to make room for Snape. After a softly whispered 'nox', the room turned completely dark. There was nothing to see, but he still couldn't close his eyes.

Snape's presence so close to him was strangely familiar yet strange, the sound of him breathing was unnaturally loud in his ears. It was as if the world around had disappeared, leaving only this small corner intact. There was the mattress and the blanket. The touch of Snape's leg against his. Nothing else existed in this frozen space.

No sounds. No thoughts. A perfect place with nothing to see nothing to remember. Such a cold existence. Frozen, like he was.

"I heard about your aunt."

Harry didn't move. He could hear Snape sigh, but he just couldn't react to the sound because it would make everything real.

"I gather you weren't close, but it's still never easy to lose a relative." It came out awkwardly, as if such compassionate words were alien to Snape. They probably were.
Why couldn't Snape just shut up? Harry wanted to scream and shout at him, but couldn't find the energy. Maybe Snape would stop talking if he was quiet and didn't react to his words.

There was a short silence. Then Snape said hollowly, "I'm sorry. For your aunt and for the Weasleys."

Harry swallowed.

He didn't want Snape to be sorry, he just wanted everyone to be alive and well. Even Aunt Petunia; his blood relative whom he couldn't grieve at all. Not like Fred. Not like.... Feeling like he was about to choke, he let out a sob.

It was followed by others.

Sighing, Snape moved closer and then wrapped his arms reluctantly around Harry. The strong body against his seemed to melt into his embrace immediately. He didn't say anything as the tremors began, simply held Harry tighter.

The only sounds in the small room were Harry's harsh intakes of breath. He didn't really cry out loud, even as his whole body shook with the power of his sobs. After a while he felt like suffocating as he couldn't get enough air with his face buried into Snape's shoulder, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything.

Snape stared into the darkness, ignoring the damp feeling on his shoulder. He had no idea what to do, besides holding Harry. There had been moments he'd informed his Slytherins of losses -- a memory he pushed away, not needing to concentrate on the vacant look on Gregory Goyle's eyes right now -- but no one had ever sought consolation in his arms.

Not that there would have been any even if someone had wanted it; Snape did not let people close to him like that. There were always others to deal with support and he could keep his distance.

He refused to analyze his current actions, relying on instinct only.

Words would have no meaning now, they would sound false, unfounded. He wasn't sure about touches either. Simple comforting touch was not really a part of his routine. In his world, physical closeness always led to either sex or violence. Sometimes both at the same time.

When the sobs didn't seem to recede, he started running his hand slowly up and down Harry's spine.

It felt soothing to him. From the lessening shaking, he thought it must feel like that to Harry as well. Since he had nothing else to do, he kept rubbing Harry's back until he relaxed completely.

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**Part 3**

Harry cringed as he stepped out of the fireplace.

He'd been here before, but somehow he always managed to forget the awfully bright light and the colors that were so sickeningly sharp they almost seemed to jump at him.

It made him wonder if such color scheme really soothed the sick people. He had no idea, but there had to be a reason why St. Mungo's resembled a colorblind idiot's dream on the inside.

Unlike usual, his thoughts didn't bring a smile to his lips.
There had been a moment this morning, right after he'd opened his eyes, when he hadn't remembered anything from yesterday. He'd lain there, nuzzled against a warm body, listening to a steady heartbeat. The scents in the dark room had told him that he was with Snape, and for that glorious moment everything had been perfect.

Then memories had come crashing down, and he'd thought he was going to suffocate again. Because of the grief, because of the overwhelming guilt.

A hand had come to rest on his back, the touch hauntingly familiar. Harry had remembered feeling the same hesitant touches last night. There were no words or sounds, only that soothing touch and the warmth next to him.

He hadn't thought about it, he'd just squirmed closer to Snape, wrapping his arms around him. Even though he'd probably slept for hours, he'd felt exhausted. Drained.

They had stayed in bed for a long time, not talking, just lying there together. Harry had been grateful for that. He knew nothing would make him feel better and nothing could change what had happened. He needed to deal with it somehow, and for now, this was the best way. More tears would undoubtedly come later.

When he'd finally got out of bed, Snape had told him to take a long shower. That had sounded excellent, and he'd padded to the bathroom without a word. The warm water had felt good. He had washed himself with familiar potions, and then stood under the spray. A stray memory of short cool showers back at Privet Drive had made his throat clench again.

He had cried then, letting the water wash away his tears. His grief wasn't because he missed Aunt Petunia. Honest with himself, he had to admit that he wouldn't miss any of his relatives. But he knew that if Dudley had ever loved anyone but himself, he'd loved his mother.

That pompous and fussy woman who had never been kind to her nephew, but had not deserved to die. She'd had nothing to do with Voldemort and their war.

After finishing with his shower, Harry had been red eyed, tired of crying and hurting.

There had been breakfast waiting for him in the living room, Snape sitting on the couch with his ever-present cup of tea. Instead of going to his chair, Harry had sat next to Snape, needing the contact right now. No comments had been made of his choice.

Food had tasted like cardboard, but at least the tea had warmed him a little. After the shower and the hot drink, Harry hadn't felt so cold anymore.

He'd tried not to think of what to do next. There was so much to do. The Order was probably assembling, they needed to prepare for more attacks. He had to make sure his friends were safe, needed to go to see Sirius and Remus. Would probably have to think of how to send his condolences to his cousin and uncle, not that they would appreciate it.

The silence had been mellow, peaceful. He'd always liked the way Snape didn't find it necessary to chatter nervously. They simply sat there, sipping tea and thinking.

Harry had finally decided on going to St. Mungo's first. All other things could wait. If Dumbledore needed his presence somewhere, he could always contact him there.

Saying that to Snape had made him feel a bit selfish, but Snape had only nodded. Told him that the floo would be open for him to return when he was ready to come back.
Trying not to act like a total git and cry again, Harry had touched Snape's hand, needing that contact. He'd offered him a trembling smile, not really being able to say anything. They had simply sat there for a moment longer.

When Harry had finally been ready to floo over to St. Mungo's, he'd been relatively calm.

Finding Remus wasn't as easy as he'd thought. Most of the nurses looked so busy he didn't want to interrupt them by asking for directions. There were some security guards standing by the main lobby, but Harry didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to Remus' room. Not with a known fugitive in there. He simply walked past them. When he finally found someone to guide him, he had to suffer through gawking and awed expressions.

Harry ignored it. Now that he was finally here, he was anxious to see his godfather and Remus again, simply following quietly as the nurse pointed him to the right door.

He nodded at a serious looking young woman standing at the doorway with her wand clearly ready. Even though he couldn't remember her name, he knew she was one of the Order. A moment later an identification charm tingled over him as she confirmed he really was who he seemed to be and not one of Voldemort's people in a clever Polyjuice disguise.

It made him feel a lot better, even though he had seen the guards downstairs. At least now no one would be able to hurt his family, or so he hoped. For Sirius would still be in danger from overzealous Aurors who would see him back in Azkaban. Or worse.

The woman nodded back, but didn't say a word. Her brown gaze was already returning to scan the corridor.

Raising his hand to push the door open, Harry hesitated for just a moment. He'd known all along that he couldn't go to the other end of the hospital where Charlie Weasley lay in coma and the other Weasleys waited. But this was the first time he felt unsure of going to see Sirius and Remus.

Old insecurities were deeply rooted into his mind and he had to fight them back before stepping inside.

Keeping Sirius' love firmly in his mind, he pushed the door open.

The room was simple with the walls painted light yellow with bright pink polka dots and only a few chairs and a nightstand surrounding a big bed. Harry's gaze went immediately to the still figure lying there.

He swallowed hard as he saw how pale Remus was, the chalk white pallor making his scars look sickly red. How funny that Harry hadn't paid any attention to them in years. Now seeing them simply reminded him of what he had read of his kind. Silver poisoning could easily kill a werewolf. It was a miracle that Remus was still alive; he looked weaker than he had in ages.

Even with the unusual paleness, the man seemed to be awake and alert. He was turning to see who had entered, and recognizing Harry, he smiled wanly. "Harry!"

Sirius stood up from the edge of the bed where he'd been sitting, trying to spin around at the same time. He looked haggard, almost as wild as he'd been when Harry had first seen him, but there was a relieved look in his eyes. "Thank Merlin!" Choking a little, he spread his arms.

Harry didn't say anything. He just walked into the offered embrace and held his godfather tight.

"I'm sorry!" Voice hoarse, Sirius whispered the words out. He rested his cheek on Harry's head. "I
should have been there for you yesterday." He would have, if the wound on Remus' chest hadn't started to show signs of silver poisoning. It had been the worst night he'd had for years, making even the memory of the desperation he'd felt back in Azkaban pale in comparison.

The madness had never come as close as it had last night. His mind had been a black hole, a completely lightless void. It terrified him to admit that without Remus, he would indeed be completely insane right now.

Losing Remus would drive him over the edge. Not even the love and duty he felt for Harry might be enough to pull him back.

"I love you, Sirius," Harry muttered against Sirius' chest. "You're here now, and it's all right."

Like always when he was hugging his godfather, he felt safe. It was a strange illusion, considering Harry knew exactly how fragile the safety and sanity Sirius held were. He wasn't going to analyze it, enjoying the sensation was enough.

The answer was immediate. "Love you, Harry." Sirius had never found it silly to say these words to Harry. He suspected that not many people had offered the emotion unconditionally to him before.

After a moment, he let go of his godson, stepping away a bit. It had been months since he'd seen him and Harry had looked harried then, a bit too skinny. He'd usually had dark smudges under his eyes, telling a tale of sleepless nights. There was that pinched look on his face again, but it was probably due to the horrible things that had happened.

Otherwise he didn't look bad. He had definitely gained some weight. Sirius approved. He'd been worried that time spent with someone like Snape would break Harry and was glad that he seemed all right.

He still shivered at the sorrow in Harry's eyes. He'd been left alone to deal with some ghastly news when there should have been people with him.

When he should have been there for his godson.

"You shouldn't have had to spend the night alone." It was the closest Sirius could mention Ron right now. Earlier, when he'd been walking the hallways on a leash while his best friend in the whole world had been dying, he'd passed by the boy in the lobby. It had been clear from the scents surrounding him that Harry hadn't been around Ron Weasley for hours.

Harry shook his head. "Don't worry about it." He could see the words didn't really change anything, so he added, "I wasn't alone last night."

"You weren't?" There was only relief in Sirius' voice.

"No, I wasn't." Offering no explanations, Harry smiled gently. He wanted to make Sirius feel better, not push him into insanity by talking about just exactly where he'd spent the night.

"I really did try to come to you, but..." Sirius shrugged. He couldn't explain how he'd felt the previous evening, when everything had been a blur and he'd wanted to go to console Harry, but couldn't.

 Couldn't even find his way around the hospital to get to a fireplace where he could floo back to Hogwarts. He doubted he'd been able to use the floo even if he'd got there.

"Sirius!" Grabbing his godfather's arms, Harry did the only thing he knew to reassure him he was all
right. He pulled him into yet another hug. "I wasn't alone. I understand you needed to stay here and I'm not mad at you."

He could feel Sirius calm down a bit. Holding him close, he sighed, wondering what he should do if Sirius actually asked him who had stayed with him. There was no way he could tell the truth, not now. This was neither the time nor the place.

Fortunately Sirius didn't ask. Relaxing, he let go of Harry and then guided him to sit on a very comfortable chair next to the bed. Trying not to look too obvious about it, he perched on the bed next to Remus.

Harry looked at the man lying in bed, answering the smile on his lips. "Hi."

"Hello, Harry." It was good to see the boy here. Remus had been worried about both him and Sirius but now it seemed like things would be all right again. "How was your stay in the secret hideaway?"

Not completely able to mask the wistful look on his face, Harry said, "It was all right." He shrugged. "Very relaxing."

Sirius huffed, 'I'm surprised to hear that. With those Slytherins with you, I would have thought it was pure hell to you and Ron." He cringed after the last bit. Not a good thing to say right now. There was a short silence, laden with uncertainty.

"I guess you can call the Potions exam hellish." Even the memory made Harry shiver. "But otherwise it wasn't bad. We had lots of things to do. I can tell you all about it later on." It was only a small lie. There were things he would definitely not tell his godfather, ever.

It made Sirius breathe easier. "All right." He looked hesitantly at Remus, begging him to help him out. He didn't want to say anything that would make Harry feel bad right now. That meant he wasn't going to mention the Weasleys again.

Before Remus could think of anything, Harry pushed the chair closer to the bed. He put his hand on the quilt next to Remus' fingers. "So what happened here?" He didn't want to talk about their time at the cottage, telling only half truths.

"Werewolfslayers!" Sirius growled immediately. "That bastard hired werewolfslayers to kill my Remus." It was actually amazing such a deep sound could come from a human being.

Remus smiled at the slip, and then glanced a bit uncomfortably at Harry. Seeing the faint grin on his face was a relief.

Still seething with anger, not noticing the meaningful glances the others had exchanged, Sirius said, "We couldn't outrun them, so we had to fight." Remembering the animal panic that had almost torn him apart, he shuddered. Even as he was holding his wand, throwing hexes all around, his mind had been screaming to him to change and rip the werewolfslayers' throats out. His human control had held -- barely -- until one of those bastards had managed to stab Remus.

"They... They hurt him." The howl that had rang in the quiet night had chilled his blood, driving all his sanity away. Control had been replaced by the simple need to defend the other man. "I don't really remember what happened after that. Except that I..."

"Snuffles drove them away." Smiling encouragingly at Sirius, Remus cut through the hesitant explanation. He reached out with his hand, fingers lacing between Sirius'. It wasn't even a conscious gesture.
Harry saw how hard Sirius squeezed Remus' hand and knew it hadn't been as simple as that. If the werewolf slayers had indeed been hired by Voldemort, they wouldn't have given up so easily. He said nothing about his suspicions. "Good."

"No." Sirius didn't let go of Remus' hand, but looked up anyway. "Not good. I didn't just chase them away. I killed a few. I remember that clearly." He spat that out as if still tasting the blood in his mouth.

Some things in his life were only a blur. Memories of time past that had faded under the desperation that had almost swallowed him in prison. There were clear memories as well. He wondered if this one would ever fade. Probably not.

Sorrow in his eyes, Sirius looked at Harry. "Now your godfather really is a ruthless killer." He had spent twelve years in Azkaban for a crime he hadn't committed. It didn't really make him feel any better right now. He'd hunted for food in his dog form, but had never killed a human being before. Killing Pettigrew still sounded like a good idea, but now he couldn't claim he was innocent anymore.

"Sirius..." Remus sighed.

Harry was up from the chair in an instant, moving to hug Sirius tight. "No. You did what you had to do to save someone you love." He felt his godfather relax slightly. "Besides, it won't change anything. Not the way I feel about you anyway. You know I have killed as well." They all knew. Everyone in the Order's inner circle had known the truth about the attack on the Burrow two years ago.

Now Ron knew as well. He wouldn't tell anyone. Probably not even Hermione. Because some things were just too private.

"But... It's different. You're a hero, Harry. I'm not."

The resigned tone made Harry swallow hard before he could say anything. "No. No, Sirius, I'm not. Or if I am, we all are."

Sirius didn't look convinced. He was not a hero. He was just a man. Not like Harry who was... Who... "Oh." It had never occurred to him that people would really see Harry like that before this moment. That the idolization and praise might be completely unfair. Even cruel.

But it wasn't like that with Harry! He was a hero, no matter what he thought about himself. Seeing the whole thing upset Harry, Sirius didn't say anything.

A soft knock on the door broke the very tense moment. Harry flinched back as Sirius shifted his shape, the big black dog appearing next to the bed, hackles raised. Not knowing what was happening, he reached out for his wand.

"Good morning! Oh, I see you have a visitor, Mr. Lupin." A young woman dressed in a mint green coat opened the door and peeked in. Her eyes widened as she saw Harry. "Oh, wow!"

Harry couldn't help cringing at that. He'd already seen the way people looked at him in the corridors and the occasional hero worship at school was child's play compared to this.

"Good morning." Smiling wanly, Remus greeted the woman. "Come on in." He made a feeble gesture with his hand.

"No, thank you, Mr. Lupin. I'm here to take Snuffles out for his midday walk," she replied, still ogling at Harry. "It's a lovely day really, and I think he'll enjoy chasing the gnomes in the garden."
Keeping his expression neutral with some difficulty, Harry sat there while the woman put the collar on Snuffles and then guided him out of the room. Only when the door slammed shut after them, he let the laughter out. He knew Sirius could probably hear him from the corridor, but couldn't keep quiet.

"That's one of the strangest things I've ever seen," Remus admitted, his eyes gleaming with mirth. He let out a chuckle that deteriorated into coughs.

Harry moved up from the chair, hovering worriedly next to the bed. He wondered if he should get a doctor or someone.

The coughing fit lasted for a moment before Remus slumped back on the bed. He took deep breaths before turning back to Harry. "Don't worry." He even managed a crooked smile. "This happens a lot."

The doctors had explained it all to him after he'd woken up for the first time and found himself lying in the hospital bed. Not that he'd really needed the explanation, he was well versed in werewolf lore and facts, knowing the side effects of a silver poisoning. He was glad it was the painful convulsions and the coughing instead of the more common paralysis and death.

"Can I get you anything? Water or something?" Even with all the training he'd had with the Order, Harry had no idea what to do now. "Chocolate?"

"No thank you. I'll be fine." The last thing Remus needed right now was to choke on water if the convulsing resumed. "Come on. Sit down." His fingers brushed against the sheets.

The silence that followed his gesture was full of unvoiced questions and explanations.

Finally Harry moved to sit on the bed. He smiled at Remus a little, knowing the reason for the uncomfortable look on his face. "I'm really glad you're all right." His tone was similar to the one he used when talking to Sirius. For a long time now, he'd seen these two men as family. Remus didn't have the official title, but he was as much a godfather to him as Sirius was.

"Thank you," Remus said, feeling relieved. "I'm sure he would have come to you if he'd been..."

"Able to think clearly? I doubt that. He'd just feel more guilty now." It was the truth. Harry knew Sirius, probably better than the man could imagine. "I'm glad he stayed with you."

The words stunned Remus. He'd seen Harry avoid certain subjects with Sirius, but he'd never thought he really knew him that well. "Yes. I..." He wondered why he felt the urge to apologize.

Harry waited for a moment. When the silence stretched, he said quietly, "I understand." His gaze was firm. This was the thing they never talked about. He didn't know why, especially after his chat with Ron about liking men weeks earlier, but he didn't want to push anyone.

There were so many things he still didn't know about the past, he was wary of approaching a subject that might make Sirius uncomfortable.

Smiling weakly, Remus leaned back again. He could tell that Harry really meant that. The boy never ceased to amaze him. "Good."

It was enough to simply sit in silence. Harry could see Remus' eyelids droop slightly, and decided they could talk later. The most important thing was for him to get better, everything else could wait.

About half an hour later the door opened and Snuffles padded inside, holding a small bag in his
mouth. The sight made both Harry and Remus smile; it simply looked ridiculous. Dropping the bag, the dog glared at both of them, and then let out a sneeze that racked his whole body.

The nurse shut the door behind him, casting one last wistful look at Harry.

Sirius was grinning as well as he changed back into his human form. It seemed he was unable to even pretend to be miffed when these two people who meant the world to him were looking so clearly amused.

"Here." He tossed a large chunk of chocolate to Harry, grabbing the Daily Prophet from the bag. "The nurse seemed to think you might enjoy this." He sniffed again.

It had to be because of all the different smells in the building, flowers from the visitors and herbs and potions stored everywhere. Snuffles' nose tended to have some problems with the overpowering scents. Even this room smelled faintly of potions ingredients. How odd, since it had just smelled of Remus this morning.

Pushing the thought out of his head, he walked to the bed. Remus didn't look any worse, so he could relax slightly. The weary smile offered to him made him nod slightly. Everything was fine.

He sat down and opened the paper, hiding his almost giddy relief behind the pages.

The room was filled with silence once again. Harry snuggled on the chair, drinking in the atmosphere. This was the one place on earth where he didn't need to think about anything, didn't need to worry. It was always like this with Sirius and Remus, the two men who were now his only real family.

Staying here was easy. He knew he was welcome, and no one would question his presence. Smiling faintly, he decided to just sit here for a while longer, even if Remus fell asleep again and he and Sirius couldn't really talk about anything. He didn't want to think about why he might be afraid to go back to Hogwarts.

A very loud growl broke his revelry.

"I can't believe this." Crumpling the paper in his fist, Sirius ranted, "Now they're blaming Dumbledore for sending Harry away. As if his presence here would have changed anything."

He didn't say it out loud, but he was actually glad Harry hadn't been home when the Death Eaters attacked. He would have been caught in the fights, probably wounded, maybe even killed. That was the one thing Sirius refused to even think about. He was not going to let Harry die, like he'd let James die.

Sighing, Harry leaned back on his chair. "I'm surprised they're not calling me a coward for going into hiding in first place." He had been certain people would see it like that.

There was a very uncomfortable silence in the room as Sirius tried to school his expression to normal. It was clear that he was angry about something, his eyes blazing with quiet rage. Somehow the effort of restraint was scarier than any rant.

"They are?" Harry asked, his eyes enormous. It wasn't surprising, but it still stung. He'd expected for something like this. From what he'd heard from Ron before their stay at the cottage, there hadn't been any slandering in the papers for ages, only rumors about his social life.

The reporters had obviously been waiting for a proper occasion to continue with the nasty articles.
Sirius shook his head slightly. "No. They're putting all the blame on Dumbledore." He couldn't say the rest of it. Could never hurt Harry, even though he thought he deserved to know. Feeling desperate, he looked at Remus for help, glad he looked more alert.

"Harry, when you went away, there was some discussion of... You running away from your destiny." It wasn't easy for Remus to say, knowing it was hurting both Harry and Sirius. He knew there was no way for Sirius to talk about this, the dark gaze haunted already, so he went on. "It was pretty bad, the press speculating on various theories before Albus put a stop to it. He gave a short statement saying that you wanted to stay and fight, and he sent you away."

He had never really understood the reason for such a comment, especially since the articles after that had been less than flattering to the Headmaster.

Harry closed his eyes. "Let me guess. That made me the hero and Dumbledore the meddlesome old coot." He had suspected it would go like this, but it still hurt, mostly because he knew now that there was no running away. No hiding.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I... It doesn't matter. It's something Dumbledore once told me." The lie came out easily. Harry smiled at Remus, the smile not reaching his eyes.

Remus nodded, accepting that lie. He was too dizzy to continue the conversation. "All right." He let out a sigh. "May I have some of that chocolate please?" Comfort offered and shared, he leaned back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

Smiling gently at him, Sirius avoided Harry's gaze and returned to the newspaper.

Part 4

It was the third morning Snape lay in his bed wide awake.

The mattress felt strange, a bit too hard under his back. How annoying. It had taken him weeks to get used to the too soft bed in his room at the cottage and now it seemed he'd become too accustomed to that softness.

The uncomfortable bed wasn't his only problem. The bigger one was the weight on his shoulder, the soft sounds of breathing accompanying the distracting brushes of Harry's every exhale on his skin.

Snape couldn't remember the last time he'd slept with anyone. There had been occasions when he'd passed out from all the pain and exhaustion, collapsing on the bed next to someone. Afterwards, regaining consciousness had been horrible. He'd certainly not felt rested. Not like now.

He moved a little, grimacing at the protesting murmurs coming from Harry as he slipped away from him. Turning on dim lights with a quiet word, he sat there, glaring at the sleeping young man.

Watching Harry lie there snuggling his pillow, he wondered if he'd ever been able to relax and sleep with someone else in his bed. Maybe when he'd been nothing but a teenager himself, dreaming of happiness and perfect love and other illusions that had vanished ages ago.

Harry made a soft whimper in his sleep and rolled over, letting go of the pillow and attaching himself to Snape's leg like a limpet. Snape didn't really care, couldn't feel any more shocked by any of this.
He could handle the touching or the simple physical act of sex they had shared back at the cottage. It was not nearly as disturbing as it was to drop his guard and trust this young man.

Last evening, when Harry had curled on his couch while he'd been brewing the Wolfsbane potion, he'd wondered if he should take sleeping potion to get some real rest. He hadn't slept well the night before, unable to truly relax after bringing Harry to his rooms. He'd doubted he could send him away just to get a good night's sleep.

It was probably the exhaustion that had enabled him to fall asleep even with Harry Potter curled next to him. He was certain it wouldn't happen again.

Once again slipping away from Harry's embrace, Snape walked to the bathroom. He needed some time to think, and now that he wasn't tired, it would be easy to figure out how to get out of this mess he'd made.

He went through his morning routines mechanically, mind focused on his problem.

Bringing Harry here had been instinctive. He'd known the idiot wouldn't go to anyone for help, and there had been no way he would have spent one night with Harry at the Gryffindor tower. So the dungeons had been the only real choice.

Snape decided not to wake Harry up, and went to get dressed in his living room. He ordered breakfast for two without even having to think about it and then sat down to do more serious thinking.

How on earth had it come to this?

Returning to Hogwarts had been simple, his rooms waiting for him unchanged. There had been a few brief words with the Headmaster and then he'd returned to his work almost like he'd never been away. Like the previous months had indeed been nothing but a dream.

It had been easy to push away all thoughts about sad green eyes and soft touches. He'd managed not to think about Harry at all until he'd heard about the attacks. Then it had been impossible to concentrate on anything else.

That was why he now found himself facing this mess.

Snape knew he would be busy these next weeks. There would be no time to rest, like he usually did during the first weeks of summer break. The Order meetings alone would take a lot of his time, not to mention working on the new personatus potion he was supposed to perfect.

Dealing with Harry would be an unwelcome interruption. The stubborn fool would want to talk about things, would need explanations, and Snape knew from the experience that the death glare wouldn't be enough to shut him up.

It would be too time consuming to reason with him, but Snape didn't want to add to the obvious pain Harry was already in, so he couldn't really just tell him to bugger off.

He sighed, picking up a cup of tea from the table. Maybe he should let things be as they were. Sooner or later Black would ask Harry to live with him and then the Gryffindors could play a big happy family together and he could have his peace back. Harry wouldn't want to stay here forever, especially when he made it perfectly clear that there would be no more sexual encounters between them here in the normal life.

For now, Harry could stay here, mainly because his presence wasn't completely unpleasant. Snape
didn't know just exactly when had he stopped seeing Harry as nothing but a nuisance, but somewhere along the line he'd stopped being an annoying twerp and become a real person. He wouldn't go as far as to say he liked Harry the way it was clear Harry seemed to harbor such thoughts towards him, but he could tolerate his presence better than anyone else's.

Satisfied with his plan, he sipped his tea, waiting for Harry to wake up before going back to work.

He didn't have to wait for long. Soon there were sounds coming from the bedroom, and then Harry appeared at the doorway, looking a bit worried until he saw Snape sitting there. The worried expression melted into a smile, and then Harry disappeared to the bathroom, scratching his head as he went.

Snape rolled his eyes.

He was certain this would not be the only moment of exasperation this morning.

Breakfast went as usual, with Harry simply sitting next to him and devouring an enormous amount of food. The silence after that wasn't bad either.

Finishing with the breakfast, Snape went to see how his Wolfsbane was doing. Like yesterday, Harry came over to actually watch him brew instead of simply ogling at him from the distance. His obvious interest in the potion made Snape want to make scathing comments about concentration and the importance of all the potions he'd taught, but the memory of Harry's return from St. Mungo's last night made him hold his tongue.

There would be plenty of time for his comments later on. He could wait until Lupin was out of hospital before making them.

After he'd bottled the potion, he turned to Harry. "Are you going back to the hospital today?"

Startling as the mellow silence was broken, Harry nodded. "Yeah. I haven't heard anything from Dumbledore, so I thought I might as well." He didn't sound like he was too anxious to hear from the Headmaster either.

Snape did not blame him. He knew Harry was intelligent enough to know what would happen next. He wasn't looking forward to it either. "Good." He handed the bottle over. "You should probably take this with you. I added some ginger roots, just in case Lupin still suffers from the silver poisoning."

His voice held faint traces of his usual scorn as he talked about the man. No matter how he was willing to brew him this potion, he could never really forget how he'd found out Lupin might need something to control lycanthropy with.

"Thank you." Harry nodded. He didn't bother to say that there might be a few bottles of the potion at St. Mungo's. Snape's brew would undoubtedly be better than any the potion-makers at the hospital could ever conjure up.

Snape decided not to ask what the foolish smile was all about. He definitely didn't want to know. It was time for Harry to leave so he could concentrate on his work again.

Before he could say anything about that, the flames in the fireplace flickered, and Dumbledore's face appeared there. The Headmaster looked from Snape to Harry, smiling slightly. "Good morning, Severus. Harry."

Feeling completely unreal, Snape nodded his reply. Next to him, Harry stammered something half
How strange that they would both act like two students who had been caught in the kitchen after curfew.

Dumbledore didn't seem to notice. "I see you're ready to leave. Please convey my regards to Remus Lupin. And your godfather as well. I do hope they're all right, both of them."

"I think they're going to be just fine," Harry said. "But I'm sure they'll be glad to hear from you anyway."

Almost snorting at the useless pleasentries, Snape waited for Dumbledore to get on with it. He certainly wasn't going to send his best wishes to Black.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore declared. "I was wondering if you might be back by two pm? Minister Fudge is coming for tea, and he wants to see us both."

There was a shocked silence. Snape could see that Dumbledore wasn't too happy about this either, even though he did hide it well. The dismay on Harry's face was easier to read.

Harry nodded. "I'll be there." He didn't even try to force a smile on his face, looking as somber as he sounded. "At two o'clock."

His words sounded very much like a dismissal. At least Dumbledore took them as such. "Good. I will see you then. Good day, Harry. Severus." With one more knowing look at Snape, the Headmaster disappeared.

Snape didn't say anything as Harry walked to the bathroom. He simply stared at the fireplace.

He knew exactly what that look meant. Albus either knew what was going on, or he was making some well educated guesses. Snape didn't really care which way it went, as long as he didn't comment on it.

Maybe he could be held accountable to Dumbledore, but he was not about to justify his actions to anyone. Not even the man who had saved his sanity all those years ago. His lips curled into a moue of displeasure, knowing that sooner or later Dumbledore would ask. If he didn't come out and say it out loud, there would be questioning glances and hints.

Snape didn't know why that didn't make him feel guilty. It didn't make him want to push Harry away or cringe at the thought of his body next to him. Not long ago, he'd thrown decades of hard work and suffering away because he couldn't stand the idea of bringing Albus bad news. Why was he now willing to risk his displeasure?

Casting a glance at the bathroom door, he decided there was no need for guilt or even explanations. Harry had climbed into his bed willingly at the cottage. Not even that; he'd sneaked his way past his well erected shields with determination and cunning befitting any Slytherin and then latched onto him like an Amazonian Rainbowleech.

He was not corrupting anyone. Would never do that to another person, even someone as Gryffindor as Harry Potter. Their sexual encounters had occurred between consenting adults, and even that was over now. He was simply doing this because it was the only thing he could do.

Disgusted by his foggy reasoning, he went to the cupboard to check with his ingredients.

"I'll be off then." Wiping off a smudge of toothpaste from his left cheek, Harry walked back to the
small living room. The smile he flashed at Snape was slightly wan. "I'll... See you later."

Snape could hear the slight hesitation well. "I will be here." Where would he go? He had work to do.

"Okay." There was relief in Harry's voice. After a moment of hesitation, he came close to Snape, and touched his cheek briefly, brushing a lock of greasy hair behind his ear. "Have fun working with your potions."

He walked out of the room before there could be any reply.

Staring at the door that had closed after Harry, Snape couldn't help thinking how annoying it was not to feel any annoyance for such a foolish gesture. He was probably used to them by now.

He turned back to his work.

It was easier for Harry to make his way through the maze like corridors of St. Mungo's now that he actually knew where he was going. There were more people walking around even at this early hour, and most of them stopped to stare at him.

He tried not to show how it bothered him to feel their curious looks on his skin. It almost felt like a physical touch, something slimy oozing on his body, sticking there and making him feel dirty.

The woman standing outside Remus' door was the same as yesterday, and she gave him an exasperated smile after checking he was who he claimed to be. Harry blinked, wondering what that was about until he heard the loud voices coming from the room.

It was good to see Sirius and Remus again, and it looked like things were getting better here. Remus was still lying in bed, but he didn't look as pale anymore. He was also arguing with his friend when Harry stepped into the room, complaining about Sirius being a mother hen.

"I see some things never change." There was a smile on Harry's lips. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Harry," Sirius said, not even looking at the door. "And no. You're not getting up until the doctor says it's all right for you to get up. Understand?"

"But I'm fine Sirius! Honestly. You know as well as I do that when the silver poisoning passes, it's not important to..."

Sirius shook his head, interrupting Remus' rant. "I know, but it's not sure it's passed yet. Besides, it's full moon tonight!" Seeing he was going to say something more, he dropped the attempt to make Remus see the sense in it and wheedled, "Please."

"Oh all right!" Muttering a few dark words to himself, Remus leaned against the pillows again.

Harry shook with silent laughter. Apparently Sirius knew exactly what to do to make Remus obey his wishes. "I see that everything's all right here."

"It would be if that overgrown poodle would let me up!" Still muttering, Remus glared at the other man, but the look in his eyes was softer now.

The jibe made Sirius laugh out loud. He made a slight movement as if to hug Remus, but then sat next to him on the bed instead. "The doctors said you're better, but you'll have to stay here for at least three days now. You know there can be a relapse after the first full moon after such a poisoning."

Harry hadn't known that. "I brought you some Wolfsbane." He put the bottle on the table. "Just in
case, you know. It even has some ginger in it, you know, for the poisoning."

"Thank you, Harry." Pleased by such consideration, Remus gestured at the chair. "And convey my thanks to Severus as well." The glint in his eyes told that he knew perfectly well Harry would never be able to brew the complicated potion on his own.

It was Sirius' turn to mutter things, but he made sure no one could hear any real words. This was the one thing he couldn't hate in Snape, even though he knew the git brewed the potion just to show off. These past few full moons had been horrendous. The *Wolfsbane* sent from St. Mungo's had not been as potent as it should have been, and Remus had been in agony throughout the changes.

Harry nodded. "I'll be sure to tell him." It was weird to think of Snape as Severus. "Oh, and Dumbledore sent his regards as well."

That silenced Sirius' grumbling.

"Then you must thank him as well." Reaching out with his hand, Remus grabbed a chunk of chocolate from the table. "And do tell him I'm doing just fine."

Not wishing to start that conversation again, Sirius asked, "Can you stay for a while longer?" Harry's visit yesterday had been so short, he hoped he'd stay. It would be the best way for him to make sure he wouldn't have to be alone.

Since Harry was in no hurry to go to meet Fudge and Dumbledore, he nodded. It would be nice to stay here, with these two men. His family. "I can stay for as long as you can handle me." He flashed an impish smile.

All three Gryffindors shared that expression.

Sirius talked about the doctor's visit for quite some time, looking happy at the good news. Every few minutes he handed more chocolate to both Harry and Remus, determined to make them both feel as relaxed as he could. Then Harry made the mistake of asking about the full moon, and was subjected to another rant about how some of the doctors seemed incapable of dealing with a werewolf without their prejudice showing.

Since it looked like Sirius was actually enjoying the rant, Harry simply listened, keeping an eye on Remus all the time and trying hard not to laugh. He was relieved to see that Remus really did seem better today, his gaze was alert, and he wasn't nodding off.

The rant was cut off abruptly as a nurse appeared with tea. She wasn't the same one as yesterday, but she seemed to be as impressed by Harry's presence as her colleague had been. Rubbing Snuffles' ears absentmindedly, she stared at him with an awed expression on her face.

Harry smiled at her tensely and thanked her for the extra cup she got for him. That made her blush and stammer something.

When Sirius changed back from Snuffles again, he was too busy sharing the sandwiches and Remus' tea to really rant anymore.

The mood in the room was mellow as they finished eating. Whoever prepared meals at St. Mungo's -- and Harry for one was surprised he hadn't seen any house elves yet -- were very thorough with their job.

"So, is there anything you want to talk about?" Sirius had already decided not to push. He knew Harry would talk to him if he needed to.
Usually when the three of them gathered together, they talked about things that weren't in any way vital to surviving the present. Sirius could remember evenings, when he and Remus had shared stories with Harry, reliving their past. It was important for Sirius to reminisce, it helped to ground him and tie that happy time to this one. It also let him bring some of that old joy to Harry's life, so that he could feel connected to his parents.

He never got bored of talking about things with Harry and Remus and could listen to their voices and revel in their presence forever.

Harry was glad of the way Sirius had phrased that. He'd been a bit worried he'd want to know more about his stay at the cottage, knowing there wasn't much he could really tell now. Very soon, his evasive answers wouldn't work, especially if he wanted to stay with Snape.

He was definitely not looking forward to that conversation with his godfather.

"Tell me about my father." Curling on the chair, Harry looked up at Sirius. "And my mother. They moved to live together after Hogwarts, right?" Seeing the nod, he smiled. "Tell me how did they know it was the right decision. Please."

This was the only way he could ask the question that had been bothering him for some time now.

Sirius burst into laughter. "Are you really sure you want to hear this?" He was glad Harry was asking about those happy days that had finally come back to him. Sharing those tales with his godson was awfully important to him, every memory precious.

"Yes. Tell me, please."

"They just knew. I've never seen two people so in love." It had been nauseating at times, but still it had also been cute. Like love usually was.

Remus looked a bit wistful as he said, "James always said that the Potter men had always been loyal and that they'd known who they wanted from the moment they saw them. We agreed to the former, for your father never even looked at another girl since he fell in love with Lily. But with the whole love at first sight thing..."

"That was a load of crap." Laughter twinkling in his eyes, Sirius interrupted. "Those two knew each other since the first year, and they used to make each other crazy. Lily couldn't stand boys she called brainless athletes and James had a thing or two to say about bookworms."

That reminded Harry of his first year. He wondered if his parents had been as annoying as Ron and Hermione had been back then.

"They were both too stubborn to let it go. Year after year. Constant bickering in the class and in the common room." Remus nodded. "But we should have seen it coming. That kind of fighting can only mean one thing, especially with James' beliefs."

Sirius nodded and then explained to Harry who was looking puzzled, "You know, James was never really into the dating game. He always said he'd meet that special one and live happily ever after with her." The old pain was still visible in his eyes. To his friends, ever after had been awfully short.

"You mean he never... Um..." Harry wasn't sure he wanted to know. There were things about your parents that you really didn't need to hear.

"Sixth year. The beginning of it. Your father took one look at Lily and that was it. None of us really understood it at the time. I mean, we were all teenagers." Casting a knowing look at Harry, Sirius
added, "Well, I don't have to tell you what it's like to be a teenager in Hogwarts. There are all kinds of... distractions there."

Remembering the looks, the invitations, Harry could only nod. He knew all right. Most of the people he knew had embraced the concept of experimenting, while others settled with studying. To him, dating had always been difficult. Not because he couldn't get a date, but because he knew what it would mean to have someone date the famous Harry Potter.

There was a very good reason for his cancellation of the Daily Prophet.

He could have followed Hermione's example and immersed himself in the books. The constant threat of Voldemort's people cutting his life short before he had any chance to try the things that haunted his dreams had made him stray from that path.

It hadn't been dating, or even affairs, nothing as complicated as that. It had been hunger and need and desperation, sharing a few glorious hours with another person.

Sirius didn't notice the slight frown on his godson's face. "You know, during those years, I chased a lot of tail..."

"Mostly your own, if I remember correctly." The gentle smile on Remus' face took the bite out of the rather acidic remark. "Sorry. Couldn't resist that."

"Oh, very funny. Anyway, I didn't understand the whole thing back then. Not even when James told us that Potter men have always been monogamous. But I could see how happy he was with Lily."

There was a soft look shared between Sirius and Remus, an emotion neither wanted to explain. It was of memories, their past together. All the things that had bound them together then, the ties that even a decade of anger and mistrust couldn't completely sever.

"I know what he must have felt." Harry wondered if his father and mother had shared the same kind of silence as he and Snape did. If everything had felt just a bit less complicated when they'd been together.

He didn't know how Remus would react when he told these two men about him and Snape. They'd never really talked about things like that, even though the relationship between his godfather and his oldest friend was as plain as the nose on Snape's face. The silence was a bit worrying, and Harry had always wondered if they were ashamed of what they shared.

Harry didn't need to guess about Sirius' reaction. He already knew what it would be. Not because of he was sort of gay, but because of who and what Snape was. It would probably be ten times worse than any tantrum Ron had thrown.

He'd just have to make sure there wasn't anything valuable and breakable around when he told Sirius that he was having warm feelings towards Snape.

"You do?" Sirius teased. "Is there something you want to tell us?" He didn't often get to say this to Harry, who didn't seem to have a girlfriend most of the time they met.

Realizing he'd just opened a door he wanted nailed shut, Harry shook his head, "Not really. Just wondering." He hoped his smile was convincing, at least it made Sirius smile back. Remus on the other hand cocked his head, as if he was smelling a rat.

Harry looked at him, praying he wouldn't ask anything. Not now.
"I remember how he had to work on getting Lily to see him as something else than a Quidditch player," Remus said, as if there hadn't been a small pause in their narration. "He tried absolutely everything that year."

Nodding eagerly, Sirius launched an account on some of the most outrageous escapades they'd engaged in with their friend.

Harry simply listened, mesmerized by the sheer lunacy of the marauders. They had probably been the most reckless students ever to go to Hogwarts. No one could surpass the mischief they’d managed, not even...

Hiding his grimace of pain, he pushed his thoughts away from the twins. He was determined not to think of anything bad that had happened right now. The thoughts would come when the lights went out, and the darkness would cover his grief. He couldn't crumble now.

Fortunately there were enough happy stories to last for hours. When another knock came on the door, Harry was shocked to see that it was already time for Snuffles' midday walk. He hadn't noticed how quickly the time went by.

As the door closed behind Snuffles and the nurse, Remus stretched luxuriously, shifting his position. He even pushed the covers to the side. Seeing Harry's questioning look, he explained, "Sirius is wonderful, but sometimes he does act like a mother hen."

Harry had to agree with that, even though he could say the same about Remus. He wondered what it would be like to live like that, to be constantly aware of his loved one and spend all that energy trying to protect him from everything that might cause him any pain. He didn't think he could handle that, it would be suffocating.

But these two seemed to like it.

"I won't tell him, if you don't want me to." Harry had kept harder secrets than this. "You've got my word on it." He meant the last bit as a joke, and was surprised to see Remus nod solemnly.

"And you know that if you want to tell me something, I won't tell about it to anyone. Don't you, Harry?"

Harry swallowed. He sometimes forgot just how preceptive Remus was. With Sirius, he could lie his way through but it was different with Remus. He would at least know that there was something wrong, and instead of settling it with a warm embrace, he would ask more questions.

"There... Might be something we need to talk about. I'm just wondering if I should talk about it right now." This had even worked a few times, even though Remus had never backed off completely, reminding him of his words later on.

Remus nodded. "No time like the present." He could see this was something that was bothering Harry, and wondered just exactly how long had he wrestled with the matter alone. There weren't many people Harry could talk to, and leaving him and Sirius and Dumbledore behind must have been awful. Even with his respect towards Severus, Remus didn't think Harry would have been able to turn to him with his problems.

"I'm..." Harry snapped his mouth shut. He didn't know if he should tell the man after all. Remus had almost died a few days ago.

The amber gaze focused on his. "We're family, Harry. You can tell me anything."
Harry smiled a little. "I know that. And believe me, I should tell you before I tell Sirius, since I think he'll have some real problems with this whole thing and I don't want him to hurt himself or anyone else."

That definitely made Remus' curiosity peak. They had never really talked about Sirius like this before. "That bad, huh?" Seeing the slight nod, he sat up a bit. "What is it?"

Opening his mouth, Harry had to think for a moment before actually saying the words. There were so many things he could say, all of them true. "I'm... I'm sort of seeing someone." He couldn't believe how hard this was. If he couldn't say it out loud with Remus, how could he ever tell Sirius?

"Is that the same someone you stayed with these past two nights?" Remus had noticed some tension in Harry as he'd said that he hadn't been alone, but hadn't asked any questions. He was always careful of what to say when Sirius was upset.

Protecting Sirius had become a second nature to him now. Sometimes it even bordered insanity, but he didn't care, not after a decade of loneliness.

Harry wasn't surprised that Remus had caught that. He'd come to realize that the man was excellent reading other people. Maybe it was a wolf thing. "Yes. I don't really want to talk about it, but it'll come out some day soon, and I'm afraid Sirius will flip."

Chills ran down Remus' spine. "Are you serious?" He saw another nod.

He closed his eyes, glad that Harry was giving him a moment. There were so many things happening now. He was feeling a lot stronger, almost all signs of the silver poisoning gone, but he would still need weeks of healing potions and monitoring. That would already push Sirius on the edge.

But Harry was right. If he was indeed staying with someone, it would come out sooner or later. He needed to know about it, to shield Sirius from his own feelings. He knew how protective Sirius was, how he saw Harry as special and there was a distinct possibility that he wouldn't see anyone as good enough for Harry.

"Remus?" Worried by the prolonged silence, Harry said quietly, "We don't have to do this now. I just wanted to tell you because..."

"No." The amber eyes snapped open and a faint smile appeared on Remus' lips. He wouldn't turn his back on Harry. "If you need someone to listen, I'm here. You know that. And maybe it is best if you tell me before Sirius finds out about it."

That was the very thing Harry had thought.

"But I'm certain it can't be that bad. As long as you're happy, I think Sirius will be all right with your choice." Remus knew Sirius would never alienate his godson by being overly rude to his boyfriend. Not even if he came from a tradition they both disliked. He decided to make it easy for Harry and said, "Even if he is a Slytherin."

Harry could only stare. His mouth went completely dry as he tried to form words that refused to come out. Remus knew? "How? When? I mean... How?"

"Please! You go away for a long time, and when you come back you seem genuinely happy." Ignoring the twinge that reminded him of the sadness that was also evident in the boy, Remus went on, "There aren't all that many people to choose from. You're together with Draco Malfoy, right?"

After a moment of gawking, Harry swallowed. This was worse than he'd thought. Slowly, he shook
his head. "Er... No. I'm definitely not seeing Malfoy." He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The silence that landed after his statement was oppressive. Remus was thinking hard, refusing to think about the most obvious solution to this verbal puzzle. He wanted to believe it was someone else.

From the resigned look on Harry's face, he knew it wasn't.

"Harry? Is this person you're seeing..." He couldn't say it out loud, mostly because such silly words would undoubtedly be followed by hysterical laughter.

"It's Snape."

No. He didn't feel like laughing after all. Remus simply stared at Harry, taking in the wry expression, the relief on his face. It was now out in the open and it seemed to be real.

Snape? Severus Snape? Severus? The skinny big nosed boy who used to glare at him and his friends from across the classroom. The sneaky and cunning boy who had always had bitingly sarcastic words to comment on them. His former colleague, who had found his place in the dark and lonely dungeons, existing only to torment others.

Snape, whom he had almost killed all those years ago.

Sighing, he muttered, "Well, you were right on one thing. Sirius is definitely going to flip."

Harry knew that. "Yeah." He felt a bit light headed. Remus knew, and hadn't had a fit. Maybe it was going to be all right. "Thanks for not asking me if I'm insane."

Swallowing the very words, Remus shook his head. No, he couldn't ask that now. But was Harry serious? He couldn't ask that either. "You're staying with Snape? In the dungeons?" He sounded incredulous, stunned by the way Harry nodded. When he'd stayed in Hogwarts as a professor, he'd never heard of Snape inviting anyone down there even for a brief visit.

He couldn't believe it. It would have been disappointing to hear that Harry wanted Draco Malfoy as his boyfriend -- and dear Merlin, he didn't want to use that word on Severus Snape -- but this was completely insane.

"Remus?" Since they were talking about this already, Harry asked quietly, "Will it be a problem that he's a man?"

"Of course not!" It was out before Remus could even think about it. How could Harry even think about something like that? "I... It will definitely not be a problem, to neither of us."

Harry looked at him straight in the eye. "I was simply wondering because it seems to be something you and Sirius aren't all that comfortable talking about." He had never planned of mentioning this, but now he didn't think he had a choice.

There was a strained silence. Remus couldn't say anything for a moment. He had never thought their silence would seem like that to Harry. "No..." He choked the word out and had to breathe deeply before he could continue. "You're right." Why deny something that was true? "But it doesn't mean we're not comfortable with the subject in general."

It still made no sense to Harry, but he didn't want to pry. There had to be a reason why these two men kept the biggest part of their lives shrouded in half-truths, hiding it from even those who loved them. "Okay. Good." He managed a smile.
Not knowing what to say, Remus offered a hesitant smile as a reply.

Harry let out a laughter that sounded almost hysterical in his own ears. "At least you're doing better than Ron and Hermione when I told them."

That definitely made Remus stare. "You told your friends about seeing Snape?" He couldn't imagine how strange that must have felt to all of them.

Nodding, Harry decided not to say anything about the way his friends had reacted to his news. But he did say, "I don't want to lie about this. Not to you guys." There was already so many things he'd either kept a secret or lied about, he couldn't deal with keeping this from his family.

"Oh." The very calm way Harry seemed to treat this with was slightly disconcerting, but Remus had to accept it as a part of him. It had been like this for a long time now, the quiet way Harry took most of the things that life threw at him.

It didn't mean Remus really liked it, but he didn't know what good trying to change it would do either.

Remus felt the familiar exhaustion creep back over him, but he had to fight against it. There was still one thing he needed to know before he could rest. Expression serious, like when he had still been only Harry's teacher, he said, "I have to ask you one thing, and I hope you'll answer truthfully. When... If you're seeing Snape, and I assume by 'seeing' you mean..."

He was actually grateful when Harry nodded frantically. Good. He didn't want to have to ask questions about James and Lily's son and his sexual relationship with Severus Snape.

"When did this start?"

Harry looked baffled for a moment. He couldn't really tell himself, not about the fancying and the companionship. "I'm not sure, really." When he'd gone to see Snape at the beginning of the year, they had barely tolerated each other. He was pretty sure some of the warmer feelings had started to develop even before they'd left for the cottage, but he couldn't say precisely...

As he hesitated, he could see Remus' expression change. Replacing the careful neutrality was pure shock that was quickly morphing into horror.

"Oh, you mean the shagging." That was at least easy to remember, even though Harry did feel strangely flustered as he mentioned shagging to Remus. He was also slightly annoyed by what he was so clearly implying. "He never touched me when I was his student." That was true. In a way. But then again, it had been Harry who had kissed Snape and not the other way around. "And even then I had to... Well. It was my idea, not his."

Still reeling from the way Harry had said clearly that he was actually shagging with Severus, Remus blinked a few times before smiling slightly. "That's all I needed to know. Not that I really imagined Severus would ever..."

This was probably the most awkward discussion Harry had ever been a part of, so he just nodded before Remus could finish his sentence. "Yeah. I know. He really wouldn't. And it really is all right." Even though it kind of wasn't.

"Good." Yawning, Remus leaned his head back. "I'm going to close my eyes for a moment," he explained, lifting his hand slightly as he saw the guilty look on Harry. "No, you didn't wear me out. I guess I'm not as strong yet as I want to believe."
Harry could see that clearly. "All right. You take a nap, I'll be here." He would wait until Sirius came back and then head back to Hogwarts.

It was getting late, and Fudge might be in Dumbledore's office already. He didn't really care. This was more important right now than the Minister. They wouldn't be discussing anything that mattered anyway. Fudge had made it absolutely clear that he was not going to get involved in this. Fairy tales and rumors, he called it, even though they had clear evidence of Voldemort's return.

Everything seemed so complicated right now, but Harry was glad he'd at least talked to Remus. Some of the things he'd said were ones he'd wanted to say for a long time now, but hadn't known how.

Harry knew everyone had secrets and weird notions of what should be shared with others and what should be held hidden. He would have kept his involvement with Snape as a secret too, if that had been a choice. Every time he explained it to people, he lost a part of something that he wanted to keep as private. His own.

The only problem was that his notion of a family didn't work like that. There might be open secrets that everyone kind of knew already, but big things like this couldn't remain in the dark. Sooner or later Sirius would have found out, and at least now he wouldn't face his horror alone.

Casting a fond look at Remus, who was now breathing evenly, Harry let out a deep breath.

A soft knock on the door made him reach for his wand a moment later. It was too soon for Snuffles to be back from his walk, and the nurse hadn't knocked yesterday when she'd returned him to the room. Pointing his wand at the door, he stood there, ready to face anything.

When the door finally opened, he stood there, staring.

"Oh!" Looking startled, Ron stammered from the doorway, "I didn't know you were here." Realizing just how that sounded, he added, "I mean I can come back if this is a bad time."

Harry swallowed. "No... No, it's all right. Come on in." He gestured with his hand. "Remus is sleeping, but..."

"I'm not staying for long. I just wanted to see if he's all right." Turning his gaze to the bed, Ron stared at the sleeping man for a while.

It was the most awkward moment between them ever, two friends standing next to each other, neither knowing what to say.

Harry waited until he was ready to do anything to break the silence. Then he muttered to Ron, "I'm sorry." It felt completely inadequate, but he didn't know what else to say.

To his surprise, Ron simply nodded, his expression never wavering.

Dreading another silence, Harry added, "I wanted to come and see you and Charlie, but I wasn't sure..." He shook his head. "Didn't think I should intrude."

Even before Ron said anything, he could see that his guess had been right. He wouldn't have been welcome to mourn with the Weasleys. Two of them were dead, one in grave danger, all because the Death Eaters had targeted people he cared about.

A simple way to hurt him.
Now that Ron was squirming uncomfortably, Harry knew that they had succeeded beyond their wildest hopes.

"Yeah. Mum is taking this pretty badly. I don't think she... Well, you know." It was sad to see how hard Ron tried to force a smile on his lips, to soften the blow. His voice was oddly mild, even distant.

Harry had suspected this all along, but it still hurt. "Yes. I do know." The story of his life. Why would this be any different? A loving family that had welcomed him with their arms open. Of course it would be taken away from him, one way or the other.

"She'll get over it." Ron didn't sound too convinced.

They stood in silence, surrounded by the polite lie. Neither sure they could manage words right now.

Ron looked down at the floor, barely seeing the brightly colored floortiles. "I... The funeral will be next weekend. Um... It will be a small occasion, just for the family." He hoped Harry would not ask for explanations, for the only thing he could think of was the truth and he couldn't say that.

There was a cold silence, full of pain. Harry fought against showing any emotions, staring into distance with the numbness growing inside with every breath he took.

After a moment, Ron cleared his throat. "I... I should go back to see if Bill's had any luck with breaking the curses yet." He couldn't stay here for longer when everything he could say was killing his best friend.

Harry nodded. "Yes. Of course." His voice was completely calm, only the blank look in his eyes betraying his true feelings. "You should be with your family."

"Harry..." Not knowing what to say, Ron clasped his hand on his friend's shoulder, his grip tight. This was not what he'd wanted.

That day when he'd befriended this skinny boy in the train had changed his life. Previously, he had always shared things with his brothers, now he had Harry to be his friend. He hadn't even thought about what it meant to be the best friend of the 'Boy Who Lived' before the whispers and barely veiled insults. Before he had seen how people treated Harry.

He knew lots of people would now put the blame on the deaths on Harry; he'd seen the anger in his mother's eyes. There was no such hatred in him. For if he blamed Harry, he'd have to share the blame.

The thought was quenched as soon as it swum into his consciousness, replaced by the strange calm that had filled him for days now. It made all pain disappear, burying it somewhere so deep it couldn't reach him.

"I know." Harry did. Seeing Ron try made him feel just a little better. At least he hadn't lost everything. "Go to them. We can talk later on." This time, the smile was genuine, even though wan.

Ron nodded, his thoughts already back in Charlie, remembering that he needed to go and get Bill some orange juice. Yes, and then later on, he was supposed to see to it that Percy ate something. He would make sure he did. Without another look at Harry, he left Remus' room, concentrating on his everyday life.

When the door closed behind Ron, Harry let out a shuddering sigh. He pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingers, trying to focus on something else than feeling lousy.
"I'm sorry."

The soft words didn't even startle him. "Yeah." Still not looking at Remus, who was now wide awake, he added, "It'll be all right." He didn't really know what he meant with his words. His own life or Ron's? Their whole world?

Remus watched how Harry collected himself, hating the way he so obviously pushed his grief away. He wanted to tell him that it was all right to lose control and mourn, but something in Harry's determined look made him stay silent. Then the moment was lost as the door opened and Snuffles bounced in, going straight to Harry to lick his face.

Part 5

"Phoenix." The word came out tonelessly.

Harry knew it was barely two pm, but he was already exhausted. It had been a long morning, but still the hours he'd spent with Sirius and Remus and then the short visit to the owlery to see Hedwig had seemed to fly by.

Dragging his feet, he walked to the staircase that was already rolling up, riding them the whole way to Dumbledore's offices.

He didn't need to knock on the door, for it was already ajar, waiting for him to enter. Hearing the soft voices coming from inside, he once again straightened his back, determined not to look like he felt. He didn't want to show his weariness and pain to anyone right now.

Plastering a look of indifference on his face, Harry stepped into the room.

Seeing Fudge sit on the couch, drinking tea and smiling at Dumbledore made him want to turn around and walk away. He didn't want to do this right now, didn't really want to do anything beyond simply going back to the dungeons and crawling into bed.

"Harry. How nice of you to join us!" Dumbledore gestured him to come and sit down. "Allow me to pour you some tea." Without waiting for a reply, he grabbed the tea pot.

"Ah. Harry Potter! Yes, yes do sit down." Smiling a polite and obviously false smile, Fudge nodded at Harry.

"Ah. Harry Potter! Yes, yes do sit down." Smiling a polite and obviously false smile, Fudge nodded at Harry.

Harry took the offered cup and then sat down on a chair opposite to the Headmaster. The cup warmed his icy fingers.

He didn't engage in the pleasantries Dumbledore and Fudge exchanged, choosing to remain mostly silent. Nodding here and there, he sat there, listening.

Soon, they would get to the reason of this meeting. Harry was familiar with the long and winding speeches Fudge tended to give people he wanted to impress, and he didn't really listen to him. He needed to keep his energy until they actually got to the point.

He wasn't sure he could smile and talk about the lovely weather for long minutes and then talk about death without wanting to scream.

It had been bad enough at St. Mungo's, where Remus had looked at him with such a terrible knowing in his eyes.
He had wanted to curl next to him and Sirius and just be there, like he did at night with Snape, without any thoughts or words. It was all he wanted right now, to be able to concentrate on himself and let others deal with everything else.

Harry raised the cup to his lips, not really tasting the tea, but noticing the warmth that seeped into him as he sipped it.

This was it; the moment he'd been expecting. Strange, but he'd thought it would be some kind of a spectacle. Not three men sitting in a quiet room, drinking tea. But no matter how small the occasion was, to him it was the most profound yet. He had been asked to come here to be a part of this, to have his say, and by simply appearing, he had made the choice he had dreaded for so long.

Smiling a cynical little smile, he let Dumbledore and Fudge finish with their overly polite small talk. He might have to live with his choice, but he was going to do it his own way.

"More tea?" Once again not waiting for the nods, Dumbledore refilled their cups. Then he leaned back on his chair, his expression serious.

That seemed to be a signal for Fudge as well. Looking somber, he said, "Yes. Well, there is some urgent business we need to tend to, but first, Harry, allow me to offer my condolences for your loss."

Harry felt a very inappropriate urge to laugh in his face, but settled for a nod. He didn't say anything about the way Fudge was using his name. It wasn't the first time he said it like that, but Harry had never liked the sound of it less. He wondered if he should join this game somehow.

It made no real difference what he called the man. The game looked just as meaningless as the one Malfoy had played at the cottage and he wanted no part in it. "Thank you, Minister."

A small smile flickered on Fudge's lips, and he seemed to enjoy his hollow victory. "Yes, a terrible thing, really. Foolish hooligans playing tricks. I'm appalled that what was undoubtedly meant as a prank got so out of hands."

"Cornelius." Looking very calm, but determined, Dumbledore said, "It was no random prank. The Muggles at Privet Drive were attacked at the same time as the Weasleys were. And there were other incidents as you well know."

Fudge put his cup down, clearly displeased by the words. "I do admit that it sounds a bit strange, but..."

"The attacks were well planned." It was as if Dumbledore didn't pay any attention to Fudge's protests. "Small groups of people using the darkness of the night as their cover, killing and maiming. Does that sound familiar to you?"

While Fudge shook his head so hard it made his hair stand on end, Harry fought against the images of his dreams. Not only the ones he'd had recently, but the nightmares he'd had during the years. Some clearly conjured up by his imagination after he'd learned about the Death Eaters, some memories of the things he'd seen.

He knew people didn't want to believe it was happening again. Those who had survived the first war against Voldemort's people probably prayed it was simply a rumor.

Three dead people were not a rumor. No one could deny their existence.

Fudge was still shaking his head. "It's not possible. You must be mistaken. There is no indication whatsoever that... No. It's not happening."
"Yes, it is." To his surprise, Harry said that out loud. "We don't want it to happen, but it doesn't change the fact that it is real."

At the same time, Dumbledore nodded, "Voldemort has returned." The words seemed to echo in the room, making the shadows in the corners grow until they looked like they were going to swallow up all the light.

"You can not be serious!" Fudge sounded outraged.

"I am, Cornelius. I am. According to eyewitnesses, there were dark robed people attacking both Privet Drive and the Burrow. Some of our staff -- including professor McGonagall -- saw the same people burn Hagrid's hut. They were all wearing masks and they left behind the Dark Mark burning in the sky." Dumbledore shook his head. "Why is it so hard for you to see the truth?"

Harry didn't say anything, but he knew the answer to that. It was like when he'd been younger, hearing Aunt Petunia soothe Dudley who had thought there was a monster under the bed. Fudge was acting like a child, telling himself there was no threat from Voldemort, almost believing it was true.

Nothing had ever made him change his mind, not the yearly Death Eater raids, not Harry's testimonies -- some under Veritaserum -- about Voldemort.

"I..." With some considerable effort, Fudge straightened himself. "They could have been impostors. People who want to cherish the memory of You-Know-Who. I have read the Muggles do that with their monsters. So why not deranged wizards?"

"Both Arthur and Bill Weasley report that they saw one of the attackers push down his hood and that he had long, white hair. Does that sound familiar to you?"

As Fudge choked at that, Harry closed his eyes in pain. Sympathy for Draco Malfoy was definitely a new emotion. He deserved it now.

He knew that Lucius Malfoy hadn't revealed his identity by mistake. It had been a declaration of war, something that went beyond the sniping between him and Arthur Weasley whenever they met. Harry knew that he had probably taken great pleasure of what had happened that night. What he had done.

"It couldn't have been Lucius Malfoy! He's an upstanding citizen!" It was clear by Fudge's tone that he didn't believe it any more than the others did. His gaze was full of terrible fear.

Words of anger were already on Harry's lips. He wasn't only angry, he was shocked. He hadn't even left school yet, wasn't considered a full adult in the wizarding world and yet he could face the truth so much easier than this man. The Minister for Magic was the leader of their world, and he was willing to bury his head in the sand. Burying their whole world with him.

Dumbledore's voice rang out before he could say a thing. He sounded sad, but firm. "Cornelius, we both know it's true. They will come, no matter what you tell yourself. If you can't see that, you will forever be remembered as the man who condemned our world."

That seemed to penetrate Fudge's shields. He jolted as if being struck by a lightning, looking up. His eyes were huge, filled with fear.

It made Harry feel sick to his stomach.

He didn't want to see the leaders of their world like this. Some part of him wanted to believe in their absolute wisdom and that they would protect everyone from whatever monsters lurked in the shadows. He couldn't afford that now, when he could see the awful truth before him.
An old man who didn't have enough power to really do everything people might want to give him credit for. Harry hated that knowledge, for he truly revered Dumbledore. He hated knowing the truth about Fudge even more, for the man didn't even try. He simply hid his head in a bush and hoped every bad thing would just disappear.

Was this really what their world had to offer? Were they really going to fight against Voldemort like this?

Harry knew there was only one other option. The one he hated the most.

He met Dumbledore's gaze, seeing the sad and serious look there. It made him almost cringe.

Fudge was taking deep breaths, controlling himself with considerable effort. "Yes, well we must consider this situation very carefully indeed." He was pushing the shock away with obvious unease.

It was clear that he was not about to discuss it more now, changing the subject with aplomb, focusing his gaze on Harry. "Actually, There is something else I wished to talk about."

His very blatant dismissal of three deaths didn't even surprise Harry. He hadn't expected anything else. If this was truly the way politics made people act, he didn't want anything to do with the Ministry after the war.

Dumbledore simply poured more tea.

"I came here to offer you a job. With the Ministry. We need someone with your... qualities."

The slight pause made Harry smile wryly. He wondered just exactly what qualities Fudge meant. His skills in DADA? His fame and reputation? "I'm... flattered." It was clear from Dumbledore's slight smile that his hesitation wasn't missed either. "But I haven't even passed all my N.E.W.T.s yet. I can't possibly take a job."

"That will not be a problem. We can take care of the paperwork." As the Minister for Magic, Fudge knew it really wouldn't be a big thing.

Harry nodded slightly, trying to hide his nausea. Was this really the way things would go from now on? Doors opened, rules bent or broken. He wondered what Fudge really intended him to do with the Ministry, probably smile at reporters and then stay out of their way until it was the time for him to sacrifice himself for the good of their world, fighting someone Fudge didn't even want to believe existed anymore. "I appreciate the offer."

It was polite, but a complete lie.

"But I can't accept it. I really have to finish school first, and then I need some time to figure out what I want to do." Time to do the thing he really didn't want to.

There was a disappointed look on Fudge's face. This was definitely not his day.

Trying to cover his disappointment, he cast a glance at the clock, feigning surprise. "Goodness! I hadn't realized how late it is!" It was almost half past two. "Albus, thank you for the tea, but I really must go now." He was up before Dumbledore could even say anything.

"Of course." Following Fudge's lead, Dumbledore got to his feet, gesturing towards the door. "It has been a pleasure as always."

Harry got up, following Dumbledore's lead and wishing he could lie as well as the Headmaster did.
"Minister." He didn't even try to think of anything else to say. It would sound forced anyway.

Fudge nodded at both of them. Then he hurried out of the room.

"That was... unpleasant." Harry slumped back on the chair. He was too tired to mind his words, even with the Headmaster.

"I do believe that in time, he will come to see things more clearly." Smiling slightly, Dumbledore sat as well. "Sherbet Lemon?"

Harry shook his head. "No thank you." He wasn't in the mood for anything sweet right now.

The offered treat would be followed by soft words, and Harry didn't want those either. In the silence, he wished that Dumbledore wouldn't ask any inane questions about how he was doing. Any platitudes he could invent would be lies and he didn't want to think about the truth now.

"Fudge may sound reluctant to commit himself in anything, but he has increased Auror patrols everywhere. I doubt there'll be any attacks for a while."

Harry wasn't amazed by the calm words. He wanted to believe the Death Eaters would lay low for some time, but deep inside he had to wonder if they could really have the time they needed to get ready for what was going to happen. "Good." At least Fudge wasn't a total idiot.

"I was wondering if you feel like taking your N.E.W.T.s now." Keeping his expression bland, Dumbledore asked that as if they were indeed back to being a Headmaster and a simple student.

It was a relief. Then the meaning of the words registered. "Now?" For a moment Harry felt utter panic at the thought. Then he could see the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes. "Oh, I thought..." He actually smiled at his own silliness. "Yeah. I think it would be best if I took them now."

He wanted this over with. Leaving school was a signpost in a wizard's life, and he knew he needed to pass that before he could go on. A part of him begged to be left alone, to cling to his past life for as long as he could, but he crushed such childishness ruthlessly.

"Splendid." Handing out a piece of parchment, Dumbledore said quietly, "I took the liberty of making a schedule for your exams. Charms, Transfigurations and DADA are mandatory, but I see you chose Care of Magical Creatures as well."

"I... If I may, I'd like to drop that." It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but there was really no time to read for yet another exam. Besides, he'd only chosen it to make Hagrid happy, and Hagrid wasn't here anymore.

With a very knowing look, Dumbledore simply nodded. "That would seem like a wise thing to do right now. All right then." He tapped the parchment with his wand, and some of the ink disappeared. "There. I also heard you have already passed Potions and Divinations."

"I... If I may, I'd like to drop that." It had sounded like a good idea at the time, but there was really no time to read for yet another exam. Besides, he'd only chosen it to make Hagrid happy, and Hagrid wasn't here anymore.

"Yes. Professor Snape gave us the exam while we were away." Letting some of the disgusted amusement he felt about the whole Divinations thing show on his face, Harry added, "And apparently professor Trelawney has seen fit to award me with a grade I do not deserve."

There was no comment on that. "Since professor Pahicna is no longer available, I will give you the exam on DADA."

Harry nodded. He was grateful the Headmaster was doing this himself. The only other person in Hogwarts qualified for such a thing was Snape and he refused to even think about what would
Almost as if reading his thoughts, Dumbledore coughed slightly. "That brings me to the subject of your living arrangements. I noticed you aren't staying in the Gryffindor tower."

"No." It still amazed Harry how every time he tried to sound firm and independent in these offices, his words came out with an almost petulant whine. At least this time he managed not to babble.

He saw the knowing look in Dumbledore's eyes, and couldn't help feeling resentment; the feeling that had always made him uncomfortable. He liked the old Headmaster very much, but sometimes he simply couldn't take the not so subtle manipulation. "And I'm not going to move back there. I'm perfectly comfortable in the dungeons."

As the silence stretched, he wondered if he should say more. That Snape was no longer his teacher, that he was old enough to make decisions for himself. That he would not let anyone dictate his life, not on this. His future was already set, by years of guidance and tutoring, mostly done by this man. This was something he chose for himself.

Harry sat there, not saying anything. He was not going to explain himself. Not now. He respected Dumbledore more than anyone, but he was not going to let his opinion affect what was between him and Snape.

"Harry..." Sighing, Dumbledore fell silent. There was no real twinkle in his eyes, only a tired look. "Please tell Severus I would appreciate it if you both joined us for breakfast in the Great Hall tomorrow morning."

"Of course." Cringing at the thought of actually telling that to Snape, Harry nodded anyway. Dumbledore seemed to think that the matter was settled. "Good. I do believe you should stay here at Hogwarts for a bit longer, at least until we make other arrangements. After you pass your exams, I would like you to move to Hogsmeade. There is a house waiting for you there."

That made Harry look up in wonder. He hadn't really thought that far ahead.

"The Order will gather here in the beginning, but I would like to make Hogsmeade our new headquarters. Hogwarts is a school, not a command center."

"I see." Harry did, better than most would think. He could bet that even if the Order moved to Hogsmeade, Dumbledore would remain here. "Sounds good, sir. It would be too dangerous to stay here, especially when the school starts again."

There was really no other option for him but to accept this. He had no wishes, no dreams beyond peace. Staying in Hogsmeade with the Order would be a nightmare at times, but he knew it was the only way he could ever achieve what he wanted.

"Yes. The house will be perfectly safe." Dumbledore didn't add that Privet Drive should have been a safe place as well. They both knew it. "It belongs to you, courtesy of the Order, so in case you want to invite others to live there as well, you're quite welcome to do so. I would imagine your godfather might appreciate the opportunity of spending more time with you."

Harry's eyes widened, both with the shock of being handed a whole house so casually and with joy at the thought. It had been one of his biggest dreams since his third year here, to be able to live with Sirius, as a real family. If he couldn't stay here, that would be more than enough. "Thank you."

They both finished their tea in silence.
It was a relief to escape the Headmaster's offices a while later. Holding the exam schedule in his hand, Harry walked through the corridors, nodding at the few professors he saw but not staying to chat with anyone.

He'd already been beat when he'd come back from St. Mungo's and now he was completely exhausted. Life had been so simple and calm for so long, days filled with nothing more complicated than easy chores. It was difficult to get used to the hectic rhythm of life here. His mind was so full of details he was afraid his head was about to explode.

It was good to go to the dungeons. He couldn't think of the Gryffindor tower as his home anymore, it would never be a home without his housemates. For now, home was the small apartment downstairs.

He refused to think about how that would change soon. With everything already changing, he didn't need to worry about that as well.

The smell of Bubotuber pus welcomed him, and he smiled slightly at the familiarity of the smell. He wondered if every Muggleborn wizard would always connect the smell with petrol. Pushing the door open -- how nice of Snape to make the door respond to his touch as well -- he announced, "I'm back."

"Yes, Potter. I can see that." Wiping his forehead with a rag, Snape glanced from where he was stirring a cauldron. "How was your day?" The clipped tone indicated that it was an actual question.

Harry sighed. "I'll tell you all about it later." He probably would, too. Things were happening so fast he needed to organize his thoughts. First, he'd try that on his own, then he'd talk to Snape. It had always been a good idea before.

Accepting that with a nod, Snape turned back to his potion. He knew that whatever Fudge had wanted had not been easy on Harry, and he would hear about it when Harry was ready. Their silences were calm and he would have plenty of time to finish his task before they would sit down and talk about today.

He didn't hurry with his work. It was good to clean the table while the final batch of the potion bubbled in the cauldron. He noticed how Harry busied himself with some parchment for a while and then went to his now enlarged trunk to collect his books.

The quiet domesticity should probably have annoyed Snape, but he couldn't conjure up the emotion even though he did try. He had been certain the simplicity of the shared silence would be marred by weeks of physical contact and it was actually pleasant to see that wasn't the case.

Things were quite back to the way they had been.

When Snape finally put the cauldron to dry after some rather furious scrubbing, it was already time for dinner. He was a bit amazed to see how late it was. Harry had simply sat on the couch for hours, his nose buried in his Transfigurations book, not saying anything the whole time.

"Do you want to go to the Great Hall for dinner, or should I order us something?" Snape asked, already knowing the answer.

Harry looked up, startled at the sudden question. He glanced at the clock, his eyes widening a little. "Oh. I hadn't noticed it's so late." Slamming the book shut, he added, "I don't really feel like going anywhere right now, but if you want to..."

"Spare me the platitudes, Potter." This was the one thing they agreed on completely. It was always more pleasurable to eat in peace. Ignoring the impish grin Harry threw at him, Snape contacted the
house elves and then went to the bathroom to wash his hands.

Like the evening before, the dinner was brought by a strangly dressed house elf. Snape didn't say anything about the mismatched pair of socks the small creature wore or the way he seemed to be unable to pass Harry without patting him on the knee. He'd stopped wondering about the rather mismatched group of people and beings Harry undoubtedly called friends a long time ago.

The house elf seemed to make Harry smile a genuine smile. Not many things did these days, so Snape managed to hold his tongue.

"Thanks, Dobby." Harry nodded at the house elf as he sat down, breathing in the wonderful scents coming from the plates. Even the lingering odor of the potion didn't spoil this.

Casting a wary look at Snape, the house elf patted Harry's knee one more time and then disappeared with a snap of his fingers.

The way Harry attacked the meal immediately and kept his attention on the food was a clear sign that he didn't want to talk about anything right now. Snape didn't mind, realizing he was famished himself. The food was excellent and the house elves had even added some chocolate cake to the tray.

Snape decided he could indulge, enjoying a slice of the cake with his tea. He didn't miss the relieved expression on Harry's face as he shoveled the sweet dessert from the plate.

He waited until they were both finished with eating and lingered over their tea. Even though there were no windows in the dungeons, it felt like it was late, making the atmosphere down here drowsy and mellow. Always a good time to a conversation.

"Talk to me." It wasn't exactly the same sentence Snape had used so often in the past. Then it had been a curt command. This was more of a question; a soft encouragement.

Harry sighed. "When I was at St. Mungo's... I didn't go to see Charlie, because I thought they wouldn't want me to be there. And I was right. Ron..." He swallowed, feeling his throat tighten. This was not the time for tears. He didn't want to make everything to be about his problems, Snape didn't need to suffer through this.

It was strange, how that look on Harry's face made Snape tense. He felt a surge of anger course through him; an irrational emotion that paled his earlier protectiveness. Deciding to wait until Harry continued, he sipped from his cup.

"Ron talked with me, and I think we're all right." Harry's eyes shone with both joy and unshed tears. He hadn't allowed himself to even think about their friendship before seeing Ron again, knowing that if he started to doubt that, he'd go insane.

Not even Snape's presence could soften some blows.

"He'll be staying with his family, I think." They hadn't really got to talk about that. "At least until the funeral. It's this weekend." He added quietly, "It's just for the Weasleys."

Snape picked out the word 'family' immediately, understanding why Harry was so sad again. He didn't know whom to curse; the redheads who had seemed to offer something unconditional to this young man only to yank it away when he most needed it or the Dark Lord. Neither would change anything, but it would make him feel slightly better. "I see."

"Yeah." Harry didn't really need Snape to say anything more. They both knew what he meant. "I know it's not..." he hesitated for a moment and then said it anyway, not certain he really believed in
it. "I know it wasn’t my doing, but I still... feel responsible. And I don’t blame them if they think that it was my fault. I think that on some level it sort of was. At least things would be different now if I'd been here."

He hated this feeling of uncertainty. Thinking that he might have been able to do something didn’t make this any easier, but he couldn’t help himself.

"You're absolutely right," Snape said, nodding. His gaze was burning with intensity. "Things would be different if you hadn't followed young Malfoy and me to the cottage."

It was true on many accounts, including this ridiculous predicament he found himself in. Without those long weeks spent together, he would not have Harry Potter in his bed.

Harry stared into Snape's eyes, trembling slightly. He knew this already, knew what he was about to say. It was still hard to accept, especially since no-one else would likely see it this way. "They would all still be dead, wouldn't they?"

"Yes. The difference is that you would be too. Or at least you'd be in the hands of the Dark Lord. The Order would destroy itself trying to save you, and then the whole wizarding world would be lost."

The whole situation was totally unfair to everyone, mostly to Harry. Nothing could change it anymore, so they would simply have to deal with what they had.

Putting down his cup before his trembling hands made him spill some of the tea on his lap, Harry took a better position on the couch, needing a moment to think about this. Somehow hearing the words out loud or saying them always made everything real. It was like a revealing charm from which no dark thought could really hide.

There were so many things he didn’t want to think about right now, but there were also things that made him feel better. Not only Sirius and Remus, but being able to stay here for a bit longer as well. He had dreaded that, to be forced to move out now, to be alone with his thoughts.

Dumbledore’s words about finishing his schoolyear had been a relief, but the move was still waiting in the not so far future.

Harry looked up, his gaze tired. "Dumbledore said there's a house waiting for me in Hogsmeade."

It was news to Snape, but hardly a surprise. "Did he say when you're supposed to move in?" A whole house for one man? There had better be good wards around it or maybe a guard or two.

Snape wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea, even though it would bring him back his beloved solitude. Having Harry spend his time alone in the Gryffindor tower had been unacceptable. The thought of him staying alone in a house in Hogsmeade was equally disturbing.

"Not really. I'll stay here at least for as long as it takes me to get through the exams." That wouldn't take long. Harry wasn't really interested in his grades; all he wanted was to pass. "Dumbledore said something about Order meetings as well, so I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

He wasn't in any hurry to go through that again, glad there hadn't been a crowd waiting for him when he'd come back. Sooner or later he would be required to attend a meeting, but he'd rather it was later. There were already so many things he had to concentrate on, he couldn't really deal with anything else right now.

"Does that mean you'll be staying here in my quarters until you move to Hogsmeade?" It was not an
invitation or a real offer, but it wasn't a serious question either. Snape knew exactly what Harry would say to that.

Glad he didn't have to ask for it -- or beg -- Harry smiled. "Yes."

He knew it was simply about living arrangements. Nothing in Snape's demeanor had hinted that he'd be willing to allow anything more, and right now, Harry didn't have the energy to fight with him, or indeed the energy to do anything more than he was already doing. This was what he needed, and it was more than enough to sleep next to Snape.

Letting out a muffled snort, Snape refused to even comment on the silly expression. He didn't say anything about the way Harry once again leaned closer to him a moment later either.

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**Part 6**

It had only been a few days since they returned, but the time spent at the cottage was already beginning to fade into a memory. Harry tried to stop from time to time, to try to grasp the strangely timeless feeling he'd had for months, but it didn't work. What had felt like an endless moment caught between the mad rush of reality was forever gone, replaced by the routine he'd followed for years.

Harry kept reading for the exams, even though he knew it was of little use. He wasn't going to be able to concentrate on this for long. Instead of the weeks he'd spent on studying for the Potions exam, there would only be days, maybe not even that.

Even though the reading he'd done earlier this spring helped, he knew he would have to study for weeks if he really wanted to get decent grades. None of that mattered now. His goal was to leave school, to be seen officially as a grown up. He didn't know why it felt so vital right now, but he didn't want to face the world if Fudge or Dumbledore could still see him legally as a child.

Hurrying through what would have been the most important thing in any other young wizard's life, Harry ignored everything else.

The DADA exam was the easiest one. He didn't really even study for that, the years he'd attended to Order meetings made sure he didn't have to. He knew it and Dumbledore knew it. Transfigurations was a bit harder, but most Gryffindors had always done well in that class, just like the Slytherins drove to excel in the Potions classroom. It was a matter of House pride to not fail in a subject the Head of their House taught.

He knew that in both the Transfigurations and the Charms test, the professors had been easy on him. It usually annoyed him, but right now he didn't really care. Neither McGonagall nor Flitwick simply allowed him to pass, so it was enough.

Dumbledore seemed to understand him and the DADA exam was as difficult as he'd thought. Receiving his only top score -- and the Divinations didn't count -- made Harry actually feel almost as proud as he'd been after getting his Potions exam back. He deserved both grades and no one could argue that.

Walking back home from Dumbledore's office with his diploma in hand, he didn't feel any different than mere days ago, when he'd agreed to take the exams.

He was an adult now, in every sense of the word. Able to make his own decisions about life; to build a family if he so desired, open a vault in Gringotts without needing anyone's permission.

Go and live in that surprisingly large house he'd visited yesterday. Go and live there all alone.
The faint flickering light from the torches painted shadows on his face, turning his carefully schooled expression almost into a sneer. It matched his mood perfectly, as did the familiar stone walls around him. He wasn't allowed to enjoy his new status for even a day. Now that the official school business was over and done, it was time for the official Order business.

Sighing, he turned the corner and walked past the Potions classroom without even really noticing the doorway. The Slytherin dungeons had stopped intimidating him ages ago.

In fact, he rarely even thought about them as the 'Slytherin' dungeons.

Maybe his mind was indeed playing dangerous games with him. Even though he was well aware of how short lived this all was, this place was now what he associated with the word home.

He cast a disgusted look at the rolled up parchment in his hand. With the N.E.W.T.s passed, Hogwarts would never again be his real home, unless he came back here to teach. That didn't seem probable, not with the grades he'd got from most of the exams. The only subject he would ever be able to teach was DADA and after facing death and destruction in reality over and over again, it was the last thing he wanted to make a living out of.

Pushing unpleasant thoughts away was a reflex by now. He'd practiced it so long and so hard it had become almost an art form. He smiled at that, but it was a sad little smile. Very soon, there would be no need to hide from his worries, for the time to hide was over.

A soft whisper echoed in the hallway.

Harry startled as he saw the doorway leading to the Slytherin common room open, accompanied by a faint sound of the password being muttered. Warily, he moved his hand to grab his wand.

"Oh. It's you." He almost groaned at the stupid thing that escaped his mouth. Seeing Draco Malfoy step into the corridor without a warning did that to him. He hadn't even thought about Malfoy after getting back to Hogwarts, except for that slight twinge he'd felt when he'd heard it had been Lucius Malfoy who had lead the raid against the Weasleys.

Suddenly he realized that Malfoy had to be living in the common room, just like he would have stayed in the Gryffindor tower if Snape hadn't let him into the dungeon.

It made him shiver a little.

"Potter." Nodding slightly, Malfoy waited until the doorway closed behind him, and then rushed towards the staircase. He didn't walk with his usual swagger, keeping close to the wall as he went, as if he wanted to blend into the grey stone.

Harry stared after him, not liking what he saw. If Malfoy spent all his time in Hogwarts, why hadn't he seen him in the Great Hall? After Dumbledore's words, he and Snape had indeed had breakfast with the rest of the staff -- arriving separately with Harry going to the Gryffindor table and Snape taking his usual place at the Head Table of course -- and there had never been any sign of Malfoy there.

It was too late to ask now, as Malfoy disappeared from sight, only his hurried footsteps echoing in the hallway.

Pushing his wand back under his robes, Harry turned around and headed home.

The warm gust of scented air that greeted him made him smile despite his somber thoughts. No Bubotuber pus this time, only herbs and something else. For a moment Harry couldn't catch the
elusive scent, but then he realized it was simply tea.

He'd got so used to Snape brewing potions, smelling his afternoon tea was almost a shock. Still smiling to himself, he went to grab a cup, knowing that there would be enough tea left for him as well. There always was these days, when every meal here was served for two.

"There's milk over there." With a negligent gesture, Snape barely cast a glance at Harry before returning his attention to a book he was browsing through.

Harry padded to the couch and sat down heavily. He didn't think he was really hungry, but he poured himself some tea anyway. And grabbed a scone. He could always have a scone, even when he wasn't hungry. Munching it with relish, he took a few sips of the tea, and then reached out for another scone.

Placing the book on the table, Snape finally raised his gaze to Harry. He frowned slightly as he saw the way he sprawled on the couch, looking desolate. Had the idiot failed with his exams? He wouldn't be surprised. Even Granger wouldn't have been brave -- or stupid -- enough to take all the N.E.W.T.s in such a short time.

Then he realized that he was most likely completely wrong with his deduction.

"I see congratulations are in order," Snape said, nodding at the parchment Harry had so carelessly dropped on the table.

"Yeah." It came out as a mumble. Harry couldn't really be happy about leaving school. It should have been different from this; all the Gryffindors celebrating together and then sneaking to Hogsmeade to get really drunk now that they kind of could.

Snape cast another sharp gaze at him, but didn't comment on his tone. He was used to seeing this side of Harry, even though he got no pleasure in witnessing such gloom.

Finishing with his third scone, Harry sighed. "I saw Malfy in the corridor."

"And?" It was clear that there was more. Snape realized they hadn't talked about Draco Malfoy since they'd returned. It was no different from dozens of other things they hadn't talked about; unlike earlier, Harry seemed to be content with simply being here. The silence was slightly disconcerting.

"And nothing, really. I just didn't realize he'd be staying here. In the Slytherin common room, I mean." Harry didn't add that he was kind of shocked about that.

"There's no other place for him to go." There was no emotion in Snape's voice. "The moment he walks away from Hogwarts and my protection, he's dead. He knows that just as well as I do."

Harry looked down. He didn't know why he was feeling this lousy. Malfoy didn't need his pity, wouldn't want his concern. They were not friends, but even with the weirdness between Malfoy and Ron, Harry couldn't hate him anymore. He didn't want to think about the fact that the Slytherin was staying in the common room alone, didn't want to remember how he'd turned his back on all his friends and his family.

That simple decision of not joining the Death Eaters had left Malfoy completely alone. His only lifeline was a man who was just as despised by the general public as he most probably was. Someone, who up to this point, had lived his life in the solitude of his chambers.

He looked at Snape. "Dumbledore said that Lucius Malfoy was one of the Death Eaters attacking the Burrow." It wouldn't surprise him to hear that he'd personally killed the two Weasleys.
"I rather suspected he would be." Snape nodded. The rivalry between Lucius and Arthur might not be as open as it was between their sons, but there had always been mutual contempt between them. He knew Lucius Malfoy, better than he would like to, and he knew that killing for pleasure was definitely something he would do. "I will talk to Draco about it."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the use of Malfoy's name, but decided against commenting on it. There was an ugly echo in the family name anyway.

He sat in silence for a moment. This was so familiar by now, the companionable mood, Snape's calm presence. He didn't want to say anything or do anything, just wanted to be here and yet that was the one thing that he couldn't have tonight.

"Dumbledore also said..." He cleared his throat, feeling it squeeze shut at the memory of the compassionate look in the blue eyes. "He said that we should go to his offices tonight after dinner. That... There'll be others coming too."

Remus and Sirius wouldn't be there, both still staying in St. Mungo's due to Remus' slight relapse right after the full moon. But there would be others, people he had worked with for years.

"I see," Snape said quietly. He had noticed that there were more people in the Great Hall these days, familiar faces everywhere. The Order was coming together, and very soon the real preparations for the war would begin.

None too early in his opinion. They should have done this ages ago.

Harry nodded sadly. "Yeah." He didn't want to talk about this now. The evening would come soon enough.

As usual, Snape had some work to do, and he concentrated on his potion without paying any attention to Harry. It was a relief, leaving Harry time to relax on the couch. Once again it was strange to simply be. He almost felt guilty for not holding a textbook in his hands.

There was no need for that anymore. No need to read about transfiguring living beings into inanimate objects or about the ever-changing currents of magical energy. Moping because he never had to study again felt slightly ridiculous, but Harry couldn't help it. He hated this.

Letting out a suffering sigh -- keeping it quiet enough not to catch Snape's attention -- he lay down, resting his head on the armrest. With nothing real to concentrate on anymore, he had to deal with the fact that he wouldn't be able to push all those unpleasant things out of his mind anymore. He'd been doing it ever since he'd come back from the cottage, not thinking about not seeing Snape again, not thinking about the deaths. Avoiding going anywhere near his relationship with Snape or his future life outside Hogwarts.

No wonder people like Fudge were unable to face the reality. Harry wasn't that keen on facing parts of it either, and for the same reason, it seemed; if he didn't talk or even think about it, it might all go away and he could continue his life in peace.

The only thing was that it would never go away. There was no Boggart in the closet and the horrors out there were all too real.

Harry Potter, the Hogwarts graduate was also reality. The change that would bring would not go away even if he tried not to think about it.

Not saying anything about his thoughts, he watched Snape finish with his brewing. They ate dinner in an almost fragile silence, but Harry was constantly reminded of what would come next.
He wasn't going to do this anymore. The exams were over and he couldn't avoid talking, not with the Order, not with Snape. After the evening's meeting, he would have to sit down with Snape and finally deal with the situation he'd found himself in.

Maybe Snape really wouldn't want to be with him like that again. There had been no indication of conscious efforts of him being more open -- no more things -- and besides sleeping together and the embrace that first, awful night, Snape had not touched him, not even once.

Losing whatever little he had would be too much right now, but Harry couldn't live like this either. Hiding from the world was one thing, hiding from himself was worse.

It was no wonder Harry was in a somber mood when they finally left the dungeons.

The corridors downstairs were empty and dark. Harry wondered if Malfoy might appear in the meeting as well, but then realized no one had probably even thought to ask him. That had to change, soon. Maybe he'd talk to Malfoy himself, as soon as he knew exactly what to say.

Professor Flitwick joined them in the hallway before Harry and Snape had the chance to agree on which one should go first this time. The small Charms teacher didn't seem to find anything strange about them walking together and after offering Harry his condolences once again, he gestured for them to hop on the staircase that was conveniently arriving from the second floor.

Not saying anything, Harry followed the two teachers.

There were others hurrying towards the gargoyle, all Hogwarts staff. Professor McGonagall cast a very sharp look at Harry, her gaze going to Snape an instant later. For a moment, Harry worried she might say something. As the Head of his House, she'd known all along where he was staying, and he was sure she disapproved.

McGonagall only nodded and said, "Severus." Turning to Harry, she added, "I was happy to hear about your exams, Mr. Potter." Her stern expression melted to show her delight.

Her sentiment seemed genuine, so he smiled at her. "Thank you, professor."

That exchange of words brought forward more congratulations from the other professors, some looking slightly miffed by the fact that they hadn't heard already.

It felt insane to lead the professors into the Headmaster's office. Harry shrugged the feeling off, knowing he'd have to get used to it sooner or later and this wasn't as bad as most of the things he'd imagined.

Letting the staircase carry him up, he focused on his breathing, smiling cynically as he realized the panic that his hyperventilating would undoubtedly cause everyone. As soon as he reached the door, he slipped in and then went to stand in the farthest away corner with barely a nod to Dumbledore.

"Welcome, Harry," Dumbledore said, his lips curled to a gentle smile. "Good to see you here."

Harry managed to answer the smile, but he couldn't really lie to the Headmaster now could he? He wasn't exactly happy to be back here like this.

Sighing, he concentrated on the people filing in.

The crowd in the office was small, familiar people he'd known for years. Harry was grateful for that. He'd been half expecting there to be hundreds of people here.
Some of those he was used to seeing here were absent. Sirius and Remus were of course still at St. Mungo's. There were a few youngsters freshly out of Hogwarts, but Harry could easily see that there were no Gryffindors amongst them, no sign of Hermione or any of the Weasleys.

Most of the professors had come here. He was amazed to see even Trelawney sitting on the couch, holding a tea cup and chatting happily with professor Sprout. Such a jovial look on her face was almost unreal. Harry was only used to seeing it when she was busy predicting his horrendous future.

That thought finally brought a real grin to his face. How disappointed she had to be now that most of her predictions had gone totally wrong. She'd always said he wouldn't live to leave Hogwarts, yet here he was, alive and well.

Keeping that firmly in mind, he surveyed the others. He missed Hagrid's huge form, so used to seeing him in the larger Order gatherings. Remembering what Malfoy had said about Voldemort's plans before they'd left to the cottage, he couldn't help feeling relieved by his absence. It was much safer in France than it was here. At least now Voldemort couldn't use their friendship against him.

As the people milled around, trying to find a place to sit, the sound of pleasantries being changed filled the room. Some of the professors threw curious looks at Harry, but no one approached him. Glad of the fact, he kept his eyes on the door, wondering if this was it or if there would still be more people coming.

To his surprise, Filch was the last one to appear. The caretaker banged the door shut behind him and then leaned against it, casting dark glances at anyone who made the mistake of looking at him and holding Mrs. Norris close.

"Now that we're all here," Dumbledore started, his hushed voice once again echoing in the room. "I would like to start by welcoming you all. Both those who have attended our small gatherings earlier, and those who are here for the first time."

That made the noise level rise again as people nodded at him and muttered their thank-yous.

"These past few days have been difficult, and I'm afraid there will be even more difficult times ahead. For all of us. But we must remember that our efforts are vital to our world. Without us, our world will fall under the shadow of Voldemort and his Death Eaters."

Harry noticed how those who had just joined their group flinched at the sound of the Dark Lord's name. It made a new emotion stir in him, anger. Sooner or later there would come a day when people would be able to say that out loud with only a disgusted grimace. They would make sure of it.

He mostly ignored Dumbledore's words, having heard it all before. Such grandiose declarations didn't really move him, the simple reactions of these people did.

Dumbledore went on, saying a few words about their organization, mostly for the good of those who had just joined. Harry didn't really listen.

Instead he watched the people. Seeing the abject horror on Trelawney's face as Dumbledore reminded them all of the recent attacks made Harry's stomach cramp. He liked the determination on most of the people who had spent their whole life educating others. He didn't look at Snape, but instead wondered why on earth was McGonagall sitting so calmly next to him, wrapped in her long cloak like she was waiting for the warm summer evening turning into a frosty winter's night any moment now.

To Harry's relief, the Headmaster didn't say anything about Aunt Petunia. He only mentioned the
Weasleys in passing, but there were still soft murmurs of sorrow and glances full of regret.

He tried not to look at anyone in the eyes.

"I have called for a meeting. The whole Order of the Phoenix will gather here in three days."

This time Dumbledore's words were met by excited babble. Even though there had been lots of meetings, there had never been one where everyone would be present. No one really knew just how big their order was. Some said hundreds, but there were probably more.

Standing still in his place by the bookshelves, Harry tried to figure out why the announcement didn’t fill him with complete horror. He’d thought it might, for even thinking about this little gathering had made him nauseous earlier. Now he was simply calm. He knew it was time to call their troops together and the war was finally moving from the shadows into the open.

"Everyone living at Hogsmeade, I’d appreciate it if you’d accommodate as many people at your houses as possible." Looking at Madam Rosmerta, Dumbledore smiled. "I would say your establishment will be crowded before today is done, Rosmerta."

She grinned at that. "I do believe you might be right on that."

"I will need everyone here to be prepared to give reports at the meeting. Since Remus Lupin will not be present, Arabella, would you please deal with the matter of the dark creatures?"

There was slight hesitation, but she nodded anyway. "I'll have to ask Remus for the final report, but I think it'll be all right."

"Good." Dumbledore turned his attention to the shadowy nook on the other side of the room. "Harry. I would like you to say a few words too. Most of the people who are now joining us are your classmates. You know how to talk to them."

Harry heard most people around him murmur approvingly. He didn't say anything, simply nodded. This time his throat was closing in, preventing any sounds from coming out.

He knew what the Headmaster meant, even if most people would take the kind words at face value. Talk to the newcomers? No. That was not what he would have to do. He’d have to stand up and address the whole crowd, say something heroic and uplifting.

The mere thought brought back the nausea.

He couldn't really think of anything great to say. Wasn't everything important said already? Voldemort needed to be stopped, every effort was welcome; that should be enough. Why did they need him to repeat it again? Was their world so damn dependant on its imaginary heroes?

Some hero he was. What had he ever done to deserve all this? He wouldn't even be here if Voldemort hadn't tried to kill him and his parents. And for what?

Harry blinked. Very slowly, he turned his gaze to Dumbledore, who was still speaking. He couldn't hear any of the words, pure shock was muffling all the sounds.

All around him, people were commenting on the upcoming meeting, making plans. Filch was looking slightly horrified at the idea of people coming to his school, traipsing around unsupervised.

Harry ignored them. His attention was on the Headmaster, who seemed to be avoiding his gaze. Determined not to let this lie, he leaned against the bookshelves. He didn't want to be here, didn't
want to know, but he had no real choice. Not this time.

"Good, good!" Nodding at something Sprout had said, Dumbledore looked up. "All right then. We will meet in three days in the Great Hall."

People muttered their answers to him, everyone looking excited about the upcoming event. There were few who could remember the last time the whole Order had gathered at the same time, for it had been almost two decades ago.

Very slowly, the crowd was starting to dissolve, most professors already leaving. Those who'd come to Hogwarts for this meeting seemed to want to stay for a moment and exchange a few words with Dumbledore. A few people cast curious looks at Harry, but no one came to him, probably because of the very cold expression he wasn't even aware of.

He simply waited for everyone to leave.

Harry realized Snape was staring at him questioningly, and he shook his head slightly. He was glad Snape still cared enough to actually wait for him instead of simply disappearing downstairs, but he couldn't go yet. There was something he needed to do now, before he lost his nerve.

Raising an eyebrow, Snape stood up and then walked out, his robes billowing behind him. He could obviously sense that his presence wasn't needed right now.

It was a relief, for this was the one thing Harry had never even considered talking about with Snape. After all the things they'd discussed about, he still couldn't ask about it. This would undoubtedly bring the most painful memories to both of them, of pain and losses and decisions that had almost ruined everything, a lifetime of grief and decades of remorse and nightmares.

He wondered if he would talk to Snape about this later on, when he'd had some time to think about whatever Dumbledore would say. Probably. At least he would tell him he knew. Snape deserved his honesty.

There was a soft but definite sound as the door was pulled shut, leaving only two men in the room.

Harry stared at Dumbledore, unsure of how to do this. He'd thought about finding out the reason behind all the insanity for so long; ever since Hagrid had told him that his parents had not indeed died in a car crash. Now that he was so close to the knowledge, he wasn't certain he wanted to know after all.

If he didn't ask, he would never know the truth.

He knew Dumbledore would probably not tell him everything and he could live with that. Once they'd finished with this, he could go to Snape and ask for the rest. Not the details, but the reasons behind everything. Maybe when he knew the basics about this, he could handle the rest of the knowledge and it being Snape who told it to him.

Opening his mouth, Harry hesitated for only a second. Then he forced himself to say, "Albus." He now knew how it must be for Snape to try to call his former Master Voldemort.

The whole idea had sounded hollow and meaningless when he had been talking to Fudge, but there it would have been a part of a game he didn't want to play. This wasn't a game, even though it was once again about the power names could hold.
Harry moved away from the bookshelves, taking a few steps closer to where the Headmaster was sitting. He could hear Fawkes make a questioning thrill and felt his own heart beat so fast he was afraid it would burst.

He knew that he had always been a pawn in this whole thing, and it would be so easy to remain as such. Something in him rebelled against that. If he had to play, he would have to do it his own way, make his own decisions.

If a strong figurehead was what they wanted, that was what they'd get, but he wasn't going to do this without knowing the reason for it. There had always been rumors and whispers, but no one had ever explained it all to him, not in a way that made any sense.

"Yes?" There was still the twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes, but it was accompanied by a strange look.

Harry took a deep breath and released it slowly. Before he could lose all his courage, he asked, "Albus, why did Voldemort kill my parents?"

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**Part 7**

Harry placed his palm on the hard stone wall.

The stones were always so cold here in the corridor, even though it was nice and warm inside Snape's quarters. He sometimes wondered about that, remembering the freezing January afternoons when they had shivered in the Potions classroom, wishing they were somewhere else.

He stood there for a moment and then took the final step towards the wooden door. His palm was cold and the sensation made the coiled snake feel strange, as if it was truly alive, breathing under his touch.

The thought made a part of his mind stir and prepare to let the sibilant whispers come out of his mouth. For a moment he wondered how insane it would be to actually talk to the small ornament. It would suit his mood perfectly to stand here and talk to an inanimate object.

Swallowing the hisses and the hysterical laughter that threatened to escape, Harry simply pressed the snake.

No words were needed. The powerful wards Snape had on the door recognized him immediately, and the door opened without a sound. Harry let out a relieved sigh as he slipped through the doorway. He hadn't been certain he'd make it here.

His mind was still spinning, wanting to reject all the overwhelming information he'd heard just a moment earlier. Only the familiarity of the corridors had guided him down here. For once he was grateful for his need to flee, otherwise he would still be standing outside Dumbledore's offices.

Probably staring into the distance with a shocked look on his face.

Kind of like he was now. It was good to feel the solid door behind him, grounding him to the reality that had suddenly turned into a whirlwind of chaos and weirdness surpassing any he'd ever met in their world. Not even hearing he had a godfather who was wanted for murder had made him feel this unreal. Or this lost.

"Potter?"

Snape's voice broke his reverie, and he blinked slowly, looking up. He focused on all the familiar
things that surrounded him; the very solid and real walls, the couch and the small coffee table.
Moving slowly, he went to sit on his chair, for once needing to feel the armrests confine him in a
certain place and ground him. He couldn't stand the idea of sitting next to Snape on the couch. If he
tried, he'd probably crawl all over him and never let go.

"Potter? What is it?" This time the worry was evident in Snape's voice. He leaned forward, putting
the parchments he'd been studying down on the table.

Harry took a deep breath. "I'm fine." He was such a poor liar even he didn't believe it.

There was no sarcastic comment, even though he was certain Snape was biting his lip to prevent
it from escaping. No questions either, only silence.

"Dumbledore told me..." Harry couldn't really say the rest of it. The explanation had been so insane,
he didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Any sound would probably come out as a scream.

Snape waited patiently for him to finish. He had no idea why Harry had insisted on seeing the
Headmaster now. It could be anything. When the silence stretched, he prompted, "Yes?"

"He told me why Voldemort killed my parents. Or at least why he thinks he did it. I just..." Making a
small gesture with his hand, Harry looked at Snape's now expressionless face. It was saying more
than a thousand words.

Snape knew. There were no doubts in his gaze, only the calm stare.

"Wild Magic."

Harry closed his eyes. He didn't want to believe the insanity Dumbledore had told him had actually
been true. But if Snape said it too... He would know.

It was incredulous, impossible. He had always thought it would be something grand; a prophecy
telling of the Dark Lord's fall or maybe some kind of heroic thing his father was doing that had
somehow branded him as well. That would have made sense.

Not this. Feeling the urge to laugh bubble inside just as it had in Dumbledore's office, Harry looked
at Snape again. "That's what he said. That Voldemort thought that my father would stand in
his way because..." Anger and hysterical amusement flashing in his gaze, he ground out, "Because he
was the king stag." A creature of myth.

He'd grinned when Dumbledore had begun his explanation, thinking it was a joke. When the familiar
twinkle had disappeared from Dumbledore's gaze, he'd sobered up.

Listening to the quietly spoken words had been strange. Harry had heard all the words, but they had
not made any sense to him, almost as if they were in some kind of a foreign language. It was still
hard to believe anything Dumbledore had said.

"Yes." Snape could see the disbelief in Harry. He didn't blame him for it. When he'd first heard
about the Dark Lord's fears, he'd found them quite ridiculous as well, and he had grown up with the
myths and legends. For someone like Harry who had been raised by ignorant Muggles, this must
sound like the worst kind of a fairy tale.

Still, he had to wonder what the other professors were teaching these days. With all the Muggleborns
in Hogwarts, there should be classes about tradition and lore and their history that stretched far
beyond the times of Salazar Slytherin and his companions. "Certainly professor Binns has..."
"I don't give a damn what professor Binns has." Snapping the words out, Harry took a deep breath, trying to calm down. He could see from the spark in the dark gaze that Snape would definitely not stop himself from making a dry comment if he didn't get a hold of his anger.

There was a short silence, the only sound Harry's ragged breathing.

"I know all about the myths." It was said quietly. "Despite what you might think, I didn't sleep through the History of Magic. Old ways of following the cycle of the year, the symbolism; I understand that. But... Damn it, Snape! It doesn't make any sense!"

Snape winced at the broken laughter that followed Harry's words. He knew the feeling. "I know. But it's the absolute truth."

Not many things were. This was one of the exceptions.

Trying to collect his thoughts, Harry mused out loud, "So you're telling me that Voldemort killed my parents because of some old fairy tales about claiming the land and challenging the king stag?" His voice broke with the last word.

It still made his heart ache every time he conjured up the Patronus; the memory of the silvery white stag protecting him from darkness and things that were worse than death. That hadn't simply been a charm, it had been his one true connection to his father.

And now he was supposed to believe that it had been that Animagus form that had condemned his parents?

"There were other reasons as well, I think. The Dark Lord was trying to make an example so that none of those who had left school recently would join the Order. But essentially, yes. The fact that your father could transfigurate himself into a stag was what killed him."

Harry heard the truth in Snape's voice. It made him want to destroy something. He couldn't believe how quickly his emotions were changing. A moment earlier he'd been bubbling with laughter that was bordering on insanity, now he was seething with rage. "Pettigrew!" It came out as a growl.

Snape didn't need that to be explained. "Yes. He told the Dark Lord everything about his circle of friends." Even then, weeks before his own decision to leave the Death Eaters, he'd held nothing but contempt for the Gryffindor. Such treachery was despicable, but it was also incomprehensible. He'd watched those four for seven years, had hated their close knit group. All for nothing.

Rage already cooling, Harry was taking deep breaths. He still couldn't believe this was it. "Okay... Snape?" He hesitated for only a moment. Then he asked, "Do you know if he really believed it? I mean... Did Voldemort honestly believe in this Wild Magic thing or not?"

He didn't want to ask it like this; like he wasn't talking to the Snape whom he knew, but to someone who had been a Death Eater. Someone who had known Voldemort well enough to actually help the Order to bring him down. He wanted to apologize for this somehow, but didn't know how.

"I don't know if he really believed in that. Wild Magic isn't like Dark Magic. It's old, untamed, dangerous. More dangerous than anything." Snape shrugged. "I think he believed in the symbolism."

"That one day he'd be challenged by the king stag?" In some deranged way, it was starting to make sense.

It never ceased to amaze Snape to hear Harry Potter make sharp and accurate deductions. After all, he had never shown any sign of having brains in his Potions class. "Yes. Or by his son."
Harry didn't know what to say, too many thoughts were running through his head. There was that familiar tingle that would make him laugh uncontrollably for long minutes until the hysteria turned into tears. He didn't want to give into it. Not now.

Something was nagging at the edge of his memory; words spoken a while back. He concentrated on it, trying to remember what was so important. Shaking his head, he stared at Snape. "Malfoy said that Voldemort wants to kill me this year when I turn eighteen." The day after his birthday when the ancient tradition said that the year started to slowly wane.

He didn't want to believe in this, but everything seemed to point into the same direction.

"Yes. The fact that you were born when you did seemed to bring some kind of validation to the Dark Lord's beliefs." Hoping that Harry wouldn't use that as a reason to blame himself for everything again, Snape sat there and watched as a myriad of emotions played over Harry's face.

Fortunately, slight disbelief, horror and anger seemed to win over everything else. Those were the ones he would need later on.

Harry wanted to cling to the rumors he'd heard and blindly ignore the stupidity both Dumbledore and Snape had told him, just because he couldn't believe that anyone was insane enough to slaughter a family for such a simple reason. An old legend? A fairy tale! Like he was Cinderella and maybe the next time Malfoy lied, his nose would grow so long it poked someone's eye out.

He stared at Snape, seeing that he was once again telling him the truth. He wanted to hate him for that, but couldn't. All he had ever asked from Snape was honesty, and that was what he got now.

Did others know as well? He doubted it. No one had ever said anything about this to him or his friends, there had been no rumors, no whispers. He was certain Remus would have told him if he'd known about this, or he'd at least been unable to keep it a complete secret.

"Do you know that..." Shaking his head, Harry closed his mouth. He couldn't tell Snape how talking about getting ready for the change seemed to be one of the only happy memories Sirius had. Hearing how the idea -- Sirius' idea -- had led to James Potter's death would shatter the man. "Oh no!"

Snape quirked up an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"I need you to promise me you'll never talk about this with anyone. Especially Sirius. Please! I know you two hate each other, but he must never know. Never!"

It amazed Snape still that Harry could put such trust in him. He did hate Sirius Black. There was something in him that made him want to reach out and just strangle him; it was pure instinct.

When there was no instant reply, Harry sighed. "Please." He knew he would beg and plead if necessary.

Snape's dark gaze burned with curiosity. "Why?" He couldn't understand why everyone seemed to want to shelter Black from the realities of life. Surely he could handle talking about the past.

"Because the whole Animagus thing was his idea." The stories had always been important, both to Harry and to his godfather. Stories about mischief and friendship and loyalty; of three friends doing whatever it took to stay with the fourth Marauder during the suffering he went through every full moon. Sirius had talked about those times more often than he could really remember.

Snape still said nothing.
"It'll kill him. He's already... And if he hears that it was why Voldemort targeted my family, it'll kill him. I know you hate him and would like to see him squirm, but... Please." He knew how Snape hated begging, but he couldn't hold still. With a small movement, as if reaching out, he added, "Please don't tell him. Ever."

"He will never hear it from me." It wasn't because Snape wanted to support the mutt's already questionable mental health.

His protectiveness was definitely not universal, but with Harry it was absolute. He knew Harry needed Sirius Black, so he would try to learn to coexist with him. It might be the second hardest thing he'd ever done, but he would do his best.

There was a stunned look on Harry's face. He'd hoped Snape would agree, probably after hours of arguing and pleading. "Thank you."

"Don’t mention it." It sounded like Snape was really asking for Harry never to bring the whole matter up again.

Harry wondered if he should leave it at that, but there was still one thing he wanted to know. "Snape? Do you think that my father would have really..." What was the term Dumbledore had used? Challenged Voldemort for the lordship of the land? "Challenged Voldemort? I mean... He didn’t want to fight my father or me and now I’m here and..."

He didn’t really know how to say it so that it made sense. It certainly made no sense to him.

Snape's gaze was hard. "Are you familiar with the term 'self-fulfilling prophecy'?" Seeing the nod, he added, "I have often wondered if the Dark Lord should have studied the concept better before acting so irrationally."

"You mean that if he hadn't killed my parents, he might still be in power today?" The thought brought such conflicting emotions. Harry shivered.

"Maybe." Snape didn't sound convinced. He thought for a moment before adding, "Or maybe the Ministry would have raised against him. Maybe your father and his friends would have defeated him. Maybe one of his loyal Death Eaters would have stabbed him in the back with a poisoned knife. The thing is, we will never know. A time turner can not take us that far back."

That made Harry glare at Snape, wondering if the words were coincidental or if the man knew something.

Realizing that there was well concealed concern in Snape’s eyes instead of cold amusement and knowing, he relaxed against the backrest. He didn’t need the confining armrests to keep him from falling apart anymore and he kind of wished he’d sat next to Snape after all.

"Is there more you wish to talk about right now, or may we retire for the night?" Snape wondered if they’d already said too much, both of them.

It had been a long day. Harry suddenly remembered he’d been up since dawn and it was definitely close to midnight now. But even if he weren’t this tired, he’d still say the same. "I think I’m ready to go to bed. Yeah. You can use the bathroom first."

He smiled at the glare his words caused, but it was all right. In a few minutes, he would be able to snuggle up against Snape, and though the thoughts of ancient legends about kings and the Dark Lord would not fade away, there would be something more important in his life.
Harry was floating. Wrapped in a soft and warm cocoon, he was nuzzling against something even warmer and for once, there were no thoughts, no needs. Just him and the heat.

Blinking slowly, he drifted awake. Not startling like he sometimes did after a nightmare, but lingering in the haze between the dreamworld and reality.

He couldn't really remember what he'd been dreaming about, if he'd indeed dreamt about anything really. There were no images, only the feeling of mellow happiness. Smiling, he leaned closer to the warmth he was holding, brushing his nose against bare skin.

Bare skin?

Harry opened his eyes, staring into the darkness in front of him. There was nothing to see, but there was certainly someone lying very close to him, someone he was almost glued onto. Snape. Yes, of course. He was in Snape's bed, arms wrapped around Snape, his face buried in his neck, nose barely inches away from his ear.

He was also hard, a moment away from grinding his erection against Snape's arse.

Breathing very carefully, he lay there for a moment. This was the first time something like this had happened since they came back. With all the stress and pain, he hadn't really even thought about sex.

It was almost frightening how overwhelming the need to simply kiss Snape's neck and mutter as if still half asleep before rolling on top of him was. He wondered if Snape would allow it and let it slide. The way his prick twitched at the thought made him almost groan. He'd got too used to having sex every time he felt like it.

He battled with the idea, but eventually his mind conquered his hormones. It couldn't happen like this.

Trying very hard not to make any unnecessary noise, he moved away from Snape, his whole being aching as he lost the warmth of his body.

Harry slipped out of the bed, praying he hadn't woken the man up.

As he walked to the living room with a fresh change of clothes under his arm, turning on the lights only when the door was firmly shut behind him, he almost wished he'd been brave enough to actually ask Snape what they were going to do with all the things between them. That conversation should happen when they were both calm, composed and definitely not half naked and aroused.

He was half certain that Snape would be willing to shag him -- or at least give him some sexual relief -- if he asked for it, but the mere thought made him grimace with disgust. He didn’t want to use Snape or to have his pity.

His body was definitely not agreeing with his mind. The erection straining against his boxers indicated that touches that came from a sense of duty or pity were better than no touches at all.

Sometimes Harry simply hated his life.

There was no real sense in being angry with his prick, it didn’t really change anything. The annoyance aimed at that part of his body never overrode the lust and need anyway.

He'd better take a long -- and preferably cold -- shower before Snape woke up.
Showering in the dungeons was such a familiar thing by now. Harry grinned as he remembered how weird it had felt to be here for the first time, how he’d been in shock to actually find out that Snape used things like shampoo. It felt like it had happened ages ago, and it stunned him to realize that it had been only six months since that first night he’d spent here.

This place had been so strange then, everything a wonder and a cause for amazement. Now he went to the small cupboard as if it belonged to him, grabbing a clean towel before shedding his T-shirt and shorts.

Harry didn't have to go looking for anything else. The potions he wanted to use were on the ledge. It was a simple, but smart arrangement, considering how many small bottles there were in the other cupboards. Harry didn't want to accidentally wash his hair with hair removing potion or spill something important.

Adjusting the water to lukewarm, he stepped under the spray.

Now was a good time to think of what he wanted to do today. Ignoring his annoyingly persistent erection, Harry grabbed the shampoo and then started to massage his scalp vigorously, as if rubbing his head would help his brain cells to activate better. He was definitely not thinking about rubbing any other body part.

Sirius would probably like to see his diploma, and he would like to see Sirius. After yesterday's revelation, he needed to spend time with his godfather, even though he couldn't tell him why. Maybe he would indeed go to St. Mungo's.

They needed to make certain plans about the move. Harry grimaced at the thought, even though the memory of Sirius nodding before he actually finished the question was a good one. After seven years of sharing a dormitory with three other people, having a whole house for himself felt a bit too much. It would be good to have his family there.

Rinsing his hair, he stood under the water with his eyes closed. His house. It had been a shocking thing to see, the huge rooms echoing with his footsteps. Nothing like the sleepy little cottage, even with the basic furniture giving some resemblance of life to it.

He reached out for the soap without even looking.

So maybe the house hadn't been awful, but he didn't want to move in there yet. He could have a few more days like this, all alone with Snape, spend most of his time curled up on the couch and just be.

Spreading the lather on his chest, Harry smiled. He didn’t know where he stood with Snape, but here he was, staying in the dungeons. Considering the way Snape still let him snuggle against him every night, Snape didn't exactly hate him. Maybe he could work with that even after he was forced to leave this place.

Staying here was somehow better than anything he knew. He liked the complete darkness, the slightly too hard bed. Snape's arms around him, the familiar scents everywhere.

He closed his eyes, the memory of Snape lying next to him bringing more images to his mind. For a moment he couldn't help grinning at that, then the grin disappeared as his body responded to his very vivid imagination.

Without really thinking about it, he rubbed his hand lower, first trying to convince himself that he was just washing, but who was he trying to fool anyway?

Somehow it felt almost forbidden to stand here in Snape's shower, touching himself. He'd much
rather touch Snape.

But that wasn't exactly an option right now.

Discarding the stupid need to somehow cover this whole thing up even from himself, Harry braced against the tiles and closed his fingers over his erection. He was too old and had seen and done too much to be embarrassed by simple wanking.

It didn't take long to rub himself into a fairly satisfying climax. All he had to do was to think about Snape and his hands and that damn dark gaze turning even darker whenever he came, and Harry was soon slumping against the tiles with a very foolish grin on his face.

After washing his body again and making sure he left no evidence of anything else in the shower stall, Harry went to grab the towel. Maybe he'd have a chance to get dressed and get going before Snape woke up.

He spent the minimal amount of time brushing his teeth and then ran his fingers through his wet hair. On mornings like this, he never bothered with a comb. His hair never stayed neat anyway, so why bother? Pulling on his shirt, he barely cast a glance at the mirror.

Since he was going out, he'd better get his robes as well. The sleeves were getting too short again -- or actually his arms were simply too long for them anymore -- but since he didn't have any interest in going shopping, his school robes would have to do.

He left the towel hanging from the hook and then padded out of the bathroom, ready to face another day.

Harry froze as he saw Snape sitting on the couch. Just when had the man got up? He'd seemed to be fast asleep when he'd left the bed. There was a very familiar tray on the table in front of him and Harry realized that Snape must have been here for a while.

"Breakfast?" There was a flicker of dark amusement in Snape's gaze as he raised the tea pot.

It made Harry blush. He knew that Snape couldn't possibly know what he'd been doing in the shower, but somehow it felt as if he did. A week ago, he'd spent hours shagging Snape almost every day, and now he was feeling stupid about wanking in his shower? "Er... No thank you. I have things to do."

Still, he was glad Snape had thought he wouldn't want to go to the Great Hall this morning.

Trying very hard not to look like he was running away, he put on his shoes, grabbed the robe hanging near the door and bolted into the hallway. Even though there were no sounds following him, he had the distinct feeling that Snape was laughing at him.

A part of him wanted him to turn around and walk right back to Snape. They had to talk about this sooner or later and now would be a perfect time for it. He hesitated for a moment but then continued on his way. He had lots of things to do today, and didn't think he would be able to concentrate on anything after arguing with Snape.

Instead of heading to the Great Hall for breakfast, he followed the hallway only to the discreet entrance to the Slytherin rooms.

Harry stood outside the Slytherin common room for some time, trying to figure out if he was indeed out of his mind. He'd had this thought not long ago, and even though he was certain it was one of the most insane ones he'd ever had, he hadn't been able to push it away.
With Sirius and Remus ready to move in with him, the huge house wouldn't feel that huge. They could live together happily, even though the place would still feel enormous.

There was still room there, for more than one person.

If things were different, he'd ask Ron and Hermione to stay with him as well. The thought was painful as always. He hadn't heard from Hermione since he returned to Hogwarts and he wondered if she was blaming him for all the deaths as well. Ron was staying with his family, and it was unlikely he'd want to live with him and face all the dangers again.

That was the thing he had to consider from now on, his friendship put people in mortal danger. It was somehow easier with Sirius and Snape. They were already hunted, one way or the other.

So was Draco Malfoy.

Sighing, Harry raised his hand and then thumped his palm against the wall, as if knocking. He still didn't really like Malfoy, mostly because of the things he'd done and said in the past, when they had both been too young to really think for themselves. He was willing not to bring up the stupidity from the cottage, but he was definitely not happy about the slightly superior attitude that clung to Malfoy like a cloak.

It was probably not even a conscious effort on Malfoy's behalf.

Still, he didn't hate him either. The thought of the Slytherin staying here alone with no real future made him sick.

That was the main reason for him being here now.

The wall shifted slowly, leaving the doorway open. Draco was standing there, wand pointing straight at Harry's chest. He looked scruffy, as if he hadn't really woken up yet, hair mussed, but his gaze was alert. "Potter. What do you want?"

"We need to talk." Harry ignored the annoyed tone. It was a bit early, so maybe it was the way Malfoy behaved in the morning. How silly that even after months of living in the same cottage with him, he didn't really know.

Lowering the wand, Draco looked over his shoulder, as if wondering if he should ask Potter in or if he should step into the corridor. Neither option sounded good.

"Maybe we could have some breakfast? In the Great Hall." Harry knew that the house elves would bring him and Malfoy breakfast even if the Slytherin didn't usually go to eat in the company of the professors who were still staying here.

"All right." That sounded good. Draco shoved his wand under his robes and then stepped out of the Slytherin rooms. He didn't say anything to Harry, just started walking towards the more inhabited part of the castle.

Behind him, the door closed slowly.

They didn't talk during the short walk. Harry didn't want to rush with his offer. It was intriguing to go through the corridors with Malfoy; it was somehow revealing. Down in the dungeons, he didn't really care about his outer appearance, walking with his shoulders slumped, but as soon as they reached the outer hallway his demeanor changed, a familiar sneer appearing on his lips.

Climbing the stairs, they came across a few professors, who all nodded at Harry, greeting him
warmingly. Most of them cast curious glances at Draco, but otherwise, almost none of them
acknowledged his presence.

Draco was rather glad for it. He didn't feel like socializing right now. Maybe after Potter had finished
with him, he could go back to his room and finally get some sleep.

The scent of food coming from the Great Hall made him straighten up a little. He suddenly realized
he hadn't eaten anything for hours, spending the night awake brooding about the joke his life had
become. His stomach growled and he rolled his eyes at such weakness.

Harry smiled slightly, but chose not to make a comment.

After a brief look at both the Slytherin and the Gryffindor table, Harry led them to the Ravenclaw
tables, gesturing at the end closest to the Head Table. He doubted that getting into a fight about
where to sit would make a good start for this. This was probably as neutral ground as they would
find here.

Unless they considered sitting on the floor.

Minerva McGonagall was sitting on her usual seat at the Head Table. She smiled at Harry and
nodded at Malfoy as sternly as always. It made Harry feel a bit better. At least someone still knew
how to act around them.

"Let's eat first." He sat down and a moment later Malfoy followed his example. There were already
plates and cups ready on the table and when they were both seated, dishes full of food appeared in
front of them. It was definitely different from watching a cranky old house elf carry a tray into the
room.

With a start, Harry realized that he actually missed the sight of Eppy glaring and huffing at them.

Draco poured himself a cup of tea, trying not to show just exactly how hungry he was. "All right."
Without other words, he grabbed a sandwich and started to eat.

Eating was a good way to relax. Harry remembered the days when he'd first gone to Snape. He'd felt
like a real idiot in the dungeons, not sure if he could just sit there and talk. There had usually been a
tray full of food and juice on the table, and eating had been a perfect way to mask his uncertainty.

Like back then, he noticed that he was feeling more comfortable when he had finished with eating,
 enjoying sitting here with a cup if steaming tea in his hand. Malfoy seemed more relaxed as well,
 looking at him with genuine curiosity in his eyes.

"So what did you want to talk about? Something important going on?" Draco wondered what this
was about.

"Have you decided what to do with your life yet?" Harry asked instead of really replying to the
question. He didn't believe he should start playing games with Malfoy, even if he tried to goad him
into them. It was best to get straight to the point.

The phrasing made Draco raise an eyebrow. "Yes. I'll rather keep it for a while longer." He knew it
might be wishful thinking, considering the way things were going right now. "Since I can not go out
in the world and live on my own, I guess I must work with professor Snape and your Order of the
Phoenix."

Harry nodded approvingly. He'd never expected to hear solemn words about keeping the world safe
or fighting against Voldemort on some obscure principle. Knowing that Malfoy's motivations were
of self preservation made it strangely easy to trust him. "I guess you're right."

He didn't have any illusions about this thing and neither did Malfoy. It was very close to the curt honesty Snape had always shown him.

"Neither of us can stay at Hogwarts forever. I doubt you'd even want to." Harry didn't say anything about what he might want to, since it was already obvious. He wanted to stay with Snape. "I have a house in Hogsmeade. There's enough room for you as well, if you can stand living with Gryffindors." Seeing the questioning look, he added, "My godfather and Remus Lupin are going to live there as well."

"Your godfather?" Draco had never heard of this. He'd thought Potter had no other relatives than the Muggles he lived with during the holidays.

Harry was a bit thrown at the question, only now realizing that Malfoy didn't probably know even half of what had been going on. He'd seen everything from the other side. Maybe it would indeed be interesting to talk to him about their world and the war, to see how the enemy interpreted things. "Sirius Black. He's my godfather."

It made Draco stare. He blinked slowly, suddenly remembering the small crowd that had gathered in Dumbledore's office after he'd laid his whole life in front of Snape months ago.

Professor Lupin had been there with another man. Sirius Black? He couldn't really believe that. Black was a lunatic, a dangerous escaped criminal, not a groomed man who seemed to be awfully worried about Potter's safety.

But that dark haired man had turned into a dog. Even in a drugged haze, Draco had seen that; a black dog sitting next to the others. He'd been too busy trying not to pass out as he'd sat in the carriage to really think about that then. It did make sense now. His father had told him about the way Black, Potter and Pettigrew had all been Animagi.

No one would believe that the clean and obedient looking animal was actually Sirius Black. He knew Voldemort's people were after him; after a half starved cur. Could this be the reason why they had never caught him?

Waiting patiently for Malfoy to stop gawking, Harry wondered what would happen if he actually accepted his offer. It was probable that Malfoy and Sirius would hate each other and he'd have to listen to more petty bickering.

He didn't really mind. At least it was something he was used to. He trusted they'd manage to survive the whole thing.

"You are asking me to live with you, professor Lupin and Sirius Black in your house in Hogsmeade?" Draco couldn't help asking that. He was completely stunned by the easy way Potter had made the offer. Not like he was doing a favor to Snape -- which was probably the core of the offer anyway -- but like he meant it.

Harry nodded. "Yes."

"Hmm." Raising his cup to his lips, sipping the already cooled tea, Draco thought about it. Staying in Hogsmeade would be better than being here, all alone in the rooms that brought back a multitude of happy memories of times gone by.

He didn't know what his function in the Order would be, if he was indeed accepted into it. Living with Harry Potter would be a step into the right direction.
There were things that he needed to think through, though, starting with the most important. "I don't know if I would be able to pay rent, Potter. I assume my funds have diminished since my last stay here." He hid all his pain under the stiff words.

No more Malfoy money for him. Leaving his family so abruptly had left him Knutless.

Even though Harry wanted to laugh at the pompous way he said that, he kept his expression straight. The talk about money -- or the lack of it -- was familiar after living for years with Ron. "I don't expect you to pay anything. But we'll share the chores. Just like at the cottage."

Draco nodded. He'd assumed that much. It was a relief that he didn't have to live on charity. "Can I think about it for a few days?" He didn't really need to think; there weren't any better options. He simply didn't want to sound too eager to agree to this.

"Of course." Pushing back the bench a little, Harry nodded and stood up. "I'll be moving the day after tomorrow, so you might want to make up your mind before that. Let me know what you decide and we'll talk more." There were things he needed to discuss with Malfoy anyway, but not now. They both needed some time. Being able to sit here and actually agree on something was already a big step. He didn't want to rush things.

Besides, he had other things to do right now.

Draco sat there for some time after Potter left. He was tired, but didn’t want to go back to the dormitory yet. There was much for him to think about right now.

The offer had come as a complete surprise. On the rare occasions when he’d met with Snape, the professor had never once mentioned anything as outrageous as this. He had simply concentrated on the most essential exams that had allowed him to leave school, going through the whole thing only because Snape had pushed him.

How strange that his whole world had once again changed, and as usual, it had been a change to the worse. Feeling slightly annoyed by the whole mess with Ron Weasley had been nothing compared to the gnawing anxiety in his belly now that he’d heard what had happened at the Weasley hovel.

Potter had to know the same thing he did and he was still asking him to live with him? It was incredulous. Apparently Snape did indeed have a bigger influence on their hero than he’d ever imagined.

Not that it was really a surprise.

Draco finished with his tea and got up quietly. He didn’t want to attract any unnecessary attention right now, even though he knew that if he really did accept Potter’s offer, people would keep staring at him.

He sneered at that. People were already staring. They were waiting for him to make the slightest of mistakes and then whisper together how he was just like his father.

Head held high, he walked calmly out of the Great Hall, ignoring the way his former professors followed him with their gazes.

As soon as the door behind him slammed shut, there would be whispers. He didn’t care, concentrating on Potter’s words. He really had no option but to accept it. Without any funds or connections, he would be dependant on others. At least Potter had made it sound like something else than charity.
Hurrying back towards the dungeons, Draco was too lost in thought to see the slim figure step out of the shadows. He stumbled into someone, almost tripping them both.

Only his Seeker reflexes saved them both from falling on the floor.

"What? I... Oh, professor." He cursed silently as he realized he'd walked into professor McGonagall. What a perfect way to start his new life amongst Gryffindors.

Draco opened his mouth to apologize, his hands loosening their grip on her arms. The apology died on his lips as he saw the almost animal panic in McGonagall's eyes. He shrunk back a bit, unconsciously mimicking her flinch.

He didn't know what had brought out such a reaction. Even though the Transfigurations professor had sometimes shown them her feline form, she was never as skittish as a cat. Now it looked like she'd hiss and claw at him if she could.

It made him shiver. Even after all the suspicious and pondering looks the professors had thrown at him, he still wasn't used to this. Didn't want to spend the rest of his life being the object of such glances.

But this wasn't suspicion. This was horror and panic, laced with something that almost looked like rage.

His voice shook a little as he said, "I'm sorry, professor." He wasn't sure what he was apologizing for, the very unfamiliar words tasting stale in his mouth. "Didn't mean to startle you."

There was a brief moment of tense silence before McGonagall shook herself, as if shrugging off an unpleasant dream or a memory. "It's quite all right, Mr. Malfoy." Her tone was impeccable as always, but the words came out strained.

Too polite.

"I..." Draco didn't know what to say to her. "I'm sorry." There were the words again, bubbling out of his mouth as if he couldn't hold them silent.

He had never liked McGonagall, seeing her essentially as a Gryffindor and therefore a rival no matter how her family was as pureblooded as his was. He'd never wasted one thought on her before this spring. Still shaken by the sudden collision, he stood there, staring at her, trying very hard not to remember seeing Snape carry her bloodied body into the Great Hall months earlier.

The hard expression on McGonagall's face softened slightly as she looked at him. Nodding, she repeated, "It's all right." This time she sounded like she actually meant it. With another nod at him, she walked past him.

Draco stood there for a moment, dazed. He was never going to understand Gryffindors. Not even if he lived to be as old as Dumbledore.

Trying not to think about it, he continued on his way downstairs.

He needed to make a decision, and it would probably be the best if he had some advice from the Head of his House.

Part 9
"So, tell us more about the house."

Harry smiled at Sirius' honest curiosity. "I think you'll both love it." Remembering the small cottage where his godfather and Remus had spent the past few years, he added, "Even though it's kind of embarrassingly huge and pompous."

"We can live with that." There was a truly happy smile on Sirius' face. He was finally satisfied with the way Remus was healing and the thought of having Harry live somewhere nice sounded excellent. He'd never really seen the place at Privet Drive, but he'd heard enough from Ron Weasley to know that Harry deserved a huge house. He deserved the best their world had to offer.

The enthusiasm so evident in Sirius' voice made Harry's chest ache. This was his childhood dream, a real family living with him because they loved him, a home away from the Dursleys.

It was still a thought that would create the biggest Patronus ever, but it was now slightly tinted with regret. There was only one thing he might wish he had beyond this.

He shook his head, trying not to think about that. If their world ever wanted to rename him, he could be the Boy Who Refused to Think About Stuff. As with the other moniker, he would surely deserve it.

"There is furniture there already, but I guess we can change things around if we don't like them where they are right now." Waving with his hands, Harry described the house that would be their home.

He was concentrating on all the good things about it; the space they would have, the nice yard. The privacy the house seemed to have even though it was a short walk away from the center of Hogsmeade.

Being able to stay there with Sirius and Remus.

"I'm sure it will be all right." Sirius’ eyes were gleaming with anticipation. After years in a small cell followed by rushing around the country, this sounded perfect. "Are you sure we won’t take up too much space?"

Smiling with only a hint of exasperation, Remus listened to the two make plans about their new living arrangements. He didn’t want to interrupt the planning, seeing how both Sirius and Harry were genuinely enthusiastic about the prospect of actually living together like a family.

Harry was a bit surprised to be truly happy about this. As long as he didn’t think about the fact that moving in with Sirius meant moving out of Snape’s rooms, everything was fine.

"So... it'll be just the three of us there? You and Remus and me?" Sirius didn't know how else to put that. He'd wondered if Harry had seen Ron lately, but didn't want to ask. He always hated making Harry sad.

Realizing he hadn't said anything to Sirius and Remus about the possibility of Malfoy moving in as well, Harry winced. "Not precisely." He decided it was best to just say it. "Actually, I told Draco Malfoy that he should move in with us."

That definitely caught Remus' attention. "You asked Draco Malfoy to live with us?" He was shocked, remembering the smirking and sneering blond boy.

He'd always seen how clearly Harry reminded him of both James and Lily, and unfortunately the genes of the previous generations seemed to be strong with the Malfoys as well. Lucius Malfoy had
always been a bastard in school, and Remus had seen his son follow exactly in his footsteps.

"Yeah." How funny that some of the reasoning Harry could think for his decision was exactly the same as he'd used when talking to Ron about seeing Snape. "I don't think he means us any harm and he has no other place to go."

He couldn't really say that he'd got to know Malfoy, but he didn't think he was completely rotten and evil either.

Sirius shrugged. "It's your house." He was a bit disappointed with Ron Weasley. After all, Harry and Hermione had followed their friend to the Shrieking Shack without hesitations, fighting against him when they'd thought he was going to hurt Ron.

"Our house," Harry said firmly. Then he smiled. "I promise you won't like Malfoy much, but he's not completely bad." His smile grew wistful.

Remus leaned back against the pillows, wondering what brought such a strange expression to Harry's face. Probably the thing they'd talked about a few days ago.

Sensing the shift in the mood, Sirius looked at Harry and asked, "So when are we going to move in?" He still didn't like the idea of Harry staying at Hogwarts all alone, with no one to look after him.

"After the meeting." Harry saw the confusion in Sirius' eyes and realized that because of Remus' condition, they probably wouldn't be able to attend. "We're having an Order meeting the day after tomorrow. Dumbledore said it will be a good time for me to move to Hogsmeade."

"What a coincidence! I'm to be released the same day," Remus said. At least Harry wouldn't have to stay in his new house with only Draco Malfoy as his companion.

Harry hadn't known that, but it fit his plans perfectly. Maybe things would be at least a little easier with Sirius and Remus there with him.

"I could come to and stay with you right now if you want to move in before the meeting." It wasn't an easy offer for Sirius to make, but he knew he could handle leaving Remus' bedside now. There had been no sign of the silver poisoning, and the only reason the doctors were still keeping him here was to make absolutely sure there would be no complications.

It had to be a good sign that he was to be released in two days.

"That would be great, but you really don't have to." Harry's smile was a bit forced. "You should stay here with Remus. I'll be okay." He was not going to leave the dungeons a minute earlier than he absolutely had to.

He knew there were plans for him, he understood the need for those. Staying in Hogwarts would be impossible, especially when summer ended and students returned, but that was all in the future. There might be days he didn't see Snape, so he needed to stay with him now that he still could.

"Nonsense! I'll come with you to Hogwarts tonight, and we can get your things ready together." Sirius could sense Harry's reluctance, and he wondered just when would he finally understand that he was not a burden. That he and Remus both loved him very much and didn't think of him as a charity case. "Remus will be fine here until he can join us the day after tomorrow." They could finally be a family.

"I really don't want to be a bother..." This couldn't be happening.
Sirius grabbed Harry’s arm. "Don’t be silly." He had been selfish enough staying here with Remus for all this time, now it was time to be with his godson. "I hate thinking about you all alone in the dormitory."

There was determination in his voice. He needed to do this now, show his support before the big meeting and all the fuss Harry would have to go through. There was nothing that could keep him away from Harry’s side tonight.

Harry cast a panicky look at Remus. This was too soon.

Squirming to get into a better position, Remus hid his apprehension and nodded slightly. He definitely didn't want to see this and would prefer this to wait until he was stronger to deal with the storm. Still, he was glad he knew what would happen next. Unprepared, this would be a total disaster.

It still might be, he couldn't tell. Usually, he could at least guess the outcome of various conversations with people, but there were just too many factors here.

At least they were still at St. Mungo's. If Sirius threw a fit, help would get here in seconds.

Harry sighed. "Sirius..." He didn't know how to say this, but he did know he couldn't let his godfather find out on his own. Remembering the betrayal and panic in Ron's gaze, he took a deep breath. "I'm not alone. I'm staying with someone."

He prayed that would be enough and Sirius would settle for grinning at him. That could happen, he was certain of it.

"Really?" There was that familiar grin on Sirius’ face. He chuckled at the obvious embarrassment on Harry’s face. "So you do have a girlfriend after all. Tell me, how did you get McGonagall to give you her permission to bring a girl to stay with you in the tower?"

Knowing that there was no way out of this, Harry said, "There’s no... I'm not staying in the Gryffindor tower. I'm staying in the dungeons." He could see his words meant nothing to Sirius. "The Slytherin dungeons. With Snape."

Cringing, he waited for the unavoidable explosion.

"You..." Sirius was completely confused. "You're staying with Snape? Damn it! Dumbledore should know better than to force you to stay with that git right now." The whole stay at the secret hideaway had been bad enough. He was certain that being forced to stay with Snape now was a nightmare.

Then he blinked. Harry had said he was all right and didn't need him to leave St. Mungo's so that they could be together because he was staying with someone.

The hair at the back of his neck was prickling, a sense memory of hackles rising. He barely suppressed the curling of his lip, but the soft growl still came out. "You. Are staying with Snape."

Harry was sure his heart was about to explode. Knowing that his voice would just tremble and make the whole thing worse -- if that was even possible -- he nodded. Yes, he was staying with Snape. And yes to all the unvoiced questions.

"Did he do something to you?" Still growling, Sirius stared at Harry, noticing the faint blush creeping on his face. It made his mind go utterly blank. Jumping to his feet he yelled, "I will kill that bastard!"
He couldn't think of anything. Not rationally anyway. There was a familiar soothing voice telling him that everything was going to be all right, but it didn't register. Harry was staying with Snape, who was doing something to him. He would not think about that, even though his mind was instantly filled with disgusting images, but he did think about the reason behind whatever he was doing.

Revenge.

"That fucking son of a bitch! I will rip his black heart out, I'll..." He bit out the words, launching into a mixture of curses and threats, not repeating himself once.

This was payback. James was dead, but Harry lived, and Snape was taking his revenge out on an innocent boy. Ruining his life because of a stupid prank, probably trying to get to him and Remus through Harry as well, needing to destroy them all.

For a short while, he had deluded himself, thinking that just maybe a man who would be willing to risk his life for the Head of Gryffindor would actually be worth something. At least worth not hating. They were both of the Order, and the secret meetings and Snape's obvious -- now so clearly false -- dedication to their fight had almost started to mellow him.

It made him feel such rage; mostly towards Snape but towards himself as well. The words coming out of him were a blur to even him, incoherent threats and even hexes that thankfully didn't work, since his wand was still hidden under his robes.

He didn't care about words or magic. All he could think of was sinking his teeth into Snape's neck and biting until his jaws clenched and then shaking. There was a death he wouldn't mourn or regret. He'd probably just regret not being able to kill him more than once.

Remus kept talking, not paying much attention to what he was saying, the tone and the voice more important. He sat up, ignoring the pain flashing through his side. There had been bad moments, but he'd never seen Sirius like this.

He'd known he wouldn't take it well, there had never been doubt about it, but he'd never thought it would be like this. Flip? Sirius wasn't flipping, he was way beyond that.

Still totally lost in his rage, Sirius banged his fist on the wall, ignoring the piercing pain. His words were unintelligible now, a low growl full of bloodlust.

Harry was staring at the raging man.

He couldn't say anything, he simply watched as Sirius let go of all control he had on his emotions. Whenever he'd thought about telling his godfather about Snape, he'd known that it would be difficult, but this was so much worse than that.

Trembling, he got to his feet. He wasn't afraid that Sirius would hurt him, but he was afraid. Completely terrified.

There were calming words coming from Remus and he didn't know to whom they were aimed at. Probably at Sirius, even though he was panicking as well.

It shouldn't happen like this! He was supposed to think of something intelligent and convincing to say to Sirius and then after a few angry words they would have sat down and discussed the whole thing. He'd never been stupid enough to imagine that Sirius would accept him being with Snape, but this was beyond his worst nightmares.
Harry felt his throat squeeze shut. His eyes burned with tears and it was hard to breathe. This was so familiar to him, the feeling of total loss. For years, Sirius had been the absolutely best thing in his life. It didn't surprise him that his love was now taken away from him. "Sirius please..."

That sob did what Remus' calm words and pain hadn't. Sirius stopped yelling and spun around to look at Harry.

Seeing the animal panic in the green eyes, Sirius swallowed. He'd rarely seen Harry like this; utterly devastated, like he'd just lost something precious. The rage disappeared completely, replaced by horror. "No!" He took a few steps towards Harry and then wrapped his arms around him, holding tight. "No, no, no! Don't ever think I'd leave you because of this. I'm never leaving you. For anything."

He wasn't exaggerating; there was nothing Harry could do that would drive him away.

Harry had thought nothing could really make him cry again, but apparently relief could. He sniffed, wondering how he could laugh and cry at the same time without the madness clinging to him.

Grasping Sirius' robes tight, he muttered, "He's not forcing me or using me." He could feel the man stiffening immediately, the growl shaking Sirius' whole body. "Please, listen! I'm not under any charm or potion. We can get a mediwitch to examine me if you don't trust me."

"I trust you." It was out before Sirius could even think about words.

"Then trust me when I tell you that I’m staying with Snape because I want to. I like him." Every word made Harry feel like he was driving a knife deeper into Sirius’ chest. He wanted to apologize, but didn’t know how he could apologize for being honest.

Doing his very best not to let out a howl again, Sirius let go of Harry. He took a deep breath, but couldn’t say anything after all. Harry was staying with Snape because he liked him? He didn’t want to know more, didn’t even want to know this much, for his mind was already racing with all the things that were left unsaid.

Teasing him about a girlfriend had made Harry fluster earlier. Now he knew why. The mere thought of someone like Snape touching Harry made him grimace with disgust.

Harry saw the expression and it was like a blow. It was worse than any harsh words, making him feel small and unloved and locked into the small cupboard under the stairs where no one ever held him.

"Please don’t hate me."

Sirius swallowed. There was so much pain in the pleading gaze, he couldn’t handle seeing it. Wrapping his arms back around Harry, he hugged him tight and muttered, "I could never hate you."

Nothing short of Harry killing half the wizarding world would make him hate his godson. Saying that he actually liked Snape of all people felt like a cruciatus, and Sirius was quite sure he was out of his mind, but it did not make him hate Harry.

"Thank you." Muttering it quietly, Harry lay his head on Sirius' shoulder. He didn't want to even think about losing this, ever. Gaining something by losing Sirius' love was completely unacceptable, even though having such love under conditions was equally impossible.

He was glad Sirius was still holding him, still cared about him like this.
Remus' voice came quietly from the bed. "Sirius, you're bleeding." The calmly said words broke the silence, forcing everyone to concentrate on something less destructive than the tension in the room.

"Bloody hell!" Staring at his bleeding hand, Sirius tried to remember how he'd hurt it. Nothing came to mind. He looked around and winced when he saw the crack in the wall and the deep red smears on the yellow paint. Oh. He'd hit the wall? He was grateful he hadn't hit anyone living.

Lost in thought, he allowed Harry fuss over his wound. The crack in the wall was still making his stomach churn, and he turned to Remus to cast an apologizing glance at him.

The calm acceptance in the amber eyes somehow made him breathe easier.

Harry held his godfather's hand gently in his, smiling. "I guess I'm not the only one who knows how to throw a temper tantrum." Even though he had just bruised his knuckles and not broken them. He remembered the occasion when he'd slammed his fist against the tree when he'd had an argument with Snape and tried not to concentrate on the memory. It was definitely inappropriate right now.

Glaring at Harry, Sirius raised his hand to his mouth and licked the blood away from his fingers. It was a reflex by now. "Ow, damn it!" he whined. "Can you tell Loreena to call for someone to take a look at my hand?"

"Sure." Glad to find out her name without having to ask, Harry went to the familiar woman standing guard in the corridor. She would undoubtedly contact another Order member to tend to Sirius' wounds. The rest of the hospital staff would have to get used to seeing Snuffles hobble around with his paw in a bandage.

It was actually good to have a mediwizard in the room. The middle aged man was a member of the Order, and he didn't ask any questions. He simply glared at Sirius and huffed.

There was a blessed silence in the room for as long as the mediwizard treated Sirius' hand. Harry needed that time to calm his mind. Now that Sirius wasn't throwing him out of his life, he could relax a little.

Still, the first thing that came out of his mouth as the mediwizard finally closed the door behind him was, "Are you still moving in with me?"

Sirius looked at him as if he'd completely lost his mind. "Of course we are!" Nothing would keep him away from Harry.

Seeing the happy smile on Harry, he clamped his mouth shut and refused to say anything about why Harry might even think that he wouldn't want to move in with him. He didn't want to deal with the rage that would accompany such thoughts.

"We will move in when they release me." Fidgeting slightly at the tension that was still thick in the room, Remus gestured at Sirius. "Isn't that right?"

Mouth open, Sirius stared at Remus. Why on earth was he so calm about this whole thing? He didn't know, but he could see that Remus was definitely dealing with this more easily than he was. Glad he could rely on him now, he nodded. They would move in when the mediwizards said Remus was allowed to leave the hospital. And by Merlin's balls, he didn't want to know what Harry did before that.

Harry excused himself after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence and a few more hugs. He had absolutely no idea what to say to the two men who were the core of his family, and could tell by the look in Sirius' eyes that he wasn't the only one.
As soon as Harry was out of the room, Sirius let the smile he’d forced to his lips slip away and
growled, "I am going to *kill* that bastard if he *ever* hurts Harry." He might kill him anyway, as soon
as it was clear that Snape's death wouldn't make Harry suffer.

Remus simply patted the mattress as an invitation, refusing to comment on his words.

Flooing back to Hogwarts was a relief, especially when Harry found the Entrance Hall deserted. He
didn't have to stifle the nearly hysterical laughter that escaped him.

He couldn't believe how insane everything was right now. He was living with Snape, sharing his bed
and all, but they weren't anything he could put a name to; not lovers, probably not friends. And yet
he had just jeopardized his whole dream of having a real family by telling Sirius about it.

There had to be something wrong with him, but he refused to let himself believe that his living with
Snape now was because of the man's insane sense of duty. It didn't sound right. There had to be
some hope left.

Straightening his robes, he set out his way down to the dungeons.

He cast a thoughtful look at the doorway to the Slytherin rooms as he passed them by. It still amazed
him that he felt nothing towards the one Slytherin living there. No shivers came when he passed the
corridor leading to the Potions classroom either.

A small smile appeared on his lips as he raised his hand, palm caressing the small snake on Snape's
door for a brief moment before the door opened without a sound. He slipped into the room.

Closing the door behind him, Harry rested his back against the solid wood for a while, concentrating
on the slight tingle that went up and down his spine. He didn't know if it was just a figment of his
imagination, or some residual magical energy seeping from the heavy wards.

He didn't really care.

It had been an impossibly long day already, and even though he'd done nothing but had breakfast
with Malfoy and then spent time at St. Mungo's, he was completely exhausted. It was good to be
home.

Such a dangerous thought, thinking of these rooms like that.

But it was all so cozy, so familiar to him now. The smells coming from the ever-present cauldron, the
soft sounds of Snape moving around the room. He didn't even have to think about those things
anymore, they were a constant; like the small greeting Snape offered from where he was working on
something potions related as usual.

Sighing, Harry toed his shoes off and then shuffled to the couch.

Snape waited until Harry was seated before looking at him, his face unreadable. "I heard you offered
Draco Malfoy a place to stay." There was a hint of amazement in his voice.

"Yeah." Harry wasn’t surprised by Snape knowing it already. "I thought that since he can't really
stay here any more than I can, he should stay somewhere safe." He didn’t think there was such a
place that would ever be completely safe for either of them, but this was the best he could think of
right now.

"Thank you."
The simple words made Harry gawk for a moment.

Had he heard it correctly? Of course he knew that Snape valued some courtesies, but this wasn't a simple phrase used when someone offered him a cup of tea. "You're welcome," he muttered, smiling goofily.

Snape refused to comment on his completely ludicrous expression. It was best to finish with the labeling so they could order some food. He was certain that Harry had not eaten anything at St. Mungo's and no, the chocolate didn't count.

Still thinking about the reluctant gratitude -- that had been completely different from Snape's honest words a moment ago -- he'd seen in Malfoy, Harry wondered what it would be like to live with him now. There would be no one to glare the Slytherin into silence.

This was probably one of the most insane ideas he'd ever had, but for some strange reason he didn't have a bad feeling about the whole thing. He knew Malfoy could behave well if he chose to, and a roof over his head was probably the best motivation he could have. Seven years of hating the git didn't all disappear with this new tentative truce, but he was willing to believe that he was not making a mistake inviting Malfoy in.

Life would be hard to Draco Malfoy. The people in Hogsmeade weren't going to forget who he was any time soon, they would look at him and see his father and the man he chose to call Master.

He'd be busy enough trying to deal with that. There would be no chance for real scheming.

Harry pushed away thoughts about Malfoys, knowing there was a more pressing matter he needed to discuss with Snape. He was tempted to leave the whole thing be, but knew that Snape would find out sooner or later. Actually, he was surprised there was no evidence of his raging godfather calling Snape through the floo and threatening him with violence.

It was quite likely only a matter of time.

He was certain this wasn't going to go as smoothly as he might wish. "I need to tell you something." That was always a good start. "Sirius..." He saw the slight moue and sighed. "Something kind of happened when I was at St. Mungo's. Sirius said he wanted to come to stay with me tonight and I had to tell him that I'm staying with you."

Snape spun around, the sound of a glass jar breaking loud in the sudden silence. He could only stare for a moment.

Then he asked with strangled voice, "What did you just say?" He was completely horrified.

"I told Sirius I'm staying here." Harry wondered if that would be enough. It already looked like Snape was either about to have an apoplexy or getting ready to hex him.

Grabbing his wand, Snape entertained the thought of turning Harry into something small and slimy before muttering a simple charm to clean the shards off the floor. He watched the jar rematerialize on the table. Breathed in and out slowly.

Harry waited for him to say something. Usually when Snape was mad at him -- or anyone -- he let the whole world hear about it. Now there was nothing but silence and that glare that turned his gaze blank.

It was worse than the sneers or the rage that so often slipped his attempted control; cold and frightening.
"I see." In control now, Snape turned to push the glass jar into the middle of the table. He really wanted to throw it at the wall, but that kind of emotional outburst would be unacceptable now. He could always do that later, when he was alone.

He didn't want Harry to see how upset he was.

Keeping his gaze on the jar, he said calmly, "Maybe it would be best if you moved into the Gryffindor tower tonight, Potter. I'm sure your godfather would appreciate that." At least the last bit came out with loathing.

"No," Harry didn't even think before the word slipped out. "I'm not going to leave because of Sirius." Or anyone else. He had two more nights here, and he was not leaving!

"Please stop being such an idiot!" Knowing he was quite probably asking for too much, Snape cast a disgusted look over his shoulder. "You know as well as I do that sooner or later Black will come to see you and if he ever finds out about...

He couldn't finish the sentence. What could he say? That they were sleeping together? That they had spent a few weeks having a sexual relationship? That Harry was being a brainless imbecile in the good old Gryffindor fashion, thinking either with his prick or his emotions? All those things would send the mutt into a homicidal rage.

Harry didn't want to stutter out excuses, so he simply said, "He already knows." He remembered the scene following his words earlier and shuddered. "He guessed most of it and I had to tell him the truth."

"What?" No trace of the controlled anger. Snape spun around, the jar smashing against the wall. He could only stare at Harry.

The boy had lost his mind!

"And what exactly is the truth, Potter?" The name came out as an epithet. What on earth had he told his godfather? And how long did they have until Black rushed into his dungeons frothing at the mouth?

"That we are staying here together. I told him that, and he drew conclusions. Most of them right. I had to tell him the rest; that I like being here with you and that we shagged." Harry lifted his chin slightly, letting out the words he'd been holding inside for some time now. "And that I want to keep seeing you."

For the first time in ages, Snape wished he was still in a position to reduce House points for Harry's stupidity. It would take Gryffindor years to get back to where they were these days. "You can't be serious." From the stubborn gleam in the green eyes he could tell that he was indeed.

Harry had known what would happen once they started this conversation, and knew exactly what to say; his honesty wouldn't allow him to back out now. He hadn't lied to Sirius, and he wasn't going to lie to Snape either.

"I am. Totally serious. I never wanted a quick shag with you, Snape. We're not at the cottage anymore, but I don't see any reason we can't do things together."

There was that word again. Snape shook his head instantly, needing to stop this insanity before it got too far. "Then you're blind."

Harry asked quietly, "Why?"
"Why?" It was incomprehensible that Snape would have to spell it out loud. Would probably have to explain it at least twice before it was understood, using simple words and short sentences. "You want to know why?"

Even though Harry didn't especially want to have this conversation, he nodded anyway.

"The savior of the wizarding world and young Gryffindor hero can not be involved with a former Death Eater." Noticing the flinch, Snape added, "I'm only stating a fact. You know that's how people see you."

The fact that he was automatically trying not to cause the idiot any unnecessary pain barely registered. When it did, it caused yet another surge of anger in Snape. Such foolishness!

"I know. But it's not what I am, and it's definitely not all you are." Labeling people was what kids did when they needed clear good and evil. Adults should know better.

That didn't change anything. "Maybe. No one will ever believe that, though."

"It doesn't matter. It won't change anything, you know?"

"Even you aren't that stupid." Exasperation clear in his voice, Snape glared at Harry.

A small smile appeared on Harry's lips. "I never thought I'd hear that from you." Deciding not to laugh at the whole thing, no matter how tempting it was, he added, "And of course I know what this means. There will always be people who'll think that whomever I choose to be with is somehow beneath me."

Snape knew that was probably true, if one could draw conclusions from the headlines and columns in the Daily Prophet. "That doesn't mean you should go asking for trouble."

"I'm not asking for trouble. I'm asking you to stop hiding behind excuses."

"Excuses?" The look on Snape's face had sent students -- and a few colleagues -- running while gibbering in fear.

Harry didn't even flinch. "Me being too young or too student or too innocent. Your age and your past and every nosy know-it-all in the wizarding world who would like nothing better than to see me miserable and alone."

"Those aren't excuses. Those are facts." Snape had to make Harry understand that dreaming about any kind of a close relationship with him was delusional. "You're too young to..."

"I'm old enough to fight Voldemort and die for the Order. So why the hell am I not old enough to be with you?" Surprisingly, Harry didn't even feel anger anymore. He was just tired of fighting. "I know how old I am. Do you have any idea of how old I sometimes feel?"

Snape didn't say anything. He'd once thought Harry felt like he was seventeen, going on forty. Seeing the weary look in his eyes reminded him of the thought.

"If you..." Harry sighed. "If you really don't want me here, say so. I can deal with that." It wasn't exactly true, but he was tired of hiding behind all the unsaid things. Better to lie a little than to swallow the words again.

There was a pointed silence. Then, "It's not about what I want."
"Damn right it's about what you want!" Why couldn't Snape see that? It sometimes felt like they weren't even speaking the same language. "This isn't about you sacrificing your peace and quiet to help me stay sane! This is about me really wanting to stay here with you! And I want to know what you want."

He was shaking now. This was the one thing he didn't want to do. His words would force Snape to drive him away, he was sure of it.

Snape stared at him, a slight sneer forming on his face. "And why do you want to stay here, Potter? So that you can sleep with me? Watch me brew potions? Spread your dirty clothes all over my furniture?" The sneer turned evil. "So you can masturbate in my shower?"

The response to his words was exactly what he'd expected. Watching the blush rise on Harry's face, Snape had to wonder how it could be this easy. He hadn't even had to say anything truly evil, about the teenage drama and Harry's tendency to blame himself for everything that went wrong in their world.

He ignored the fact that he would never have used that as a weapon. He didn't want to rip Harry into pieces, he simply wanted Harry to use his brains for once and see that whatever foolishness he was planning would never work.

Harry had never forgotten just exactly how cutting Snape's words could be, but it had been so damn long since he'd said anything like this to him. It was biting and cruel and it was rather pathetic how he still couldn't hate the bastard.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "If that's all I can have, then I'll take it." He saw the way the sneer faltered. It made him feel a lot better. "I like you. I want to be with you. Now, what do you want?"

It was the question Snape had been avoiding for some time. He had no idea what he wanted. He knew he wanted to have his peace and quiet back and that he should be disgusted by the invasion of his privacy. There should be no doubt about it.

Yet, he didn't exactly need to be alone right now.

The indecision was more irritating than anything, and his first thought was to send the stupid brat out of his rooms forever. He curbed his usual angry reaction without any real hardship. As much as he'd like to, he couldn't really think of Harry as a brainless child anymore.

Harry waited patiently for a while. He could see that Snape wasn't shrugging the question off but was considering it. When the silence stretched, he couldn't help adding quietly, "Do you really want me to go away?"

A very simple question. Something he didn't want to ask, but had to. His life was a big mess already and he felt like this would be too much to face. If Snape said yes, it wouldn't exactly break his mind, but he had a sinking feeling that it might break something else.

Snape's gaze hid every real thought and emotion, burning black as he stared down at Harry. Finally he nodded curtly. "No."

Frozen at the gesture, Harry had to blink a few times as his mind tried to process the two conflicting messages. "No?" He saw another nod. "You mean you don't want me to go away?" This time the nod was accompanied by an annoyed glare.

"Then I'm not leaving!" Harry knew he was probably asking for trouble, but he wasn't going to back away from this.
Snape wanted to tell him he was an idiot, but that would be wasting his breath, since he'd been telling Harry that for seven years now, and he was still acting like one. This was one of the things that would likely never change. "Even if there will be no sex or things?" He couldn't promise Harry anything, couldn't make this any easier for him.

"Yes." There was not a moment of hesitation. Harry nodded so hard his neck hurt. "Even if there's nothing more than this." It was not exactly a lie. Not completely anyway.

Deciding it would be pointless to challenge that, Snape flicked his wand at the shards on the floor, once again making the broken jar rematerialize on the table. "Very well, then. If you intend to stay, you can contact the house elves for tea and some sandwiches."

He chose not to say anything about the bright smile Harry flashed at him before rushing to order some food.

Harry snuggled on the armchair to drink his tea, not even thinking about crowding Snape on the couch.

This had been the most exhausting day for a long time, and he hadn't even done anything. It was incredible, really; the truth he'd told could have destroyed everything and now he had more than he'd ever dreamed of. Sirius knew, and didn't hate him. Snape didn't want him to leave, and considering where they'd stood at the beginning, that was a miracle.

He was definitely not going to do anything to disturb things now.

After finishing with his tea, he went to grab his Firebolt and his broom servicing kit. Tending to his broom was a familiar act that required no thoughts, and he ran his fingers through the twigs automatically, wrinkling his nose a bit when dust rained down on him.

He should have done this sooner, but there had never seemed to be enough time for something like this. Smiling a little, he started to polish the handle, wondering if he'd have time to fly any time soon.

There had been a time when he'd spent his evenings in the Common Room tending to his broom and watching his friends study -- or in Ron's case, evade studying. In the earlier years, there had been Oliver telling them all stories about Quidditch, and later on there had been heated discussions about strategy.

Harry had loved that, just as he loved sitting here and watching as Snape once again went to work on something. He'd never wondered how Oliver had the energy to focus so completely on Quidditch; it was his passion as well, and their captain's ramblings had always made sense to him. He didn't really understand how someone could pour all that passion into brewing potions, but it was clear to him that to Snape it made sense.

He concentrated on the homey sound of something bubbling in the cauldron, smiling at the familiar scents. This was perfect; to quietly tend to his broom with Snape working near by.

Ridiculous really, but he honestly didn't want more from life than this.

He knew that this wouldn't last forever, but at least he still had a few days to spend with Snape. He'd try to hold onto these small moments as tight as he could.

His hands stilling on the broom, he kept staring at Snape. Watching him move between the work table and the cauldron had always been somewhat interesting, but now he could feel other feelings stir inside.
He had been like this at the cottage. He'd never interrupted Snape's brewing, knowing that it was important to him. There had been long hours he'd spent in the small room watching the man chop the ingredients or bottle potions and the knowledge that as soon as he was finished he would turn to him had been enough to get Harry through the waiting.

Swallowing, Harry tried to stop that thought. He'd been honest when he'd said this would be enough, but for some reason his body wasn't exactly agreeing with him.

He wanted Snape. It had been so much easier when his body had felt numb with shock and had only craved to feel Snape next to him when he slept. Now that numbness had faded, and he couldn't stop remembering how it had been to feel Snape's hands all over his body.

Bad thought! Bad! Harry had the mental image of grabbing his broom and slamming it against his head, screaming 'Bad Harry!' like he was a disobedient house elf. It would probably make no difference, but at least the pain would make him stop thinking about Snape's touch.

Or maybe not. Sometimes his stupid mind just had to focus on the one thing he wasn't supposed to think about, and it just wouldn't stop. It didn't matter that he knew he couldn't go to Snape and wrap his arms around him; he wanted it anyway. He wanted to attack those damn buttons with his fingers and strip Snape naked, drag him into the bedroom and then lose himself in the haze of pleasure.

It didn't help that Snape was leaning over the table, his gaze on a book. The posture just made Harry's mouth dry.

He had to be totally insane to agree to this torment! How many times had he felt like this? And how often had he simply dropped anything he'd been doing and gone to Snape, knowing that he was never turned away from his door?

There had never been any promises, but still the moments they'd shared had meant something to Harry. It hadn't been just sex, of that he was certain and he wanted it back. He hadn't lied to Snape, he'd settle to what he had if it was all that was offered, but he couldn't help wanting more.

He wanted everything from Snape.

Snape raised his gaze from the book, and met Harry's stare. It was clear to him that Harry hadn't intended for him to actually see that he was staring, but even though Harry's embarrassment was rather obvious, he didn't look away immediately. After a moment, he smiled ruefully and then turned his gaze to the broom.

Seeing the look of undisguised longing was a slight shock, even though it didn't exactly surprise Snape. He couldn't understand what made Harry feel like that; as if he wasn't simply yearning to once again share his bed -- and this time in the more sexual meaning of that phrase -- but wanted something more.

*Things*. The word was insufficient to describe the elusive concept, but Snape couldn't think of anything better. Harry undoubtedly wanted those small gestures.

He didn't blame him for it. People behaved the way they were taught to, and by now it was painfully obvious that the real difference between these youngsters he knew was more than simply House pride. Harry truly believed there would be something Snape could give him, things that would make him happy. It was mind boggling.

Sexual encounters he could deal with. As a matter of fact, if the idiot continued to simply sit there aroused and polishing his broom as if he was thinking about something else, he might even suggest
He did not find the physical act of sex unpleasant with Harry, and knowing he was going to insist on spending time with him no matter what, another sexual encounter wouldn't change anything.

Harry was already delusional -- and stubborn -- enough to not let go of him.

Of course any suggestions towards sex could be taken completely out of context. Snape had no illusions about Harry's ability to deal with this rationally. Any touches could be seen as an encouragement.

Then again Snape was certain *anything* he did could be misinterpreted. There was probably some Gryffindor tradition that made simple courtesies like pouring someone tea or not hexing them for making a mess seem like a declaration of undying devotion.

At least sex would be easier than anything else the idiot might want.

Before Snape could make up his mind about that, Harry got to his feet and then walked to the bathroom with a half strangled, "I'll take a quick shower before..."

The door slamming closed cut his sentence.

Snape had to smirk at that. Of course he could also sit here and try not to listen to the loud moans that were only partially drowned behind the sound of the shower.

He put the book down and went to the bedroom to prepare for bed. At least now he couldn't hear the shower. Imagining Harry stand there touching himself was slightly disturbing. Snape blamed the few weeks of continual sexual contact on the faint arousal this situation caused, slightly dismayed by the way his body was betraying him.

Ignoring the first stirrings of his erection, he changed into his nightrobes and turned the duvet down. He was not a hormonal teenager, he could maintain control no matter what delusions his libido had.

When Harry finally came out of the shower, his hair wet and cheeks reddened by more than just the hot water, Snape cast a knowing glance at him, but didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Harry seemed to understand all the things he might have said anyway.

Muttering, "Oh shut up," quiet enough for Snape to pretend he didn't hear that, Harry crawled under the blankets. Then he added a bit louder, "Good night, Snape."

Snape should have known the embarrassment would turn into impudence. He wasn't certain if it was typical Gryffindor stupidity or bravery, but he couldn't really resent it. Not, when above everything else it might be, it was honest.

"Good night, Potter."

Their nightly ritual was the same as always. As the darkness fell, there was nothing to see anymore and somehow words ceased to matter. Snape pulled the blankets to his chin, knowing that sooner or later Harry would at least try to hog them. It was like that every night; Harry would latch onto him until he fell asleep, then he would roll over and steal the blankets. At some time before morning, he'd use Snape’s shoulder as a pillow, so that Snape would wake up to the tickling sensation of Harry's breath on his skin.

Deciding he was too tired to go through the whole squirming ritual tonight, Snape simply rolled to his side and waited patiently for Harry to get comfortable so they could finally sleep.

He felt a wry smile tug at his lips as Harry snuggled against him, molding his back against his chest.
At least there would be nothing poking at him in the middle of the night this way.

Yawning, he refused to acknowledge the small twinge of disappointment that thought caused.

Part 10

Harry's second last day at Hogwarts dawned annoyingly bright and sunny. Being used to the constant faint lighting down in the dungeons, he was squinting his eyes as he followed behind Snape to the Great Hall.

A moment later his eyes went wide as he saw Draco Malfoy sitting at the Ravenclaw tables and casting hesitant looks at him. "Well I'll be damned." He'd thought Malfoy would make his decision at the last possible minute and even then make it sound like he was actually making a real decision instead of doing the only thing he could.

"Morning." Smiling knowingly, he sat down across from Malfoy.

"Good morning, Potter." Draco looked up at him, wondering for a moment what the smile meant and then decided it was simply an expression and nothing more than that.

They sat in silence for a moment, both pretending they were too busy eating to actually have a conversation.

Draco sipped his juice, feeling his stomach clench. He really didn't want to talk about this; it would be so much easier if he simply moved into the house and that was it. He didn't even have that much to pack. Most of his belongings were still in his trunk, waiting for him to simply pick it up and leave.

"So... Have you decided yet?" Harry knew a dozen different ways to ask, but he settled with the one that would bruise the famed Malfoy ego the least.

A wry smile appeared on Draco's lips. Now that he had to say the words out loud, he didn't feel like avoiding the issue after all. "Cut to the chase, Potter. We both know I'm not suicidal enough to decline your more than gracious offer." It was not a real choice, because he had no alternative. He couldn't stay in Hogwarts anymore, and even if by some miracle he was allowed to stay, he couldn't stand the silence of the Slytherin rooms for another night.

Living with Potter and his relatives wouldn't be as bad. He hoped.

Harry let some of his amusement for Malfoy's stiff words show. "Of course." He was surprised by how relieved he was by this; no matter how big an asset Malfoy could be in the fighting he was actually more concerned about him as a person.

"Are there any conditions you would like to set on our new arrangement?" There had to be some catch in this, of that Draco was certain.

The very Slytherin question hit Harry hard. It reminded him of most of the talks he'd had with Snape regarding things he took for granted. Friendship, companionship; all forms of any kind of intimacy. "Well..." He shrugged. "Yeah, actually. I want you to at least try to be civil to Remus and Sirius. No stupid games to make their life miserable. And if any of my friends ever come by, I want you to... Well, behave."

He didn't know if he should even make that point. He didn't even know if he had friends anymore. Hermione was away with her family, and he was half convinced she wouldn't be coming back to their insane world where she could find only destruction. He was quite sure that given the choice, he
wouldn't. Then there was Ron, who had already lost too much. Why on earth would either of them want to come back?

Draco lowered his gaze, not wanting to look at Potter as he muttered, "You have my word that I won't..." He didn't know how to phrase it. There was no word he and Potter would agree with.

"Good."

Raising his gaze, Draco was stunned to see that Potter was actually satisfied with his hesitant words. He almost rolled his eyes. Gryffindors! But for some reason it wasn't enough. "I mean it. I won't even talk to..." No need to squirm his way through this. "Weasley unless he addresses me first." As if that would ever happen.

Harry didn't want to think about Ron. "Okay." He was going to take Malfoy's word, mostly because it was in the Slytherin's best interest to actually keep it.

There was nothing more to say.

Since he had nothing really pressing to do today -- except maybe to watch Snape work -- Harry spent some extra time with his hot chocolate. He enjoyed the change of taste, even though he would always choose tea in the dungeons over anything.

He didn't say anything as Malfoy lingered with him, holding his own mug tight between his palms as if drawing the warmth from there. It was kind of strange to sit here with Malfoy, especially without the miasma of hostility hovering around them. Strange, but not bad.

A dark shadow was cast over them, and Harry looked up to see Snape standing next to their table.

Unable to keep the grin from his lips, he muttered, "Hi."

"Potter. Mr. Malfoy."

Draco put his mug down. "Good morning, professor Snape."

Not bothering with small talk, Snape kept his attention on Malfoy and said, "I assume you have decided to move in with the Gryffindors then." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir. I have. If that's all right with you." Even with the advice he'd got from the Head of his House, Draco somehow needed to say this.

He was not going to ask Snape's opinion on everything, but since Potter was Snape's -- he didn't even know what to call it really and didn't want to focus on that -- he thought it prudent to show that he was well aware of the situation.

Having Potter actually live in Snape's rooms was a show of allegiance, of approval of some sort. Draco doubted it was simple ownership but something more complicated he didn't really want to know. He had to keep in mind that the Head of his House had plans for Potter and no interference was allowed.

Snape let out a snort, but nodded anyway. "It is." He turned to Harry. "I hope your godfather is still at St. Mungo's." His tone indicated that he hoped Black had been taken in as a patient and would spend the rest of his life in the mental ward.

"Yeah, he's staying with Remus. They'll move into the house tomorrow." Once again, Harry was glad that their schedules were the same. It allowed him to spend these last days with Snape without extra regrets.
"Excellent." That would give them plenty of time to work. "If you gentlemen have nothing better to do today, we are going to have a look at your new lodgings."

Both young men nodded at that.

It was strange to walk to Hogsmeade with the two Slytherins. Harry had definitely got used to the flooing and walking the short distance felt odd somehow. Of course he understood why they couldn’t simply floo into his new house, but they could have grabbed broomsticks instead. It was a beautiful day for flying.

The way Snape had glared at him when he’d made the suggestion had made him realize that the man didn’t exactly consider that an option.

Too bad. Even the mention of flying had made Malfoy’s expression brighten.

A moment later Snape stopped and glared at Harry again. "Actually, you should go and get your broom. Hurry up, we don't have the whole day to dawdle!" The impatient nod included Malfoy in his command, and both young men rushed back to the dungeons.

Snape waited for them to return and then handed them both large buckets full of something heavy. "Now let's get going."

Carrying both their brooms and the buckets was awkward and annoying, but Harry didn't complain even though he did glare a lot. He was fairly sure that they were carrying the purple goo Snape had brewed the previous evening, but had no idea what it was for.

Still, it was a nice summer day. Not too hot, maybe a bit windy. It was actually rather pleasant to walk from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade. They met no one on their way to the village, even though they could see people bustling around as they neared the house. Harry was startled as he realized his new house was not far from Honeydukes.

At least there was something good about this whole thing.

Since he'd paid little attention to all this when he'd first visited here, he tried to take in most of the details, wondering what the place looked like to Snape and Malfoy.

They were probably used to houses that were bigger than this, but Harry was amazed by the sheer size of the place. And there was a real garden! Didn't look like there were lots of gnomes there.

It wasn't likely he'd have much time to worry about things like de-gnoming anyway.

"Is this it?" Snape looked at the house. He could tell the answer from the dazed look on Harry's face and couldn't blame him for being shocked by this place. Shaking his head slightly with disbelief, he gestured with his hand. "After you."

Harry didn't say anything as he pulled the key from out of his pocket and then opened the door. A slight whiff of some kind of a cleaning potion made him almost sneeze. "Welcome to my humble house." There was a world of sarcasm in his voice.

The previous visit here had been dream like, his only memory the need to get back to the dungeons as quickly as humanly possible.

Showing his house to Snape was somehow making this real.

They walked through the rooms, inspecting the place. It was as if Harry was seeing everything for
the first time; the surprisingly tasteful furniture, the hallway and the almost uncomfortably large
rooms. He wasn't sure what to think of all of this.

It was a bit too much. Like everything seemed to be lately, chafing his sense of propriety the wrong
way.

Snape cast suspicious looks at the locks and ran both his fingers and his wand over the doorknobs
and the small latches on the windows. His gaze missed nothing in the large house.

It took some time to get through every room. The house didn't resemble the smaller, shabby looking
cottage at all. There was a large basement that made Snape nod with approval, enough storage area
for a big family down there and no sign of rodents. The ground level floor had two smaller rooms
and a living room with an access to a real dining room and a surprisingly modern looking kitchen.

Harry paused for a moment to stare at the staircase. A small grin flickered on his lips as he realized
that there was a cupboard under the stairs.

They marched upstairs.

"I see they assume a teenage wizard needs at least four bedrooms." Staring at the doorways leading
to fairly sized rooms, Snape shook his head in disgust. From a dormitory shared by five youngsters to
this? Either the people in the Order thought Harry already had an overblown ego or they wanted him
to have one.

That brought another wry smile to Harry's face. "Yeah. Stupid, isn't it?" He remembered Dudley and
his second bedroom. Maybe some people really lived like that. He most certainly didn't want to.

Draco liked the place. It was large and the portraits and other decorations looked expensive. They
were also artistic and tasteful, unlike some things he'd witnessed lately. The shades of green and grey
repeating in both the furniture and the curtains made him grin and cast a look at Potter.

Who didn't seem to notice his amusement.

"Have you chosen a bedroom already?" Ignoring Harry's comment, Snape waved his wand and sent
all the doors flying open. "If not, please do so now."

Harry shrugged. "I haven't really thought about it..." Seeing the very familiar look on Snape's face,
he cut the sentence and went with, "I'll have a look."

He didn't really care which of the rooms he'd take, but looked around anyway. All the rooms looked
nice; they had a bed, a small table at the bedside, shelves for personal items by the wardrobe and a
few comfortable looking chairs. The only real difference was the view. He didn't like the windows
pointing towards the busy main street nor the one from which he could see the Three Broomsticks at
the distance. In the end, he pointed at the second door on the left. "I'll take that one."

Nodding slightly, Snape started the inspection with that room.

"May I..." Draco didn't finish his sentence when he saw Potter nod. He didn't like asking. "Thank
you." The very empty phrase he'd always used only to gain something tasted weird in his mouth.

He was more thorough with his examination. The room he chose was the one farthest away from the
bathroom upstairs. Incidentally, it was also the one farthest away from the one Potter had chosen.

They didn't linger upstairs for long, it was a big house and they had work to do.
Snape gestured at the buckets they had left in the hall. "We are going to make certain that your new home is as secure as the Slytherin dungeons." He cast a look at the large windows and grimaced with distaste. Well, almost as secure anyway.

It was a good thing that young Malfoy was already familiar with washing the windows. That skill would come handy now.

Using the exact tone as he did in classroom, Snape added, "Usually the houses we live in are charmed with wards. However, a charm is only as strong as the person casting it and will most of the time break when that person dies. Therefore a potion is a better option."

Harry smiled slightly at that. He was certain that Snape thought that a potion was the preferred option in everything. "I know. A potion will seep into the walls themselves and live in the house for as long as it stands."

There was an incredulous expression on Snape's face, mirrored by the faint shock on Malfoy's.

"Hey I may not be good at Potions, but that's basic defense knowledge!"

Snape didn't comment on that, but he did shake his head slightly in amazement. At least now he didn't have to explain every single detail. Ignoring the smile on Harry's face, he looked at Malfoy.

"Even with the protective barriers, it would be prudent to raise wards as well." There was no such thing as being too careful. "I expect you to look after that in case your Gryffindor housemates don't share our views on proper protection."

Draco lifted an eyebrow. True, Snape had been the one to maintain the wards around the cottage, but that was expected. He had been the adult there. Certainly Potter and his godfather would handle the security of their new home?

But as Snape had said, they were Gryffindors. "Of course, sir." He had to fight against a grin. He'd make sure Potter was safe, since that seemed to be the very core of Snape's order.

He was not going to screw this up, especially after his little talk with Snape that had kept him awake half the previous night.

It was funny, how he'd always seen the world divided in two. There were people who had power, and they could do whatever they wanted. The arrogance had been fed to him in his mother's milk, everything in his life showing him that he was special, one of the privileged.

Of course there also had to be those who were powerless. Those you could use. Sheep, his father called them. Not only Muggles, but Mudbloods as well, those who had the potential, but decided to waste it in being 'good'; Gryffindors, Dumbledore's lackeys.

Now he was not certain about anything anymore.

Harry was rolling his eyes, not at all surprised that Snape would say that to Malfoy. It was more than clear what the man thought about the other houses. "Thank you for the vote of confidence."

He could have sworn that the faintly amused and yet proud expressions on both the Slythins' faces were identical.

Busying himself with the potion and the brushes, Snape ignored that as well. He didn't care if Lupin and Black cast a dozen protective charms around the place. Taking care of some of the defense would give young Malfoy a sense of purpose, something he would probably need to survive living
with these half-wits.

He spent a few more minutes explaining the use of the protective magic before drawing the first line across the wall in the living room. The purple potion clashed with the warm green paint, but in a few moments the potion was absorbed into the wall, leaving no trace of it behind. "Like this."

"Can I help?" Since this wasn't about actually making a potion, Harry was certain he would be allowed to do something. He was right. Grabbing a brush, he went to paint the walls with the potion.

It was actually fairly intriguing. They used different potions on the walls and the doors. Malfoy sighed a suffering sigh when Snape told him to wash the windows using an extra potion in the water. It made Harry grin. With all these signs of humanity Malfoy was showing, he might actually get used to having him around.

They worked on every possible wall, painting the tiles in the bathroom as well as the stone walls down in the basement. After finishing with the inside of the house, they went out and Harry and Malfoy watched as Snape drew a protective circle around the whole perimeter of the property before mounting their brooms and sprinkling the roof with yet another potion.

Harry had never had this much fun with a potion -- not counting the lubricant potion of course. But this was still great fun. He enjoyed swooping down from the heights, the circling with Malfoy almost like a dance. It was clear from Malfoy's expression that he wasn't the only one having a good time.

Of course their actions started to gather a crowd after a while. Seeing the small group of witches stop and stare at them right outside the owl office made him sprinkle the rest of the potion as quick as possible and then land next to Snape with a slight frown on his face.

"What is it, Potter?" Snape asked. He'd seen how the complete joy had disappeared from Harry's face a moment earlier.

Not looking up, Harry said, "We have an audience." He had to agree that maybe he would have stopped and stared at two people flying over a house too, but he didn't want the crowd to get any bigger. Or the people to recognize any of them.

"Ah." It didn't really matter. "We should be going. It's almost lunch time." There was nothing more they could do to the house. It was as secure as it could be.

Harry nodded eagerly. He was actually hungry after all the work, and nothing sounded better than to return to Hogwarts.

"Apparating this short a distance is more dangerous than walking." Maybe if they could Apparate all the way inside Hogwarts' grounds it would be the best option, but not now. "I'm certain I can make my way back to Hogwarts on my own, but you may fly ahead if you wish to." Snape had already shrunk the now empty buckets -- not having to worry about the shrinking process destroying the potion -- and pushed them inside his robes.

Still feeling the exhilaration from the short moment of flying, Harry cast a longing look at his broom. Then he thought of Snape walking alone and shook his head firmly. "We'll walk." He didn't want Malfoy to go flying off alone either.

The only answer he got was a fairly annoyed glare. He didn't mind, he was used to those already.

There were other glares as well. As they walked down the street, a few witches and wizards stopped to stare at them, whispering amongst themselves. It was an unpleasant reminder of how true Snape's perception of their lives was. The looks he got were happy and revering and they turned sour
whenever the person realized who he was with.

Harry wasn't surprised to see Snape ignore all the stares. Years of suspicion and rumors about his loyalties must have prepared him for this. The way Malfoy kept his expression impassive as well wasn't a surprise either, even though Harry could see that he was more tense than usual.

He wasn't going to comment on it.

The tension in the Slytherin didn't leave even when they got back to Hogwarts. Ignoring the smiling greetings from the professors, Harry headed straight to the Great Hall and the Ravenclaw table and motioned Malfoy to follow him. They were both hungry enough to concentrate mainly on the food appearing on the table, avoiding eye contact and keeping the conversation to bare minimum, neither ready to risk this tentative truce they'd formed.

Right after lunch, Snape came to inform them he was going to talk to the Headmaster, alone. His tone suggested they keep out of trouble.

Both Harry and Draco nodded at that.

Maybe it was for the best. Harry didn't want to waste the whole day sitting on the couch and trying very hard not to focus on the fact that tomorrow he would be living elsewhere. There wasn't anything for him to really do, except to pack his things, and that would be too morose as well.

He wanted to do something he loved, something that would drive all this gloom away.

There weren't many things to choose from. He wasn't interested in reading anything, and walking through the castle would simply lead him to places he didn't want to go to.

He looked at Malfoy who didn't seem to want to go down to the dungeons alone either. It was strange, with anyone else, he wouldn't hesitate suggesting a walk or a game of chess, but did he really want to spend time with Malfoy like that?

Surprisingly, he realized he didn't mind the idea. They'd have to spend time together anyway with Malfoy living with him and it would be best if they could move past this phase where old enmity had turned into awkward politeness.

Harry knew of one thing he could suggest to Malfoy that wouldn't lead to complete disaster. It wasn't much, but it was a start. "What do you say about a little one on one Quidditch?" He'd settle to flying around aimlessly if he had to, but he simply had to get on his broom right now.

Startled, Draco looked up from the napkin he'd been playing with. "Quidditch?" He snapped his mouth shut, not wanting to sound like a pathetic fool who was shocked by the fact that someone wanted to spend time with him.

"Yeah, Quidditch." After all this time with Snape, Harry had learned that when he felt like he was walking on thin ice, honesty was the best policy. "I'm not going to waste the whole day moping. It's a perfect day for flying."

"Do you think it would be safe?" There were wards all around Hogwarts, but Draco wasn't going to forget that during the years, lots of dubious people had managed to sneak through them. He hoped the Quidditch pitch would be secure. He'd missed flying more than anything.

"Yeah, I think so," Harry nodded. Both Snape and Dumbledore knew he loved to fly, and they would have warned him against it if there was any danger. "So what do you say?"
"Sounds good." Even though his new situation would have compelled him to agree even if he hated the mere idea, Draco was almost radiating with relief. He wasn't going to spend the day alone in the common room.

Smiling with genuine joy, Harry nodded towards the door. "Let's go, then."

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**Part 11**

"Tea?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Thanks."

Pouring a cup full of the steaming liquid, Snape kept his voice quiet as he asked, "Have you finished with your packing yet?"

It was fortunate that Harry hadn't chosen to get the teapot himself, for the question made him jump. He didn't want to be reminded of tomorrow, but Snape never did let him escape reality. "Yeah." Not counting a stray sock behind the couch or the few toiletries left on the shelf in the bathroom. "Almost."

"I see." Deciding against making any comments, Snape put the pot down and then offered Harry his tea.

It wasn't really intentional, but Harry's fingers brushed against Snape's hand as he reached out to accept the cup. The way he let the touch linger on the other hand was. He didn't even feel ashamed of it, not even when Snape raised an eyebrow at him and that very familiar sneer appeared on his lips.

Harry simply drank his tea.

There was nothing to do, nothing to distract him from the fact that this was the last night he would spend here.

He was certain they could discuss about the future in a calm and logical manner if he brought up the subject. He could even mention his concerns and Snape would listen.

Leaning back on the couch, Harry closed his eyes. He didn't want to spend the evening talking about things in a reasonable manner. Nothing could change what would happen tomorrow. A discussion would undoubtedly lead into a fight over what kind of a future they could have together, and he really didn't need that right now.

He simply wanted to enjoy the peace and quiet for as long as he could.

It was almost as if he was living through a flashback, the similarities to their last day at the cottage enough to make Harry uncomfortable. He was going to say goodbye again and leave Snape behind again. Facing the future that would hold very few surprises was even worse than the blind jump to the unknown.

All too soon, Dobby came to collect the tray away. Harry didn't manage even a faint smile at the house elf, causing Dobby to cast worried looks at both him and Snape before leaving. It was late and Harry was tired. Too tired to pretend.

He snuggled on the chair and let his gaze move over all the familiar things; the cupboard, the doorway leading to the bedroom. Snape didn't seem to notice his stare -- or at least pretended not to -
"I believe it's time to retire for the night, Potter." Snape didn't comment on the flinch his words caused.

Gesturing with his hand, Harry muttered, "Yeah, you go on. I'll be there in a minute." He wasn't ready to get up yet.

It was much simpler to listen to Snape move around in the bathroom, the sound of a shower soothing, drowning the insistent ticking of the clock on the wall. The hands of the clock showed it was time to go to bed, and Harry could feel the lassitude spread all over him.

When Snape disappeared into the bedroom, the calmness seemed to turn into something suffocating. Harry stood up, ignoring his aching muscles and padded to the bathroom to go through his evening routines. Even though the warm water worked miracles on his slightly sore body, he didn't linger under the spray.

He wasn't going to waste more time than necessary showering.

The lights were already low in the bedroom. He could see Snape lying in bed, covers pulled up to his chest as usual, and the sight made him stop near the doorway and simply stare.

For a brief moment he wondered if he should turn around and walk back to the living room and spend the night in his chair. It would be too difficult to sleep here now. Then his feet were moving on their own volition, carrying him to the bedside and it was the easiest thing in the world to slip under the covers next to Snape.

A soft sigh greeted him, but there were no words.

Harry was grateful, for he didn't think he could handle talking now. He was barely able to turn out the lights completely.

Like last night, Harry snuggled as close to Snape as possible, not waiting until they could both pretend they were asleep. He knew that if his actions were unwelcome, Snape would tense or say so.

It had been a long day, and he was exhausted. They wouldn't have to wake up early, but it was best to get a good night's sleep before tomorrow, for it would undoubtedly be a busy day.

The meeting that would change everything was merely hours away, and Harry didn't want to look half dead in front of the Order.

His eyes opened to stare into the utter darkness.

Tired as he was, he could already feel insomnia lurking at the edge of his awareness. He moved even closer to Snape, his arm snaking around his waist and squeezed his eyes shut. Breathing in and out, he tried to relax.

Pushing the panic away was harder than he could have imagined. All he could think of was that he didn't want to go through tomorrow. Whatever small steps he'd already taken on the path set for him were insignificant compared to tomorrow. His decision made in Dumbledore's office while watching the Headmaster and Minister Fudge had felt so profound, but it had simply been the end of his inner struggle. Tomorrow, he'd have to match his resolve with actions, and it was terrifying.

Trying to dissolve his fears with yet another deep breath, Harry concentrated on feeling Snape's body against his own, grounding him to the here and now.
Not exactly a relaxing thing.

The need that flooded through him was almost as terrifying as thoughts of leaving. Snape was lying so close to him, his body hard angles against his, the faint scent of herbs lingering all around him, and there was no way Harry could keep his own body from stirring.

He knew he should let go and then walk back into the bathroom, but he was already settled down and as nice as a slow wank in the shower sounded, this was better.

The silence was broken by Snape's calm breathing only. It would have been enough to lull him to sleep if he hadn't been so excited by the simple closeness of Snape's body. Maybe in time it would indeed override the lust and the angst and he could simply drift away.

Minutes ticked by. Harry fidgeted a little, trying to find a better position but unwilling to let go of Snape. His feet were uncomfortably tangled with the covers, but squirming didn't really help.

He was restless and horny and was it really hot in here or was it just his imagination? He didn't know, but the thought of taking off his T-shirt sounded like a plan. Then again, pressing his naked chest against Snape's robes would just make this worse.

He fidgeted again, trying to find a more comfortable way to lie so close to the man.

"Will you stop that!" Snape's voice came from the darkness, sounding annoyed. It made him jump and accidentally push his erection even harder against Snape's hip. "And do something about that thing!"

Harry was glad it was dark. This way his embarrassment wouldn't be so damn obvious. "Oh. I'm sorry." He'd thought Snape was already asleep. Moving back a bit, he tried to will his erection away. It didn't exactly work.

"Good." Rolling forward, Snape snapped the word out. They would both be busy tomorrow and maybe after this they could finally get some sleep. "The potion is in the round bottle on the nightstand."

Harry wondered if he was talking about the infamous neutering potion. That wouldn't surprise him, knowing Snape's evil sense of humor. "Potion?"

"Yes. Potion. Now would you please hurry up! I don't have all night for this."

Deciding not to ask, Harry squirmed towards the edge of the bed, reaching out with his hand. At least the small round bottle was easy to find by touch only. He opened the bottle carefully, sniffing the contents.

The scent made him freeze. He would definitely recognize this potion anywhere.

Did Snape really mean what he thought he meant? It was pretty obvious, considering that he was holding lubricant potion in his hands, but why would Snape give him this now?

Heart pounding, Harry sat there for a moment, wondering if he'd fallen asleep after all and was now experiencing a very hot dream.

It didn't exactly feel like a dream, even though he was certain he would dream of shagging Snape on this very last night in the dungeons. Of course in a dream he would already be naked instead of contemplating imagining things.
He moved quickly back to Snape, all thoughts of just closing his eyes and getting a good night's sleep gone. "I didn't think you'd have the time to work on anything as insignificant as this." Laying his hand on Snape's back -- missing in the dark and fumbling for a while until his palm met with the soft cloth of his night robes -- he regretted his words instantly as he felt Snape move away from him.

"You may want to call in insignificant, but I refuse to let you stick that thing anywhere near me without proper lubrication." There was definitely amusement in Snape's voice.

Harry's fingers went nerveless and he dropped the bottle. Fortunately it hit the mattress next to him. "Really?" He hadn't even thought about this. Snape always tried to be in control of everything, so he'd assumed he wouldn't wish to relax enough to enjoy being shagged.

Snorting, Snape refused to answer that. He rested his head on his crossed arms and waited for Harry to stop the unavoidable gawking and get on with it.

He didn't have to wait for long.

But instead of feeling hands yanking off his night robe, there was a hesitant touch on his shoulder, compelling him to turn around. He complied, wondering what was going on. The moment of fumbling and then the soft kiss planted on his lips were an answer enough.

He should have remembered this; the slightly sloppy kisses Harry bestowed so easily and without any agenda beyond their mutual enjoyment.

Hating even the idea of breaking the kiss, Harry muttered against Snape's lips, "You know you don't have to do this if you don't want to." No matter how much he wanted this, he had the very unpleasant feeling of this being a goodbye of sorts.

A consolation prize Snape was offering to him.

"Don't be an idiot, Potter. I'm not sacrificing my virtue for your sake." Snape leaned closer for another kiss Harry was eager to give. Waiting patiently until Harry had to breathe again, he gasped in air and then muttered, "I am not doing anything I don't want to."

He sounded rather angry at that.

Harry smiled. "Good." It wasn't pity either, he could bet that Snape never did things out of pity.

"Neither am I." With that, he kissed Snape again. He wasn't stupid enough to ask if he really wanted this then.

"Yes, that is fairly obvious." The sneer was audible in Snape's voice. "I assume you are aware of what to do with the potion?"

Opting against rambling, Harry simply muttered, "Yeah, I am."

"Good. Then get on with it."

It was pitch black in the bedroom, but Harry had no trouble trailing his lips along Snape's neck. He'd missed this so much, he needed this simple touch more than what was being offered.

The reasons for this didn't really matter. Harry didn't care if it was a way to say goodbye or a dream or something else. He was touching Snape, and it felt more real than anything in his world and it was enough.

He took his time undressing Snape, touching and tasting the familiar skin before reaching for the
potion again. He was nervous, the feeling making his erection wilt a little. It wasn't a bad thing, really, because he needed to make this last. Snape had made awfully many comments about hormonal teenagers already, and right now, Harry wanted to prove him wrong. Wanted to make him feel good, make him revel in his touch.

Scrambling out of his pajama pants was less than graceful, but since Snape couldn't see the way he struggled with them and then flung them across the floor, it didn't really matter.

He wanted this. Foolish words of gratitude bubbled in his mind, almost escaping before he swallowed them down. He didn't think he needed to say anything out loud, his actions made his enthusiasm more than clear.

Trying not to let the bottle slip from his nervous grip, Harry scooped up some of the potion. He needed to make this perfect somehow; show Snape he wasn't a fumbling idiot. He didn't know what had made him offer this and didn't really care, but he had to make sure that Snape wouldn't regret this.

He lay his palm on Snape's arse, hesitant touches in the dark.

This would be so much easier if he put the lights on so that he could see. He actually thought of going for his wand for a moment, but then discarded the notion. He didn't want to let go of Snape now, didn't want to lose the connection.

Didn't want to risk this was just a dream and moving would wake him up.

It was definitely awkward to do it like this, but he was determined to make it work. Slowly, he ran his potion free hand down Snape's arse, the beat of his own heart so loud in his ears that he could hear nothing else.

Harry felt Snape move slightly. At first he thought he was pushing him away. Then his breath caught as he realized Snape was spreading his legs, inviting him in.

He sat frozen in place for a moment, unable to comprehend that small movement for just a second. Then his tentative touch turned into a firmer one, his fingers trailing Snape's arse, moving without hesitation.

All the thoughts of settling to simply sharing the same bed with Snape disappeared as he touched the heat inside him. He was used to self denial, at least to a point, but he could never again lie to himself about this. The quiet evenings and the discussions and sleeping next to Snape were good, but he wanted this as well.

He poured more of the potion on his hand, not caring if some of it dribbled onto the sheets. He was going to shag Snape and nothing else mattered.

For the first time, Snape's silence in bed unnerved Harry. Usually he could tell by the sounds if he was doing this right, but there was nothing but steady breathing. He couldn't even see Snape's expression. Would there be approval in the dark gaze, or quiet annoyance? Did he really want this?

The very unpleasant thought made Harry ask, "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, you're not." It came as a suffering sigh. "It seems this is the one thing where your standards are above dismal."

Harry smiled at the words, but he still wished he could see Snape. In the darkness, there was nothing but skin on skin, as if everything else had disappeared and there was no world beyond the bed. As
intimate as it felt, he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to actually see the skin he was touching. How would Snape's eyes look as he pressed into him?

The thought alone made him shiver.

Eyes open, staring into the complete darkness, he kept touching Snape. Trying to compensate for the lack of sight, his ears picked up every sound, the rustling of the sheets, the slow wet glide of his own fingers. He leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on Snape's skin, needing that connection as well.

"Do remember that the potion is not edible."

"Okay." That mental image alone was enough to make Harry's hands shake and he couldn't believe how calmly Snape could say that. It didn't even sound as weird as it had the first time Harry had heard about licking someone's arse. Would his mouth there shatter Snape's control? He had no idea, but he wished he could find out.

He was going to do that some day and to hell with Snape's notions of not sharing things anymore! Now that he knew that they both really did want this, he was not going to let go.

Deciding that starting an argument right now would be a very bad idea, Harry simply kissed his way up Snape's spine.

He closed his slippery fingers over his own erection, spreading the potion over his skin quickly. This was going to be over before he ever got inside Snape if he spent a moment longer preparing himself.

Then he was there, pushing in, and he had to bite his lip to keep from losing it and coming way too soon.

He wanted this to be good.

Harry moved as slowly as he could, nuzzling against Snape's neck. He didn't want to rush this, but was unable to stay still. The heat surrounding him was maddening, forcing him to flex his hips ever so slightly, to try to bury himself even deeper in Snape. He pushed Snape's hair out of his way so that he could trace his soft skin right under his ear with his lips.

Sliding his hand down Snape's arm to brace himself against the mattress, he groaned quietly as he realized Snape was clutching at the sheets with a death grip.

"Are you all right?" The question came out from between clenched teeth as Harry fought against the need to thrust.

"You still ask such stupid questions." Snape's voice was hoarse. "Now move!"

Harry couldn't disobey that. He let out an almost grateful sigh as he started to move, searching for a rhythm with a few almost painfully awkward thrusts before finding the right tempo.

His breath came in harsh pants, his lips were moving, but no sound came out. Even in this haze of pleasure, instinct warned him against the word. He leaned closer to Snape, kissing his neck again. The breath that formed a fiery "Mine!" caressed the skin beneath his lips, but he didn't voice it out loud.

He'd always known he could be possessive and needed people who would be there just for him. There had been that desire whenever he'd been with a lover, but it had never been as strong as now.

The need to claim Snape as his wasn't simply because he was buried inside of him, joined in this
intoxicating moment. Shagging him felt so good it was almost scary, but simply the fact that he was with *Snape* was even better. He'd never had anything he'd wanted this much, and he never wanted to let go of this.

Harry let out a choking sound as he felt Snape *squeeze* him, muttering curses from under his breath about sadistic bastards. He was too far gone to know what he was saying, and hoped that any understandable words were lost in the middle of the desperate gasps.

It was impossible to stop now and Harry sobbed out something that sounded embarrassingly like an apology as he thrust in harder. He didn't want this to end yet, wanted Snape to come first, wanted this to last forever, the incredible rush of pleasure about to hit him like a charm and he squeezed Snape's hip so hard it had to bruise as he came.

He managed somehow not to slump on Snape's back, breathing in harsh breaths as his heart rate slowed down somewhere closer to the norm.

Slightly disappointed with himself for coming before his partner could, Harry leaned back and pulled Snape with him to his side. He winced a little as the movement separated him from Snape, wondering if there would be any comments about the mess he was undoubtedly making.

He lay there for a moment, trying to catch his breath. Damn, he had missed this, the insanity of the frantic movements, the touch of Snape's skin against his.

The bedsprings let out a faint creak as Snape fidgeted, as if he was starting to move away from him. A moment later Harry realized that he *was* indeed moving away, getting ready to leave the bed.

"No... Please, wait." Harry didn't know what Snape was thinking he was about to do next, but somehow the mere thought of not touching him now was making his chest too heavy. Did Snape really think he'd just lie here and maybe even fall asleep without even trying to make him come? The thought was completely unpleasant, more horrifying than anything.

Snape stopped inching away from him and lay there waiting. "Yes?"

The fact that he didn't really sound angry was worse than anything.

Without hesitation, Harry molded himself against Snape's back again, kissing his neck. "Sorry. Didn't mean to be so selfish." He didn't want to be sorry, he just wanted to make things better.

He hugged Snape against him before reaching out to grab Snape's still hard prick. Trying very hard not to fumble, he settled into the familiar stroking rhythm.

He kissed Snape's shoulder gently as he heard the man's breath catch.

Soon, his hand was joined by Snape's, guiding his touch to a faster pace. It didn't take long; feeling Snape arch into their joined touch, Harry wrapped himself tighter against Snape, the soft groan echoing in the darkness escaping his own throat when he felt the familiar wetness on his hand.

Taking deep breaths, Harry lay there. He was glad of the darkness, knowing there was no way he could not grin foolishly right now.

Next to him, Snape squirmed around to find his wand and cast a cleaning charm on the sheets. Then as an afterthought, he cleaned them both as well. It would have to be enough until the morning. Harry yawned, feeling completely exhausted and almost boneless with contentment. It was fortunate he wasn't required anywhere until noon.
He lay back down. Not even tomorrow's meeting and thoughts of war could keep him awake. This already felt like a sweet dream, and he was perfectly content to let it continue forever.

"Snape?"

"Yes?" Snape wasn't surprised to hear Harry's voice. It was late, they had just had sex and it would be reasonable to fall asleep. So of course he would feel the need to talk right now.

Instead of saying anything, Harry inched closer. His hand brushed against Snape's nose, feeling around till it found his cheek. A moment later he leaned down to kiss his lips. It was an unhurried kiss, full of satisfaction.

There were still no words when Harry pulled back a little and then once again latched onto Snape like a leech.

Snape let none of the sarcastic words that came to mind escape him. He simply moved a little to accommodate Harry better and then lay there, staring into the darkness.

He's a bit amazed of how easy this was. Not the physical act; it was so familiar to him from years past that he didn't need to think about it really. But he'd wondered about how Harry would deal with this, and how would he be able to simply give his body here on his own territory, where no one had ever touched him like this before.

It had not been earth shattering, but the quiet burn had been more than enough. The simple pleasure Harry wanted to share with him was still somewhat a mystery to him.

Sighing, he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his inner clock was telling him it was time to wake up.

He let Harry sleep as late as possible, dressing up as quietly as he could. This would be quite different from yesterday, when they had almost been able to pretend that things weren't really going to change.

The way Harry so clearly sulked through the breakfast they had in Snape's living room confirmed his suspicions.

Snape didn't comment on the silence or the almost panicky look in Harry's eyes. There was nothing new to say. This reminded him of the last day they'd spent at the safe house, when Harry had suddenly looked like he hadn't really understood that they were leaving until that final moment.

At least this time they could have some privacy. He didn't even try to pretend he didn't know what was going on, but sat next to Harry on the couch, ignoring the way Harry seemed to need to touch him all the time.

Time seemed to almost fly by, which was strange, for they were simply sitting here, doing nothing. Snape was startled to notice that even though it felt like they had sent the breakfast tray back only a moment ago, it was already lunch time.

"Do you want me to send for lunch?" Seeing the slight shake of head, Snape decided that he wasn't hungry either. "All right. But I insist we have some tea."

It would definitely look bad if Harry fainted later on.

Harry looked up, shrugging. "Whatever." His gaze was distant.
The familiar house elf bringing the tea looked worried again, casting a disapproving look at Snape before disappearing. Snape wanted to hex the little creature.

This was definitely not his idea of a pleasant day. Almost anything would be better than sitting in an oppressive silence and waiting. Harry seemed to be completely satisfied with his moping, though. He took the offered cup of tea and then leaned even closer to Snape.

Snape didn't move away, allowing the touch.

Minutes ticked by. The silence made it feel like they were inside a bubble that existed out of time. An apt analogy, for Snape didn't want to focus on either the past or the future. He couldn't change what had already happened, all he could do was to accept it and move on. This time, he was unable to shape much of their near future either. It was out of his hands for as soon as they left this room, things would once again spin out of his control.

He wasn't sure he even wanted to have any control on what would happen. It was easier to simply let go and move back to the shadows where he'd lived most of his life.

Tea time came and went without either man commenting on it.

Finally Harry let out a sigh. "It's time, isn't it?" He sounded dejected. When Snape nodded, he sighed again. "I guess..." The words got stuck in his throat and he had to swallow before saying, "I guess we'd better get going."

Snape got up. "Yes. They're waiting." He didn't say whom they were waiting for, because they both knew the truth already. No one was really waiting for him, while their world was holding breath expecting Harry to arrive any moment now.

He walked to the door, not looking at the packed trunk waiting near the wall. The house elves would take care of that later on.

"Snape?"

The very quiet sound of his name spoken out made him stop. Turning around, he saw Harry standing next to the couch as if he hadn't even moved. Snape didn't like the uncomfortable sensation that filled him as he watched Harry.

Everything ended. This was the second time in weeks he was doing this, and for some reason it didn't get any easier. If anything, this was more difficult than leaving the cottage, and Snape had no idea why. "We have to go."

"I know."

Snape saw the slight change in Harry, once again marveling at the strength he was showing, at the same time wondering just exactly how much of it was pure stubborness. He knew that there would be no whining, no confusion, even though Harry would undoubtedly kiss him before they left the dungeons.

He was glad to see that there was only a very faint trace of the sadness showing in the green eyes. Harry looked determined to face whatever the day was going to throw at him.

When Harry finally stepped next to him and raised his face, clearly expecting a kiss, Snape leaned down. He didn't want to say anything, not having the faintest idea of what would be proper in a situation like this. Any platitude would be too emotional or sound completely hollow.
The kiss tasted of sorrow, salty like swallowed tears. Snape closed his eyes at the taste and when the brief touch of Harry's lips on his was gone, he wanted to wipe his mouth.

Opening the door, he gestured at the shadowy hallway, waiting for a briefest moment before following Harry.

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Part 12

Harry could feel the excitement in the air as soon as he stepped out of the Slytherin dungeons.

It had been nice and quiet down there, the hallways as empty as always. Even with the torches here and there, the light was always faint these days, when there was no need for multitudes of students to see where they were going.

Shivering, Harry watched the people in the paintings rush towards the Entrance Hall and the Great Hall. The sound of dozens of people talking was almost deafening, different voices blurring into an annoying buzz that seemed to come from everywhere around him.

The fact that most of the ghosts were flying around the staircase, yelling to each other didn't really help.

He smiled slightly as Snape glared at the Bloody Baron who was waving his sword around and making very nasty comments. The Slytherin ghost didn't seem to be immune to the glare. Instead of making threats, he backed away slowly and then rushed to chase after Peeves.

The contrast to the peaceful morning spent with Snape was almost too much. Harry wanted nothing more than to turn around and walk back into the dungeons, but he knew it was the one thing he couldn't do now. He couldn't help muttering, "Bloody hell."

Snape cast a sharp look at him, but said nothing.

It was more annoying than the disapproving words that were so obviously on the man's mind. Harry bristled a little. Anger was better than the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, but he didn't want to be angry with Snape. He was probably the only person in the world he wasn't angry with right now.

There were sounds of footsteps coming from behind them. Harry looked over his shoulder, smiling faintly as he saw professor McGonagall hurry towards them. This would be it, the end of his peace and quiet, not ending with a crowd staring but with polite small talk.

To his surprise, McGonagall simply nodded at him, cast a slightly amused look at Snape and then moved on.

Not wishing to analyze the look right now, Harry kept moving, his feet feeling heavier with every step. He could hear the sounds coming from the main hallway and knew that there would be more people in the Great Hall than he'd ever seen before.

He was glad they weren't using any of the larger, more crowded hallways, for now he could pretend a moment longer. Snape's presence next to him gave him strength, but not even that could drive away all the butterflies that were so merrily dancing around in his stomach. Especially now that the man was clearly heading towards the teacher's entryway.

A small sigh escaped Harry as they stood by the stone wall.
Pointing at the small doorway, Snape muttered, "I will go through here. You should probably use the main entrance." He knew that it was what people would expect, their glorious hero making an entrance. He also knew this was something Harry had to do on his own.

Harry grimaced, but he knew it was true. "Yeah." He would have to try to get used to this, for from now on, things would never again be simple.

There was nothing more to say. Snape didn't want to share another sad kiss with Harry, so he simply turned around, his hand grabbing the doorknob without having to even look where he was reaching. He had used this entrance for most of his years here and it was almost as familiar to him as the dungeons.

"Snape?"

He turned around to look at Harry, who was still standing there, as if waiting for something. "Yes?"

"When I come back to Hogwarts to meet with Dumbledore or if there's an Order meeting..." There was a small pause, as if Harry didn't know how to really say it. "I'll come to see you. I mean, I'll come here. To be. With you."

He wondered if Snape understood what he really meant; that he didn't just want to see him sitting in the Great Hall, wouldn't crawl into the dungeons simply to get more great sex. He wanted everything. Maybe he was greedy and maybe he shouldn't want this so bad, but he did.

He wasn't going to let go of this and he'd be damned if he'd ever settle with a big house and followers and memories.

Snape raised an eyebrow, his hand squeezing the doorknob. "You will?" He could hear well that Harry's words hadn't been a question or a plea.

A nod.

It didn't surprise Snape. "I don't think that's wise." Now that he couldn't act as a spy anymore, he didn't know what his part in the war would be, but he was sure it wasn't to stand by Harry Potter like this.

"I didn't say it was. I'm saying I want to continue seeing you." Seeing that Snape was about to argue again, Harry stepped closer. "No. We've been through this conversation. More than once. I'm not going to waste any more time arguing with you about this. When I come here, I'd like to come and see you."

He didn't care what people would say. Things would change, and he knew he'd have to do things he didn't want to, things that had kept him awake during long nights, all the fears and doubts that had lead him to the dungeons in the first place. The war was reality now, out there in the open, and the wizarding world would turn to their hero.

No matter how he disliked it all, he was ready to do it. He had to, because no one else would, he accepted it.

Self sacrifice, honor and bravery. Gryffindor traits he would have to live through. He knew that wanting to hold on to Snape was selfish, but he didn't give a damn. He was pretty sure he was entitled to have this one thing of his own.

Snape was quiet for a moment, marveling at the honesty in Harry's voice. It almost sounded like he believed in his words and thought he would indeed care about Snape even after the world took him
away from this.

Then he nodded curtly. "Then I shall see you later." He didn't wait for a reply but simply stepped through the doorway, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Staring at the door, Harry muttered, "Yes, you shall."

The hallway was empty, and Harry let his shoulders sag for just a moment. He really didn't want to do this now. There had been meetings with the Order before; either a large amount of people gathered in Dumbledore's rooms where Harry could try to sit quietly next to Ron and Hermione, or the few weathered members of their inner circle planning and plotting.

He had always had the chance to sit and listen. Observe and learn. Now, he would have to actually use the little knowledge he had.

He rubbed his palm across his face. Even all those weeks he'd spent worrying about this day hadn't really prepared him to what this would be like, what it would feel like to stand here and know what was waiting for him.

"Damn..." Standing here wouldn't likely help either. Harry straightened himself again and then continued walking down the hallway, his steps measured.

It was actually a blessing that there were so many people in the main hallway. Most of them were standing in small groups, talking with hushed voices and completely missed seeing Harry Potter sneak into the Great Hall.

Trying not to look around in search for people who wouldn't be here, Harry walked down the central aisle of the Hall. But when the sounds around him grew louder, he couldn't help turning his gaze here and there.

There were more people here than he'd imagined. He nodded politely at those who recognized him and muttered out his name, but didn't go to talk to anyone. The Gryffindor table on his right side was almost drawing him to it, but he knew that this time, it would not be his proper place.

He kept nodding at people, his lips not co-operating with him when he tried to smile. This was strange, like he was simply walking through a dream, and he felt like he was really not here at all.

So many people. Old witches and wizards who looked too frail to be here, men and women in brightly colored robes, talking to each other and looking somber. Younger people didn't look as morose, but no one was really smiling. No one had a reason to.

There were those Harry could remember from school. A few older Gryffindors he had looked up to when he'd been only a first year. Lots of people whose names he didn't really know, but who all knew his. Then there were those he'd seen every day.

Harry froze as his gaze met an achingly familiar face. A moment later, he continued on his way towards the Head Table. Hermione hadn't noticed him. He couldn't help wondering if that was intentional.

Ignoring the buzz all around him, he kept his attention on her. She was talking quietly to Lee Jordan, both looking subdued and wan.

Lee looked up, seeing Harry and nodded slightly, his expression tired, but definitely not hostile.

It made Harry stumble a little. He'd somehow expected to see glares and blame on the faces of his
former housemates. Especially Lee, who had been the best friend of Fred and George.

"Lee?"

Harry could hear Hermione's voice even from the distance. He knew what would happen next, but didn't turn away, couldn't move even if he wanted to. He simply stood there, watching as she glanced to see what had caught Lee's attention and then spun around.

The smile appearing on Hermione's lips lit up her face. She took a step forward at the same time as Dumbledore's voice called out for Harry. Still smiling, she rolled her eyes, gesturing Harry to go on and mouthed, "Talk to you later." It was definitely a promise, not a threat.

Blinking hard, Harry mouthed back, "Yeah." He had been so afraid when he'd heard nothing from her since she'd left and now she was here and it didn't look like she hated him.

He could feel his lips curl into a faint but real smile as he walked to the Head Table. Even the way people were moving out of his way, startled by Dumbledore's call, didn't make the smile disappear.

"Harry. Please sit here." Dumbledore's words were a command as he pointed at the seat next to him where their DADA professor had used to sit. Most of the professors seemed to be sitting where they always did, professor McGonagall now looking at him from her usual place at Dumbledore's right.

Grimacing a little, Harry walked around the table to take the seat that was offered.

He sat down on the surprisingly comfortable chair, staring at the table in front of him for a moment before raising his gaze again. He didn't want to say anything to Dumbledore, not feeling like he could say anything polite right now, so he looked to his left, fully expecting to see professor Sinistra there.

"Snape?" Harry stared. Why on earth was he here? A quick glance to his right gave him all the explanation he needed. The twinkle in the Headmaster's eyes told him exactly what had made Snape forgo his place at the other end of the table.

The very curt nod and the muttered, "Potter" clearly showed what Snape was thinking about all of this.

The very curt nod and the muttered, "Potter" clearly showed what Snape was thinking about all of this.

Harry turned his attention away from him, afraid that he would do something he'd regret later if he kept looking at Snape. He did however move his leg a little, so that it barely brushed against Snape's, and didn't move away when he heard the suffering sigh.

The Great Hall was filling with people. Witches and wizards from all around the country, all members of Dumbledore's silent task force. Harry had met with most of them previously, knew many by name. He'd felt it was important for him to learn.

People were talking together quietly. It looked like there were whole families here, small groups formed by wizards of all ages. Harry could now see that there were indeed many from his year, Gryffindors and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs gathered together. He waved at Seamus and Dean, not quite able to form a smile in greeting. Next to the familiar duo was another one and Harry had to blink to make sure he was seeing correctly. Yes, it was indeed Lavender and Parvati there, whispering together as always.

So many familiar faces. Hermione was now talking to Terry Boot, looking relieved to see him here. On the other side of the room, there was a group of a bit older wizards. Harry met with Oliver's gaze, shivering when he saw the sadness there. He had to turn his gaze away as he saw Angelina there by his side. The old Quidditch team looked so wrong without their redhead Beaters.
Not a thing Harry wanted to think about right now, especially since the Weasley family was absent. He'd hoped at least Ron would be here, but it seemed he wouldn't come after all.

The noise level in the room was rising. It was almost the time for their meeting to begin, and everyone was starting to feel restless. They had lots of things to discuss now. The war wasn't a far away concept anymore, it had become a reality to everyone.

Harry glanced around him, feeling a bit weird sitting here at the Head Table, but he knew it was his place from now on. He wondered how alien Snape felt right now, but as usual he couldn't read anything from his face; he was looking as composed as ever.

The only ones absent were their latest DADA professor -- who had indeed suffered a nervous breakdown in May -- and professor Sinistra. He didn't know why she wasn't here. Maybe it was because she was a Slytherin. There didn't seem to be many of those here.

He didn't even have to look to know that Draco Malfoy was sitting alone at the Slytherin table. The room was full, and people had taken seats on that table as well, but no one sat close to him.

Except... Harry couldn't hide his surprise as he saw a man sit down opposite to Malfoy. It was apparent that Malfoy was as shocked as he was. He was staring with his mouth open before the shock melted into a genuine smile.

"Ah. Young Zabini," Dumbledore muttered, clearly pleased. "He is the only one from your house to refuse going home, Severus." Looking over Harry's head, he smiled at Snape.

Snape didn't say anything.

There was a small commotion at the door, and Harry turned to look what was going on. Seeing the group of people walk slowly down the aisle almost made his heart stop. His hands grasped the edge of the table, his knuckles going white. "Thank Merlin." It was a soft whisper, choked by the familiar strangled feeling.

Ron's journey towards the head of the Gryffindor table was cut by Hermione rushing to hug him. They stood there, in the middle of the room, holding each other tight. It was clear that at least Hermione was crying.

Looking determined, Arthur Weasley continued his way across the floor, nodding absentmindedly at people who offered their condolences with hushed voices. Right behind him came Bill and George, both looking as grim as their father.

Harry couldn't believe his eyes. He couldn't stop staring at the Weasleys, a lump forming in his throat as he saw Percy stepping into the room, hiding at the back.

His eyes were blurring with unshed tears. Rooted at his seat, he tried to breathe evenly.

"Go to them." Dumbledore's hushed voice came from his right. "We still have some time before we'll start the meeting."

Not bothering to even glance at the Headmaster, Harry pushed his chair back and then walked slowly around the table. He couldn't hurry, not now.

Arthur Weasley's grave nod made one of the tears slip down his cheek. Others followed as Bill offered him his hand without words. By the time George patted his back, Harry couldn't really see anything.
Then Ron and Hermione were there, both holding him tight.

This was the absolutely worst time and place for this but Harry didn't give a damn, holding his friends tighter. Ron was standing awfully still, his eyes bright but he was not crying. Hermione's soft snuffles were the only sound in his world.

Harry wished he could just stay here for the rest of the day; to revel in this moment of shared grief and friendship and forget all about the war. Squeezing his friends one last time, he let go. He couldn't do this now.

Voldemort had made this decision easy. No matter how he hated this, hated the war and his role in the Order, he couldn't even imagine doing anything else but fight right now. It wouldn't matter where he went; these people would still be in danger. They would fight and they would die, and he was determined to be right here by their side when they did.

He pulled back, slowly. Wiping his face, he took a deep breath. "You'd better find seats." His voice sounded too deep even in his own ears.

"Sure." Ron nodded. His expression was calm, no tears on his face. He guided Hermione to sit next to him and his brothers at the Gryffindor table.

Harry walked back to his place at the Head Table, his mind strangely clear.

The silence that had fallen when Harry had walked to greet the Weasleys continued as people all waited for their leader to start the meeting.

"Welcome." Rising to his feet slowly, Dumbledore greeted his Order. "Welcome all."

The familiarity of those words made Harry almost wince. They had been the beginning of everything good for as long as he could really remember. 'Welcome all to another year at Hogwarts.' A warm phrase that had brought him back home for seven years.

People murmured their greetings back, the room echoing with the polite words.

Dumbledore waited until the last sound died before grabbing a glass that had appeared in front of him a moment earlier. "First, I would like to raise my glass for those who have already fought in a war that should never have started." He lifted the glass up. "And to those who have fallen."

Hearing only the humming sound in his head as people everywhere raised their glasses, Harry followed suite. He didn't taste the liquid in his glass, couldn't say if it was pumpkin juice or something else. His grip on the glass was so tight he was stunned it didn't shatter.

He listened half heartedly as the Headmaster continued with his speech. The encouraging phrases were familiar to him, as were the plans.

The Order was gathering here for the first time, but it would also be the only time they would all be called to Hogwarts. No matter how good a stronghold it was, the castle was now and would always be mainly a school. A place of education where generations of wizards and witches had lived their teenage years.

Hogsmeade, the small village that existed mostly to cater the students and the wizards who were passing through and needed to spend time with something familiar, would become the heart of their Order. Though he shouldn't be, Harry was slightly surprised to hear that there were already plans for their new headquarters, and that they would soon be able to gather in Hogsmeade. When he'd been enjoying his last free days, it seemed that the Headmaster had been quite busy planning.
Or maybe the plans had always been there, and he just hadn't looked hard enough to see them.

Dumbledore's speech was long and winding, but for the first time, there were no silly anecdotes or humorous phrases. He simply stated facts, outlining the plans.

It was probably the one thing keeping everyone silent and staring. The Headmaster guiding his flock had disappeared somewhere, and Harry for one could well see how this wizard on his right had been able to battle against more than one Dark Lord.

He simply wished this were enough, knowing it wouldn't be. The churning feeling in his stomach only intensified as Dumbledore seemed to come to the end of his speech.

"Now that the war is upon us, you are all needed. No one's effort is too small." Dumbledore looked around the room, his gaze serious. "Those who can, should stay close to Hogsmeade. Others should make sure your floo works well, but don't forget to put up wards to your fireplace!"

Some people were actually scribbling down notes, making sure they didn't miss any advice. Harry knew he shouldn't have been surprised, but the sight of quills scratching on parchment was somehow absurd.

This was not a class. This was more real than that.

After Dumbledore finished with his speech, some of the older members of the Order took a stand in front of the crowd and gave short reports of the situation with the Death Eaters.

Harry didn't listen to that either. He already knew what was going on, and couldn't concentrate on anything right now. All that mattered was the fact that sooner or later he would have to stand up as well, the mere thought of that making his palms sweat. As Arabella Figg sat down after her short speech, he knew the time was finally here.

There was a moment of excited babbling all around the room. People whispering plans and making decisions.

Waiting for the silence to land again, Dumbledore turned to Harry. Keeping his voice quiet, he said, "You will be staying in Hogsmeade to train them. I believe now would be a good time to say something to your troops." It didn't seem like the slip was accidental.

Until now, it had always been Dumbledore's Order, his small army. It would still be called that, but he would not be the one leading it into the fight.

Harry wasn't surprised. He didn't feel anything as he slowly stood up.

His actions silenced the room better than any charm could have. People were staring at him, waiting for him to say something.

Feeling slightly nauseous, he looked at Ron and Hermione. Then his gaze moved to Arthur Weasley. "People have fought against Voldemort," there were a few gasps in the room at the name, mostly from those who had joined the Order recently, "for a long time. My parents died fighting him. My friends have died fighting him. It's quite probable that many of us will too. But we will not stand back and let him rule our world."

A few cheers. Applauds. They went on for a surprisingly long time.

Harry didn't know why would anyone cheer at that. He'd just said they would die, and people cheered. It was incomprehensible. After the noise died, he went on. "There is a lot of work waiting
for us." More than most people could see. They were a big group of dedicated people, but they'd have to learn how to actually work together.

He kept his gaze away from the Slytherin table and the empty benches around Malfoy and Zabini.

There was an absolute silence in the room.

"We have fought and we have died for decades. Many people remember the first time Voldemort came to power and I've heard that most of you call this the second war against the Dark Lord." Harry nodded at the younger people. "Let's make damn sure there will not be a third one."

With that he sat down, squeezing his sweaty hands together. He'd said all that he wanted to, like in a Quidditch strategy meeting, feeling just as nervous and wondering if anything he'd said made any sense at all.

Unlike in those meetings, where people just nodded and went to work, there was a continuing silence that suddenly ended with loud catcalls and applauds. Some people stood up to cheer, and others quickly followed suit. In a few minutes the Great Hall was back in similar chaos as it had been when they'd started the meeting.

Harry glanced at Dumbledore, waiting for him to restore the order. Seeing the old man just sit there with a benign smile on his lips, he shook his head. If Dumbledore expected him to try to control the crowd now, he would be sorely disappointed. He didn't have anything else to say.

Since everyone was milling around already, Harry stood up. "I do believe our meeting is over." He didn't even try to moderate the sarcasm in his voice.

He stepped away from his chair, squeezing his hand into a fist so that he wouldn't brush it against Snape's back as he passed him by. Then he headed to the crowd, seeking for his friends.

Snape saw the way Harry was immediately surrounded by former Gryffindors. He sat there a moment longer, experiencing a very annoying surge of hesitation and something that tasted awfully like regret.

When the first redhead approached Harry, Snape decided it was time to go. Harry had the Weasleys and either they or Draco Malfoy would make sure he got home safely. There would be family waiting there, Black and Lupin undoubtedly all settled in already. He wasn't needed anymore.

He got up and walked out of the Great Hall, ignoring the very knowing glance Albus cast at him. Down amongst the Order, Harry experienced a moment of panic as people closed in on him. He stood his ground, offering everyone a nod once again. The faint smile that flickered on his lips as Lavender rushed to hug him was real, showing genuine amusement.

Following Lavender came Parvati, who settled for just grinning at him, as did her sister. It was kind of confusing, considering how neither of them had been really friendly with him since the ill fated Yule ball over three years ago.

It was strange, but having to actually form coherent sentences -- even ones filled with all kinds of platitudes -- pulled Harry's attention to the here and now, chasing away the feeling of unreality.

He couldn't pinpoint what exactly had snapped him back to himself, but he definitely knew when he noticed just how much strength he needed to do this.

When a blur of black robes caught his attention.
Watching Snape leave the room quietly, Harry wanted nothing more than to run after him, to say goodbye once again, to hug him. It would make this even more difficult, but he still took a step towards the side door.

Then the crowd enveloped him, and the moment was gone.

Everyone seemed to want to say something to him. Congratulations, condolences, just a stuttered greeting from Blaise Zabini. Most older people wanted to shake his hand, while some of the younger women wrapped their arms around him.

It was slightly unpleasant and awfully crowding, but Harry allowed it. He disentangled from the witches with a few kind words and then went on to the next person needing to have a moment or two with their hero.

"Good to have you back!" Boot exclaimed, shaking Harry's hand vigorously.

Harry nodded, forcing the lie out automatically, "Good to be back." It wasn't. Especially right now.

"Yeah."

The slightly hesitant sound made Harry turn away from Terry Boot. He looked at Ron, suddenly unable to think about anything to say. "Ron." Well, at least he got his name right.

"Harry. I heard you have a great big house in Hogsmeade." It was said with almost a too casual voice, as if Ron didn't really know what to say either.

Nodding, Harry said, "Yes. A great big house." Huge. With lots of space. Lots and lots of space. He had an idea where this was going, and couldn't hide his relief.

Ron shoved his hands into his pockets. "So... It's okay with you if I.... You know? Stay with you? I mean if you have some room to spare."

"Yes!" Harry smiled. It was more than okay. "You know it is. I do. You know?"

They both grinned.

"Don't do anything stupid then, little brother." Cuffing the side of Ron's head, Bill Weasley stepped closer. He didn't look at Harry, keeping his attention on something at the back of the room.

It hurt, especially since there had been a moment two years ago when they had fought side by side, ignoring things like age and experience, both trying to survive and keep the other one alive. Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley, wondering if he'd be as distant as his oldest son.

"Harry! Good to see you." There was no sign of false cheer in Arthur Weasley. "I see my son has already managed to pester you about housing. We have a place to stay, but if you do have the room for him..."

Harry hurried to assure him. "Yes. There's plenty of room for Ron." He didn't want to talk about things like rooms and rent with Mr. Weasley. "For anyone, really."

"Good." Nodding absentmindedly, Arthur stepped next to Bill, his gaze focusing at the back of the room as well. He looked worried. "Good... All right then. Ronald, you have your trunk ready?"

"Yes, dad!" By the suffering sigh, it wasn't the first time Ron's father had asked that. With a last grin at Harry, Ron rushed to get his things.
A few older wizards came to shake Harry's hand, making Harry feel extremely uncomfortable. He didn't want to do this, not in front of the Weasleys to whom he would probably never again look like a hero. It was absurd how that could hurt so much even when he wanted nothing more than to leave that title behind.

As the crowd thinned again, he turned his attention back to Mr. Weasley, opening his mouth to assure him that Ron would be safe with him.

None of the words came out. Mr. Weasley and Bill were both staring over his head towards the doorway, both looking slightly alarmed now.

Harry swallowed and slowly craned his neck to see what had caught their attention.

At first, he couldn't see anything special, just people milling around. Then he shivered as his gaze met with an intense stare that threw daggers at him through the distance.

"Oh no..." There was nothing else he could really say as he saw Percy Weasley there. Unlike the rest of his family, he'd stayed near the doorway the whole time, standing there wrapped in a heavy outer robe.

Percy's expression was full of insane hatred. He stared at Harry for a moment and then turned around, walking out of the room.

It felt like a slap in the face. Harry swallowed hard. A part of him felt like he really did deserve that, the part that would probably forever blame himself for every single death in this absurd war.

"Harry, we..." Arthur looked from the doorway to his son. "He doesn't really know what he is doing." His glance sent Bill after his brother. "I'm sorry."

"No! I'm sorry." Shaking his head, Harry said, "I don't blame him for not wanting to be in the same room with me. Or for blaming me for everything that happened." Why wouldn't he?

Arthur sighed. He couldn't say Harry was wrong. "I'll go and tell Ron we're leaving." At the questioning look, he added, "We really must go now. Just remember that we will be here whenever you need us." It was a promise he intended to keep. Even if he had to resign from his position in the Ministry, he would be here to make sure that the men who had killed his son would pay for their crimes.

It was really hard for Harry to keep a neutral face at that. He finally managed a nod.

"Good bye, Harry Potter." Arthur turned away, walking quickly to the small group next to the door.

Harry followed him with his gaze, feeling completely drained. He saw Mr. Weasley whisper something to Ron before turning to George, who was chatting with Lee Jordan. He noticed there was a stunned expression on Lee's face as he stared at George and wondered what that was about.

He didn't really want to know. There were so many things he had to concentrate on already.

The Order was slowly leaving. Harry looked up at the ceiling that was for once charmed to look like an ordinary ceiling with its rafters and took a deep breath. Somehow it had felt as if there wasn't quite enough air in the room with the crowd here.

"Are you ready to go?"

Not even jumping at Ron's question, Harry smiled. "Yeah." It would be good to be away from the
multitudes of people. The house would be quiet, he hoped. At least he could go to his room and lock
the door and know that no one would bother him. Sirius and Remus would respect his privacy, and
Malfoy...

He groaned, "Oh, crap." How the hell could he have forgotten Malfoy?

Ron stopped fidgeting with his shrunken trunk at the sound of Harry's voice. "What?" He had a bad
feeling about this.

"Ron... About my house." The word still made Harry grimace. His house.

"Yes?" Ron cocked his head. He wondered what the slightly annoyed expression was about. It was
definitely a good thing to own a house in Hogsmeade. A real house! His father had told him all about
it. A few blocks from Honeydukes, in the older -- more respected -- part of the town.

"Like I said, you know you are welcome to stay. But... There are already people living there with
me. Remus and Sirius have a room downstairs." Not that it would matter. They all liked the older
men.

Ron let out a grin. "I don't mind." Once he'd got over the gawking, he'd really started to enjoy Sirius'
presence. The man knew more dirty jokes than anyone.

They could live together. Hell, they should ask Hermione to live with them too. Five Gryffindors
under the same roof? No problem. He'd lived with worse, much worse. Hopefully, they'd even have
a house elf or two so that they wouldn't have to waste time on stupid chores.

"Ron." Not knowing any way to make it easier, Harry drew a deep breath. "I have a lot of room. So
I offered... I offered Draco Malfoy a place to stay."

He cringed at the sudden silence that fell.

Not sure he'd heard right, Ron stared at his friend. There was worry in Harry's eyes, as well as guilt.
So he had heard right. Malfoy. Living with Malfoy. It had to be a joke. Had to be. "Very funny," he
said calmly. "For a moment there I thought you said you're living with Malfoy."

Harry could only nod. He knew words wouldn't be needed.

After a moment, Ron raised his hand to push his hair back from his forehead, the movement half
hearted. "Oh, fuck!"

"I know you hate him, so if it's a problem..." Seeing the strangely empty stare, Harry's voice faded
away. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Ron, but it's his home now as well." He couldn't throw
Malfoy out even if he wanted to.

"Whose home?" Walking quietly to her friends, Hermione blinked as her question made both of
them startle. "Oh, and Harry. Do you mind if I stay with you as well? Terry said you have a big
house in Hogsmeade."

Ron let out a choking sound.

Part 13

Seeing the house made Ron's mouth fall open.
He hadn't said a word since they left Hogwarts, settling for following Harry and Hermione, listening to their chattering absentmindedly. The new house, Hermione's parents' reaction to her staying with Harry and the others, Remus and Sirius sharing a room downstairs, whatever. It didn't register until the moment they actually stopped in front of the enormous building.

The honest astonishment pierced his consciousness like a knife "This is where you... we live?" It was an old two storey house, just like their little hideaway cottage had been. The similarities ended there. Where the cottage had been small and somewhat shabby, this was almost like a miniature manor.

"Yes. Our little palace." There was a hint of unhappy disbelief in Harry's voice. It would definitely take some time for him to get used to such a place.

He knew he should share Ron's delight and wonder. His own house; a place he could really call home and no one would be able to take it away from him. People he loved, Sirius and Remus and Ron and Hermione. He didn't mind Malfoy's presence. At least with the six of them living together, the place would be filled with sounds of life. It wouldn't be an empty and hollow shell.

It felt really stupid to want more; to resent leaving the dungeons behind. Harry didn't want to be greedy, for there had been a time when he'd had nothing at all. Compared to those years, this was the best thing he could have, and maybe it was selfish to want everything when he already had so much.

Ron blinked. The place was huge. He couldn't believe he was actually going to live there. "Wicked!"
It came out quietly, as a formality he had to say. The brief moment of real excitement was already fading into the grey mist.

There were lights on in most of the windows. Sirius was waiting at the hall, standing half hidden by the door, smiling at all three. "Remus is in the living room." He lowered his voice. "He refused to go to bed until you all got home safely." He didn't seem at all surprised to see both Hermione and Ron there.

"Whatever he's telling you, he's lying!" Came the yell from the living room.

Smiling, Harry let Sirius pull him into a brief hug. "Glad you both made it here safely."

"We did." Sirius nodded and then stepped out of the way as Hermione and Ron tried to find a place to leave their shoes in. He fidgeted a little before adding, "The room is great."

Harry smiled slightly. "I thought you and Remus might like it." No matter what was going on in Sirius' head, he wasn't going to pretend those two would need separate rooms. Before there could be any awkward words -- or worse yet, an awkward silence -- he made a gesture at Ron and Hermione. "Come on, let's get you two settled in."

It took a while to tour his friends around the ground floor, both Ron and Hermione making appropriate sounds of awe and Harry managing even a few genuine smiles. The familiar people here were already taking away some of his resentment over what he still considered a ridiculous gesture from the Order.

Hermione was more than happy to stay in the empty room downstairs, casting pleased looks at the large bathroom nextdoors. "This will do just fine!" She put her trunk on the floor before anyone could object.

"Feel free to use the bathroom upstairs if you need to," Harry muttered to Sirius. No matter how smart and balanced Hermione was, she was still a girl, and sometimes it seemed that every girl had a weird attachment to the toilet they used.
Myrtle wasn't the only one who liked to spend forever in the loo.

"Thanks." Planting his hand on Harry's shoulder, Sirius leaned a little closer. "We will."

By mutual agreement, all five Gryffindors stayed downstairs. Harry went through the kitchen cupboards to get them some late dinner.

Swallowing a mouthful of tea, Harry muttered, "So... Malfoy's upstairs then?" He'd already seen the familiar looking shoes in the hallway, but since there was no other trace of him, he had to ask. Ignoring Ron's snort, he kept his eyes on Sirius.

"Yup. He's upstairs." Sirius had been too busy watching the door for Harry to really concentrate on Malfoy; especially since the Slytherin had barely greeted him and Remus before slinking up the stairs.

Harry nodded. "Okay." Refusing to acknowledge the tension practically oozing from Ron, he didn't ask more about Malfoy.

He waited for Sirius to usher Remus to rest and Hermione to disappear into the bathroom before turning back to Ron. "About Malfoy..."

There was a blank look on Ron's face, but he looked so tense Harry was sure he would snap any moment now. Ron took a step back, as if putting distance between him and the whole thing. Even though Harry's first reaction was to let Ron back away and drop the matter, he couldn't. They had to try to make this work, and the only way to do that was to deal with things. Hiding wasn't an option.

Holding his hand on Ron's arm lightly, he said, "Don't. I spoke with him earlier, and he promised me he's not coming after you. He won't even talk to you unless you talk to him first." He remembered the look in Malfoy's eyes as he'd said that and for the first time, he trusted the Slytherin completely.

"I am not afraid of Draco Malfoy." Ron could feel nothing as he said the words out, not even anger. His chest felt tight, cold. He was not afraid of anything.

Harry looked at him curiously, wondering what the tone was about. He felt a bit strange around Ron, as if Ron was somewhere far away. It had made him feel silly on their way from Hogwarts, his thoughts probably due to an overly active imagination. But it had never been as obvious as now. He'd thought Ron would be angry. Mad. But he wasn't; he was indifferent. It was crazy.

Maybe it was Ron's way of dealing with everything. Harry shrugged. "Okay. Let me show you to your room then."

Even though there were two vacant rooms upstairs, Harry had no intention of even suggesting that Ron take the one next to Malfoy's. The farther those two stayed from each other the better, and maybe he should have suggested that Ron stayed downstairs with Sirius and Remus. Too late to do that now; Hermione was already settling in and bringing the whole thing up would just make things so much worse.

He watched Ron's face glow with a silly grin as he showed him the large bedroom that would be his. It made him feel slightly better, like maybe now things would get back to normal.

Saying good night to Ron who was still so amazed by his new lodgings that he couldn't really do more than grin some more brought a wan smile to his lips, but a moment later it was chased away by
Too tired to really even think, Harry walked into his own room. He wished they could have connected to the floo network as well, so he could go to the fireplace and contact Snape. Just to talk to him, to tell him he was all right.

He was still a bit miffed by the trouble they had to go through every time they needed to talk to someone in Hogwarts, but he knew that open floos would be too dangerous. The people in Hogsmeade were being awfully nice about the whole thing. No one had complained about the shutdown, at least so that he'd hear.

It made everyone's life difficult from now on, he knew that, but he couldn't really concentrate on that now. All he knew was that he would really miss Snape.

Scratching his head, he went to grab his toiletries from his trunk.

Ron had almost a heart attack as he stepped into the bedroom that would now be his. All his. It was huge! Enormous. And the bed was about twice the size the one he'd had in the dormitory.

It was weird to think that he was really going to live here all by himself. His own place.

Grinning, he put his bags on the floor. With a muffled yelp of glee, he rushed to the bed and bounced on it a few times.

This was so great! So damn great! Cool! Wonderful! Excellent! Wicked! Bloody brilliant! He lay on his bed, the grin on his face hurting his jaws, hands squeezed into fists.

He didn't want to think about anything but the house right now. His room, his bed. His life that was looking really good right now. There was nothing wrong with it. Nothing at all.

He'd survived this far with no thoughts about anything unpleasant.

It was late, and he'd been up since dawn, but he didn't feel like going to bed yet. His mind was too full of thoughts, scattering around aimlessly, all screaming for his attention and yet all escaping as soon as he tried to focus on any. He knew he'd just toss and turn if he tried to sleep now.

Ron got up and padded to his trunk. It was probably best if he at least tried to put all his stuff into the wardrobe. He unpacked in silence. Shoved the once again shrunk trunk on the back of a shelf and then closed the wardrobe.

He was still not tired. Didn't feel like taking a shower either, fearing that he'd wake someone up if he started to run water at this hour. Wasn't the room where Sirius and professor Lupin lived right below the bathroom? He couldn't really remember, and didn't want to find out by disturbing them.

Maybe he should go and get a snack. For a brief moment he wondered if he should ask Harry's permission first. Then he shrugged the thought off. Harry had said it was his home too.

Determined not to feel all weird in this very large and probably very expensive house, Ron slipped into the corridor.

It was dark there, and Ron muttered softly, "Lumos."

He looked around, still a bit disoriented. The cottage had been so damn tiny compared to this. Spotting the staircase, he took a step towards it and then froze. He didn't feel hungry after all.
The door to Harry's room was closed, so he didn't think he should go there. His friend had looked awfully tired when they'd come home earlier. Tired and sad. He definitely didn't want to think about that right now.

One of the other doorways was open, leading into an empty room. Sneaking around in silence, Ron went to investigate. It was another bedroom, almost as lavishly decorated as his was.

This place was really insane. Had the Order really bought this just for Harry? What on earth had they been thinking; that he'd live here all alone? It made him shudder. He wouldn't want a place like this just for himself. It would be too much, too overwhelming.

Alienating.

Leaving the empty room, Ron returned to the hallway.

There was one more door; one that was firmly shut. It was somehow mocking him, the wooden frames shaking with silent laughter. He didn’t know why it seemed like that, but the door leading to the second bedroom back at the cottage had looked the same.

Ron tried to push the thought away, not really succeeding in it. This was something he had never been able to ignore.

He knew exactly who would be there. Hiding. Harry had said he would not harass him, would not even talk to him unless he wanted him to.

He definitely didn't want that. Never wanted to see Malfoy again, never wanted to hear his voice. Felt almost sick thinking that he would once again have to share the house with him. Wished Malfoy were continents away.

Moving without a thought, he stepped closer to that door.

Anger was a strange thing. It could fill you until you burned, radiated the madness of the rage. It was an all consuming emotion that fed from all the others.

Malfoy.

Ron hated him with everything he was. Hated the sneer, hated the laughter. Hated even the way he had looked like in the cottage those last days, when he'd almost seemed sorry for what he'd done. Hated the brittle pride on his face when he sat there in the Great Hall, the heir of Malfoy all alone.

He took another step towards the closed door.

There had never been anyone else he could hate as much as he hated Malfoy. There would never be anyone.

Malfoy. The name itself made him grimace with disgust.

All those years suffering from Malfoy's taunts and cruel tricks. All those weeks watching him play his sick game.

Games and tricks, that was all he was. Everything about him was rodden. Foul. He and his kind would do nothing but destroy everything they touched.

Ron didn't want to see that. Hated the mere idea of having to watch another game. Maybe the git would live here, but he wasn't going to talk to him ever again. Wouldn't even want to be in the same
room with him or see him.

"Alohomora." Barely registering his own voice, Ron stared as the door opened in front of him.

He had no idea what he was doing. Malfoy was the last person he wanted to see, and yet here he was, walking into his room. He wondered if he was cursed somehow, under the *imperius*, for he couldn't stop.

Draco looked up from the book he'd been reading, his wand ready. He'd been expecting for something like this, but seeing Weasley was still something akin to shock. Especially when there was such a strange expression on his face. Not anger or hatred. Nothing.

He had given Potter his word to stay away from Weasley, and he'd intended to keep his word no matter what, even if it meant he stayed in his room for the time being. At least that had been his excuse to stay here for the evening. It wasn't because he didn't want to face professor Lupin whose secret he'd once spread around the school or Sirius Black who seemed like a normal person until you looked into his eyes.

The day had already been full of tension and surprises with Blaise's grinning face greeting him across the table and Dumbledore clearly bringing Harry to the limelight, but this was something he couldn't just watch. Staying in shadows wasn't an option here.

"Weasley."

The word sounded loud in Ron's ears, even though it was muttered quietly. Ron could only stare. His wand was back under his robes, and he could see Malfoy put his down on the small table.

So now he wasn't even worth being afraid of. He wanted to laugh, but couldn't.

His lips moved slowly, as if not sure of how to form the word. "Malfoy." He felt like he was in a dream, under water.

It was such a familiar feeling.

For days now, it had been a constant companion; muffling everything real. The only thing keeping him whole, keeping him from falling apart.

Surrounding himself in a calm shell that didn't let anything past it, Ron had lived through hell. Stayed by Charlie's bedside when Bill had fallen asleep after his attempts to break the last curses. Made sandwiches for Ginny when his mother had been too exhausted to cook. Listened to George's feeble jokes as if they were indeed funny.

He had never faltered, never let go of what he used to be. His world had fallen apart in one single moment, but he refused to let go of the shards, knowing he would crumble into nothing if he did.

It was now suddenly like walking on thin ice. The shell cracking, the unnamed, unbearable choking emotion fighting to get out, oozing through the cracks like some kind of a dark creature, almost suffocating him.

Putting the book down, Draco stood up. He had no idea why Weasley would be here, had no idea what to say to him. Not only did he feel bound by his promise to Potter, but the guilt over what his father had done had all but drowned the desire to make nasty comments or the even simpler desire for Weasley's body.

He simply waited for Weasley to say something, prepared to face any accusations he might want to
The taste of bile rising to his mouth, Ron stared at Malfoy. He hated the hesitation, the completely blank look on him. The familiar sneer would have been so much easier to face.

Draco didn't say anything. He simply stood there.

A soft growl escaped Ron. He didn't know what to do. He hated everything so much right now and nothing was right in the world. Everything had turned into ashes, and he needed a lifeline, something he could depend on.

He didn't even have to think about it. His hand was already squeezing into a fist. It wasn't at all difficult to swing it.

The sound of his knuckles hitting Malfoy's chin was surprisingly loud in the small room. A dull ache spread over his hand, but he couldn't really feel it. His world was a whirlwind of chaos and pain deeper than that of the flesh.

There was no anger in Draco's eyes. He raised his fingers to touch his bruised mouth before nodding slightly. Then he slammed his own fist into Ron's face. No guilt could stop that, after all, he had a promise to keep.

A rivulet of blood ran down from the corner of Ron's mouth.

"You hit me?" Ron didn't really recognize his own voice. How could he sound so damn fragile? He repeated, "You hit me," unable to know if it was a question or a plea.

"Yes." Draco nodded.

There was a moment of silence. Then a soft whisper, "I hate you."

"Yes."

Later on, neither of them could tell which one had taken the first step. Suddenly, Ron was holding the front of Malfoy's robes in his fists and Draco's fingers were buried in his hair. Pulling each other close, they met in a kiss that was nothing like a gentle caress.

Ron was completely lost with his world falling apart, and this burning sensation was the only glimpse of reality he could find. Nothing felt like this, not the sad atmosphere back home, not the solemn Order meeting. Not his friends. Muttering, "Fuck!" as his knees gave in, he pulled Malfoy down to the floor with him.

He felt his robes tear, but didn't care. Instead he took a good hold on Malfoy's robes and returned the favor. The hands on his body were moving softly, gently but he wanted none of that. Squeezing Malfoy's arms so hard it had to hurt, he pulled him closer to a violent, bruising kiss.

"Weasley..." Draco growled. He lifted his head a little to look into his eyes, stunned by what he saw there.

Rage and fear mingled with desperate need. It was more than lust or desire. Those could easily be denied. Not this. He kissed Weasley again, possessing his mouth. He could taste a hint of something sweet like strawberry jam, tea and then blood as he nipped his lips.

The sound escaping Ron was hoarse.
He clawed at Malfoy's robes, his fingers grasping the expensive material and ripping it. Feeling elated at the thought of destroying something that had probably cost more than all the clothes he'd ever owned together, he reached out again. Then he was lost, feeling only warm skin under his touch.

Ignoring the sounds of tearing cloth, Draco pushed at Weasley, rolling him on his back. Mouth still on his, he started to push his robes off. When after minutes of struggle he was still clothed, he decided that for once, Weasley had made a good decision and tore the robes off as well.

Bits of black cloth flew across the room as both tried to get rid of the robes, tearing into fabric and skin alike. Draco was more familiar with this kind of foreplay and he didn't even try to get Weasley naked. No need for that now. As long as there was plenty of naked skin for him to play with and certain body parts at hand, he was happy.

"Oh.... fuck..." Thumping his head against the floor, Ron closed his eyes as those damn clever fingers wormed inside his trousers, grasping him in a firm grip.

The sound coming from Malfoy closely resembled laughter. Eyes snapping open, Ron could see wonder on his face. It almost made him want to punch him again. Instead of letting the rage rule over the desperate lust, he simply ripped Malfoy's tailored trousers into shreds.

It was complete madness, everything else fading away as the hunger grew inside him. He didn't flinch back as he felt Malfoy's hard prick, curling his fingers around it. It felt strangely alien and familiar at the same time, hot and hard, alive in his hand.

Ron could feel Malfoy's hand move on him, the slow tight grip making his hips roll upwards. He couldn't do anything but lie here, burying himself into that touch.

Lips touched his again. Softly, then with force. He could feel teeth nipping him again, and he groaned into that mix of pain and pleasure.

Everything was like that. So awful. So glorious. Ron couldn't focus on anything but Malfoy's touch, his own arms moving to wrap around Malfoy's back, fingers clawing at the soft skin.

The frantic touches were answered by others. Letting go of his prick after one last squeeze, Malfoy kept kissing his lips, his jaw, nipping the side of his throat. The loss of touch made Ron gasp out curses, but the way Malfoy was so clearly moving back towards what really mattered made him silent again.

Torn cloth got in Draco's way, but he didn't care. He let his lips and fingers brush against every bit of naked skin he could reach as he slithered down Weasley's body.

There were red marks forming on Ron's chest, small wounds from scraping fingernails, bruises that were shaped like handprints. Malfoy let his gaze slide over those marks to meet Ron's glazed eyes.

Slowly, he lowered his head to take his prick into his mouth.

Ron closed his eyes, banging his head back against the floor again. This was familiar, the wet heat surrounding him.

He'd be glad to drown there. Without even thinking what he was doing, he grabbed those sweaty strands of blond hair and guided Malfoy to take him in deeper.

The world was such a simple place, existing only in lips that moved up and down his prick. There was nothing else, no thoughts, no touches. So hot, soft, the tongue twirling against his skin, making him let out soft whimpers that vanished into the nothingness surrounding him.
Lifting his hips, Ron tightened his hold on Malfoy's hair. It wasn't enough. The slow steady rhythm was making him lose his mind. He needed more, needed it now, and his fingers hurt from holding Malfoy's hair so hard.

The fingers playing on the base of his prick, cupping his balls, moved to touch him higher, disappearing into Malfoy's mouth alongside his hardness. Ron didn't have time to even wonder what they were doing before they were moving again, down this time.

His eyes opened wide at the first hesitant touch. The moan escaping him came out without words, even though his mind yelled 'No!' The hesitation lasted only for a moment. Then the touch firmed, pressed against him harder and slipped in.

Ron panted out his breaths, completely shocked. Malfoy was pushing a finger up his arse? The touch moved away and then returned. Oh, fuck, yes he was.

The touch sent shivers up his spine. His mind was screaming that it was wrong, degrading, and he shouldn't let Malfoy do anything like that. It was taking something away from him, leaving him utterly empty.

Draco planted a few kisses on Weasley's thigh as he heard a keening wail echo in the room. He paused for a moment and then bit down on the place he'd kissed, enjoying the way Weasley made another desperate sound. It didn't sound anything like the word stop. Or no.

He didn't know if this was lust or desperation or insanity, and quite frankly, he didn't care. Not right now.

Biting Weasley's inner thigh again, he pushed another saliva coated finger in. It didn't matter that the grip on his hair tightened even more. They both needed this.

Ron squirmed, not knowing if he was trying to escape or invite Malfoy in deeper. The mouth that was nibbling its way back to his groin was maddeningly clever, agonizingly slow on its journey. He wanted to thrust back into that wet cavern, at the same time needing to move against the invading touch that was stretching and even painful, especially when it moved. Just. Like. That.

He groaned when the pain lanced through him again. It was insane, his whole body was on fire with a mixture of pain and pleasure, but he reveled in the sensations, 'cause he could feel. He even welcomed the agony.

Some small part of his mind was screaming at him, ordering him to stop this right now. He didn't want this. Didn't want to do this with Malfoy of all people. He couldn't stop even if he wanted to.

When Malfoy slithered back up his body, he knew what would come. He reveled in the thought even though it froze him. It was wrong and disgusting, but he couldn't help craving that; to be so completely possessed by someone.

He looked up at Malfoy, wishing he could see the usual sneer instead of the rather hazy look in the grey eyes. "Malfoy..." Moving out of control now, he spread his legs and pulled him closer. He hated himself for it, but would hate Malfoy even more when this was all over.

Draco felt the strong thighs squeeze him tight and thrust against Weasley. He didn't know what he expected from him, but wasn't about to do anything but what he was already doing. He was tempted, sorely tempted, but Potter -- not to mention his godfather, Remus Lupin, Granger, all the older Weasleys and probably Snape as well -- would kill him if he took such advantage of him now.

And damn it all, he would do it right now. He'd push Weasley's legs even wider and then sink into
that tightness. He would claim him and shag him until he screamed. If only Weasley would ask him with plain words and he had lubricant or even some hand cream potion. If only he wasn't about to come in a few seconds anyway.

"Yes..." Thrusting again, he grabbed a hold on Weasley's hair and yanked his head back. Keeping the grip tight, he lowered his head to kiss his throat. Then he bit down. Hard.

Howling, Ron arched into the bite. He couldn't stop the noises escaping him as Malfoy bit him again, rubbing his prick against his. Fingernails leaving bloody trails on Malfoy's back, he pushed up, trying to get as close to him as possible.

Another bite on the soft side of his throat and Ron convulsed, coming hard. He didn't scream, only strangled whimpers escaped him.

He lay there, completely still. He barely even registered the way Malfoy thrust against him. World was once again blurring around the edges, almost as if he was drifting away. Far away again.

"Oh, fuck, Weasley." Groaning the name out, Draco came. Riding the waves of ecstasy, he held onto the redhead, mumbling incoherent words. Still breathing hard, he slumped on Ron, planting a soft kiss on the reddened skin of his throat.

That gentle touch brought the world crashing down on Ron.

He lay still for a moment, cringing as Malfoy's exhales tickled his neck. For the first time, he really registered the hardness of the floor beneath him and the warmth on top of him. The cooling wetness squashed between him and Malfoy, the bare, sweaty skin against his.

Rolling over, he shoved Malfoy away from him. This couldn't be real! He couldn't have! There was no fucking way in hell he could have done this right now!

"What is it?" The post orgasmic lassitude was already spreading through Draco, and the way he'd been rudely dumped on his arse was a very unwelcome awakening. "Are you all right, Weasley?"

The way Malfoy was actually being nice made Ron gag. He couldn't say anything, for the only answer to the question would be no. It would probably come out as a scream.

He scrambled to his feet, not able to take his gaze away from Malfoy. The remains of his robes fell on the floor, but he didn’t care. He saw the way Malfoy was about to say something else and turned around and ran.

Stumbling out of the room, Ron looked around the hallway like a wild animal in panic. He needed to run somewhere, needed to escape. Nothing else mattered.

"Ron?" Harry asked, peeking from his room. He'd heard the noise coming from Malfoy's room and wondered if he'd heard correctly.

He didn't have to wonder now as he saw Ron stagger to the hallway half naked.

It was shocking to realize that his friend had actually shagged Malfoy now, after all the fighting. After what Malfoy's father had done to his family. Seeing the lost expression on Ron's face made Harry shiver. He'd never seen him like this. "Hey, Ron? Is everything all right?"

The only answer he got was a broken sob. Ron looked like he was going to collapse any moment. As Harry took a hesitant step forward, he sank down on the floor, crawling down the hall on his hands and knees as if unable to stop.
Harry followed Ron, kneeling next to him and holding him tight as he started to cry. He could feel the cold clamminess of Ron's skin, the scent of sex and sweat almost overpowering him. It didn't matter. This was the first time he'd seen Ron show such naked emotion and he couldn't help wondering if he'd allowed himself to cry after they'd come back from the cottage.

He was certain Ron couldn't even hear the questions he murmured out quietly, but it didn't matter. Grieving like this had to be better than not really being fully here.

Footsteps echoed in the staircase. Hermione hesitated as she saw the strange sight in front of her, mouth opening as the open door to Malfoy's room revealed just what had happened. "Harry?"

Mouthing, "It's all right," Harry shook his head, keeping his gaze on Hermione. He didn't think she could really help now.

He didn't know what exactly had happened, but after hearing the sounds coming from Malfoy's room, he could make a few educated guesses. He wasn't going to say anything until he knew more. The way Ron had clearly gone to see Malfoy and not the other way around meant something.

Hermione seemed to understand, even though she didn't look too happy about it. She tried to offer him a slight smile that ended up looking more like a grimace. Then she turned around and promptly stumbled onto Remus Lupin who was leaning heavily against the railing as he was climbing up the stairs.

"I think it would be best if you went to bed." His voice was quiet, but the words came out firmly. Seeing the relieved look on Hermione's face, he added, "Both of you."

"I..." Harry started to protest, but then realized he wasn't sure he could help either.

He didn't know what to do or say. The grief so evident in Ron was too overwhelming, it would grab a hold of him and take him away as well. It would do no good to either of them.

Remus walked closer to them, his gait slower than usual, as if he was still recovering from the after effects of the full moon even though it had been days ago. He looked determined to deal with this. "I will take care of him." He cast a look at the open doorway through which he could clearly see Draco Malfoy standing in the middle of his bedroom, looking uncharacteristically lost. "I'll take care of them both."

"Okay." It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but eventually Harry was able to let go of Ron. He hated leaving him like this, but knew he didn't really have a choice.

He trusted Remus' opinion on this.

Waiting long enough to see Remus put his hand on Ron's shoulder, Harry went to his room. He closed the door firmly behind him and then sagged against it, suddenly exhausted.

How the hell could things turn like this again? Everything was already so damn miserable and now this. They had all suffered, were all broken, and now they had to carry each other through all this pain. It made him feel so damn empty inside.

Glad he'd already been through his evening routines in the bathroom, Harry shrugged off his robe and dropped it on the floor. His trousers followed. Not bothering to actually pick them up, he crawled into bed.

Eyes closed, he simply waited.
There were sounds coming from the other side of the wall. Harry couldn't hear any words, but recognized the cadence of Remus' voice, the calm and measured tones he had used years ago in Hogwarts. He was glad he couldn't hear any words, he couldn't handle them right now.

When he heard Ron's voice raise up in a keening wail, he grabbed his wand and cast a silencing charm around his bed. All sounds were cut immediately, and he was wrapped in a quiet cocoon. It was probably at least a bit dangerous to shut himself off the rest of the world like this, but right now it was better than listening to Ron.

Waving his wand again, Harry surrounded himself in darkness. He closed his eyes and tried to get a good position on the bed.

He hated the silence, not used to it. The only time in his life he hadn't heard the sounds of other people breathing in the room during the night time had been when he had been living at Privet Drive. Sleeping alone in his cupboard or in Dudley's second bedroom had been filled with a kind of relief and loneliness, and now all that remained was the sad feeling of missing company. Missing the other Gryffindors, missing Snape.

Harry sighed. Everything had changed once again, and in his opinion to the worse. The battles were still ahead of them, but they were already scarred, all of them. He had to wonder if any of them would live through this war even relatively sane. If they indeed survived.

Probably. No matter how bad things looked, most people would manage to pull through. Like those who had fought the first war against Voldemort. None had got away from it unscathed, but they could deal with most of the things life threw at them. Some with more help than others, but they managed.

Falling asleep felt as distant as on most nights when he'd ended up walking through the corridors at Hogwarts, but he refused to remove the silencing charm and get up. This was his life now; his responsibility to be able to deal with things even if that meant giving the unpleasant duties to someone else. Remus would deal with Ron and Malfoy and tomorrow, he'd talk to his friends.

Harry pulled the blanket tighter around him. His first night in this bed, his bed, in his own house. It felt strange, and foreign, and so unbelievably empty.

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**Part 14**

The scent of fresh coffee with a hint of cardamom was tickling Harry's nose, bringing a grin to his lips as he walked down the stairs.

He'd woken up early, feeling completely disoriented. It was strange to wake up in an unfamiliar bed, especially with no sounds in the room.

It wasn't as if Snape snored, he usually just breathed evenly, the sound having become as familiar as the soft coughs and mutters he'd heard in the Gryffindor tower for years. This silence was quite unnerving. Opening his eyes, Harry had almost yelped when he'd seen the strange room, wondering where the hell was he.

Then he'd remembered.

This was home now. Smile turning crooked at the silly thought, he'd gone through his morning routines, casting a worried look at Ron's door and deciding against going there until the door was opened.
He didn't linger in the bathroom, startled by his very chatty reflection. After a few comments, he'd decided to ask Snape for the charm to stop the damn mirror from chattering about his appearance.

It didn't take long to get dressed, and then he was almost ready to face this day.

Following his nose, he padded across the small hallway towards the kitchen. Coffee was a homey scent somehow. Sirius always insisted on it early in the morning, saying that nothing else could really wake him up.

Harry was still smiling as he pushed the dining room door open, prepared to see his godfather sitting there with his feet on the table, a cup of coffee in his hand. What he saw was definitely not what he'd thought.

His gaze fixed first on Draco Malfoy who was holding a cup of tea as if it was a lifeline, a mix of worry and determination on his face. It was a surprise to see him here right now, after what had happened last night, but then again it was Malfoy. Maybe Harry should have expected it.

He didn't know if it was Malfoy pride or something Remus had said, but he was actually glad the Slytherin was here now. Then he looked at the others and all thoughts of Malfoy escaped him.

Sipping from his cup, Sirius was leaning back on his chair, his feet firmly on the floor. Next to him, Remus was trying not to laugh as he poured himself some tea. A scrawny young house elf was carrying a tray towards the table. Behind him, another house elf was clearly supervising his movements, glaring at him.

"Eppy?" Harry grinned as she turned her glare at him, genuinely happy to see her again. Realizing he'd completely forgot to ask about the possibility of her coming to work to them, he pushed back a twinge of guilt.

It seemed Dumbledore was still one step ahead of him.

"Can Eppy get you something?" Her voice was just as whiny as he remembered. It also took a while before she managed to blurt out, "Sir."

"Maybe some toast. Thank you Eppy." Barely keeping the smile off his face, Harry sat down next to Sirius.

She glared at him for a moment and then wobbled out of the room, the young house elf following her without words.

As soon as the kitchen door slammed shut, Remus let out a chuckle. "I see you have already met Eppy." He cast a knowing look at Sirius, who was relaxing slightly.

"She was there at the cottage." Had it only been a little over a week since they came back from their little hideaway? To Harry, it felt like eternity, as if the months they had stayed there had only been a dream. "How did she get here?"

"You must ask her. She was already making breakfast when we got here." Remus grinned. "She sure is something. Told Sirius to take his feet off the table and he obeyed immediately."

Looking embarrassed, Sirius muttered, "Well I can't really talk back to someone that old."

The door opened again, and the young house elf scurried to the table carrying a plate of toast. He looked nervous as he planted the plate in front of Harry and then scurried back into the kitchen without saying anything.
"Who's that?" Harry had never seen him before, not even when visiting Dobby in the kitchens.

"He? I think he's Bob. Or something."

Remus swatted at Sirius' arm. "Bobbler." He saw the slight smile and knew that the offhand remark had been completely intentional to irritate him. It was a relief in a way. If his friend continued to treat him like he was made of glass, he would scream.

"Like I said. Bob."

That lead to a small scuffle that didn't end until Hermione walked into the room. Harry sat sipping at his tea, smiling at the very loud Gryffindor behavior.

He had missed that as well.

More tea and toast was soon delivered, and after a very disapproving glance from Eppy, Sirius and Remus settled down to eat. Harry muttered some introductions, deciding to tell more stories about Eppy and her constant disapproval when the house elf wasn't around.

The younger house elf barely stopped to nod before scurrying away looking more or less terrified. Eppy on the other hand banged a plate of toast on the table and glared.

"You will be paying them for their work, right Harry?" Hermione sounded uncomfortable. She had never grown accustomed to house elves and their eager way of serving, and the very grumpy demeanor of this particular house elf didn't encourage her to believe that it was all right to have someone work for her without some kind of compensation.

Eppy's glare focused on Hermione, her ears twitching jerkily. "Eppy doesn't need pay." She sounded offended at the very thought. After a prolonged pause, she added, "Miss."

"But..." Seeing that the glare was definitely getting darker, Hermione nodded and accepted the toast without any further words.

"It takes a while to get used to her, but she really isn't bad." Harry remembered how the house elf had acted the last time he'd seen her and was glad she was here to make their lives a bit more complicated with her grumbling. He forced himself to cast a look at Malfoy, who was doing an excellent job mimicing a statue. "Right, Malfoy?"

An awkward silence fell in the dining room as everyone turned to glance at Malfoy and then tried to look like they weren't staring.

"Yes." It was clear that Draco had no idea what was expected of him, but he nodded anyway. "She is an... intriguing person." Not that he'd ever noticed house elves for their personality, but Eppy was indeed someone he couldn't ignore.

Buttering another piece of toast, Sirius muttered, "You don't say."

Even Hermione seemed to find that amusing, though the looks she cast at Malfoy were barely above freezing.

Breakfast was definitely different from the one served in the Great Hall. It was actually nice to sit around the small table and listen to Remus and Hermione engage in polite small talk. Harry was glad to just sit back and watch, knowing there was no one staring at him or assessing him. A refreshing change.
It gave him hope that things would somehow be all right. Maybe not perfect, but close enough for him to focus on the things he really needed to worry about; the war, the Order. It would be too easy to get lost in everything that was so wrong with his friends or his life and he couldn't afford that right now.

Harry smiled, relaxing more, and then almost choked on his tea as the door banged open, the sound reminding him of Snape.

In his corner of the table, Malfoy seemed to shrink a little.

"Good morning, Ronald." Remus' voice was soft and gentle. "Come on, sit down." He gestured at an empty seat between him and Hermione, as if it had been left there just for Ron.

"Harry. Hermione." Nodding at both of his friends, Ron walked to the empty seat, not looking at anyone for more than a few seconds.

Everyone muttered their greetings back.

It was uncomfortable for a moment, when no one knew what to really say. Harry could see Hermione glance at Ron with a worried expression on her face, but she didn't break the silence either.

When the door banged open to show Eppy bring the morning's paper in, Ron jumped and then gaped at the house elf. The smile on his face was faint, but genuine. "Eppy!"

Grumbling something from under her breath, she slammed the paper on the table and then pushed a cup a little closer to Ron.

The way Ron shook his head slightly made Harry feel a lot better. Even though his friend didn't exactly look happy, he didn't look like everything he said and did was false anymore.

"Tea? Or would you prefer coffee again?" There was no trace of awkwardness in Sirius as he reached out for the pot planted in front of him. He and Ron had got along well ever since the unfortunate rush under the Womping Willow, and they had always seemed to bond over food.

That hadn't changed. "Coffee, please." Nose twitching, Ron reached out for the cup and held it steady as Sirius poured the steaming liquid. "Thanks."

The easy mood was definitely gone, but everyone seemed to do their best not to acknowledge the fact. After a few minutes, when the house elves were once again puttering around, Draco pushed his chair back, getting to his feet. "Thank you," he mumbled with his gaze focused on the easiest target who happened to be Eppy, almost incredulous of the fact that he was actually thanking someone equivalent to a household item.

"Malfoy." It was irritating that Harry didn't know what the hell had happened between Malfoy and Ron last night, but considering how Sirius hadn't maimed the Slytherin, he could bet it wasn't completely Malfoy's doing.

Startled, Draco looked up from the floor and managed a small nod. "Potter." Straightening himself, he cast a brief look around the table. "Granger. Mr. Black. Professor Lupin."

There was an encouraging look in Lupin's eyes.

Draco sighed. It was clear what was expected of him and since the werewolf was living with Potter's godfather, his wish was kind of his command. Keeping his voice as toneless as possible, he muttered,
"Weasley."

Ron jolted as he heard his name said out loud and then cast a highly suspicious look at Malfoy. He could see no laughter on his face, but that didn't really mean anything. The calm grey eyes were measuring him, and he was sure that if he looked into them for too long, it would lead to a fight.

He was so tired of fighting with Malfoy, he was so damn tired of being angry all the time.

"Malfoy," he said.

Without any delays, Draco walked out of the dining room, his steady footsteps echoing in the house as he obviously headed straight to the stairs.

Ron let out a deep breath.

Responding to Malfoy was definitely not a peace offering, but there had been no real anger in his voice either.

"How are you doing, Ronald?"

Smiling wearily at the way Remus sounded awfully like his father, Ron said, "Better." He didn't look at his friends saying that. He could see that there was genuine worry in Remus' eyes, and added slowly, "I still... miss Fred but I don't want to kill Ma... anyone. So I'd say I'm doing better."

Hermione let out a slight sniffle but hid it well by fussing over her tea.

When no one really commented on what he'd said, Ron cast a brief look at Harry and then grabbed a piece of toast.

"So we're all going to be okay?"

Stunned by Harry's hesitant question, Ron looked back up. There were so many things they hadn't spoken of hanging between them, but to this there was only one real answer. "Yeah. We're all going to be okay."

At least he hoped they would be. Remus had spent hours listening to him and then talking quietly, but he still had no idea what last night had been about. All he knew was that his whole body ached and that he hurt even more inside. He missed his family. He missed Fred.

And it had really been all right to admit that he was indeed grieving. That didn't mean that he wasn't a little ashamed of what had happened last night, but he had the feeling that it was going to be fine.

Refusing to dwell on Malfoy or what had happened -- even though Remus would undoubtedly want to talk about that with him later on -- Ron drank his coffee. He was going to have breakfast now and that was it. Nothing more.

Harry watched Ron eat, wondering if he should somehow get involved with the mess his friend had got himself into. He had first hand experience of guilt and sorrow and madness, but he didn't think his input would help anyone.

It was too close to him, he could feel all the raw emotions tingling on his skin.

Painful as it was, he had to admit that it was best if he didn't even try to deal with Ron's problems. He had enough problems on his own, going to Hogwarts to meet with Dumbledore seeming like the least of them.
A slight touch on his arm made him almost yelp, and he he turned to see Remus' serious expression. Mouthing silently, "It will be all right," Remus patted his arm gently before offering him more tea. Harry smiled at him beatifically, glad that he didn't have to deal with Ron's confusion.

When he put the teapot down, Harry mouthed in return, "Thank you!" Remus would take care of whatever was going on with Ron; he trusted Remus and knew he'd do what was best for his friend. Harry was simply going to eat his breakfast and then head to Hogwarts for a private meeting with Dumbledore. He had a hunch his days of wondering what to do were about to end.

The house elves brought more toast and once again everyone concentrated on the food. Eppy glowered at everyone, especially Ron and then slammed another pot of the cardamom-scented coffee in front of Sirius.

Sirius smiled at her, the expression making him look years younger. "Thank you, Eppy." In his youth, he'd always used flirting to hide his confusion. It had always worked with professor McGonagall, turning the stern look into an exasperated smile, so he figured he should at least try.

He saw Eppy's ears twitch with annoyance, but the glare wasn't as deadly as it had been earlier. The house elf muttered slightly to herself as she left the room. "Always the charmer." Shaking his head, Remus glanced at Sirius. He should have known that would happen.

Sirius grinned, feeling ridiculously proud of himself. "You should know."

Then he realized that the teenagers were all staring at him. He coughed, trying hard to ignore the way Harry's eyes were twinkling with merriment. Lifting the cup to his lips, Sirius turned his attention back to the Daily Prophet he'd grabbed earlier.

The next moment his cup clattered on the table, spilling coffee on the clean tablecloth. The whole room reverbarated with his angry cry, "Those miserable bastards!"

His yell could probably have been heard back in Hogwarts.

It was quiet in the dungeons, the thick stone walls keeping out all the bustling sound from the upper levels of the castle.

After yesterday's excitement, Snape hadn't felt like going to the Great Hall for breakfast. It was still summer vacation, so Dumbledore couldn't insist on his presence. He preferred eating here where he didn't have to be courteous to colleagues.

He'd been up for a while now. It had taken him some time to fall asleep, and when he finally had, he hadn't slept that well. Probably because of the heat.

Refusing to even consider it was because he was sleeping alone again, Snape had stormed into the shower and stood there for a long time. Enjoying the fact that there was no one to harass him or crowd him. It was bliss.

Feeling grumpier than in a long time, he'd finally emerged to his living room, definitely not in the mood to go to the Great Hall for breakfast. If there had been students around, it would have been different; at least then he could have taken his bad mood on some idiot breaking rules.

House elves were always accomondating, and he didn't even bother to intimidate the one bringing
him the breakfast tray. He simply shooed him off and sat down, pouring himself some tea before grabbing the newspaper.

Snape squinted his eyes as he took in the first paragraph on the front page. The small movement made him look even angrier than usual. Here, in the silence of his rooms, he didn't have to school his expression at all so he could allow the worry accompany the anger.

'The true story of Harry Potter, the greatest hero of our time!' The header made Snape snort.

So this was what it would be like. Now that Harry was seen as an adult, he'd be the subject of more intrusive articles. The reporters would probably do anything to get a story about him.

He was a bit surprised that there was nothing about the meeting last night. Maybe the wards set around the school had indeed kept the reporters out. They'd get to the story soon enough, he thought. They always did.

Spreading the Daily Prophet on the table, Snape started to read.

By the time he finished with the main article and the smaller ones on page four and seven, he wasn't angry anymore. He was seething with rage, his body tingling with the need to destroy things. Not only because of the condescending way the article had been written, but also because of the contents of the story.

He wondered if it was true; that Harry's relatives truly were the worst kinds of Muggles and that they had abused him as a child, that the rumors circulating in school were actually accurate describing the desolate childhood of...

Snape squeezed the paper in his hands. He wouldn't let his anger burn through him before he had the chance to talk to Harry.

It could all be just a fabrication. There were probably stupid pig headed Muggles in Harry's past, but he doubted they had actually mistreated him. A cupboard under the stairs? That had to be some kind of an inside joke. And the obese boy trying to hide behind his even more obese father in the picture, he was probably suffering from some kind of a glandular problem. Not a great pampered bully.

Because it couldn't be true. If it was, Harry wouldn't be sane. He'd be a suicidal wreck using alcohol and drugs to escape the madness of his life.

Snape knew Harry didn't like his relatives and yet spent every summer with them. Surely Albus would have given him a place to stay if Dursleys really were such monsters!

He looked at the article again, knowing that Albus Dumbledore would do anything to conquer Voldemort. Would even leave a child to suffer with his rigid and sadistic Muggle relatives.

Suddenly, he wasn't hungry anymore.

Deciding to call the house elves to clear out the untouched breakfast, Snape went to the hearth. He wasn't certain what he was about to do. He couldn't contact Harry, and even if he could, he would not do it. He couldn't afford such a gesture; it would simply add to the idiot's delusions about caring.

He didn't want to call the Headmaster either, knowing that Albus would offer him some platitudes instead of the truth he needed to hear.

Angered by the whole thing, he walked back to the table to stare at the Daily Prophet as if it would suddenly reveal him more than he'd already read.
It irritated him, the words printed on the paper making his hands itch with the need to smash something. He watched the two Muggles in the picture again, wondering what kind of people they really were. He wasn't an expert in Muggles.

Except when it came to inflicting pain on them. Snape let the thought wash through him as always when he allowed himself to think about the past. For the first time in decades, it didn't make him cringe with shame.

He took deep breaths. This was totally unacceptable! He should put the paper down again and concentrate on something important. He had work to do, and he'd spent enough time reading through this rubbish already. That firmly in mind, he looked down at the article again.

Maybe one more look at it before he put it away.

The door behind him opened, the very familiar sound of the hinges creaking slightly sending shivers run down his spine.

He spun around, the movement a reflex. He wasn't exactly worried about someone unknown entering. There was only one person besides him who had access to his room uninvited.

"Hi." Harry let the door slam shut behind him, but didn't move away from the doorway. He'd taken the fact that the door still responded to his touch as a good sign, but now that he was here, he wasn't certain how to behave after all.

Snape stared at him, still slightly shocked that he hadn't even thought about replacing his wards. That had never happened before. Harry was the only person he'd ever allowed such access, not even Albus could waltz into his rooms like that, unannounced. He should have remembered to deal with this.

"Potter," he muttered. The boy looked awful. It was clear that he hadn't slept well last night and there was a tight look around his eyes. "I assume you have seen today's newspapers."

Not exactly the way he had intended to say it, but it was better to blurt it out than to stand here in silence. The uncomfortable silences always seemed to unnerve Harry more than anything.

The only answer he got was a weary sigh.

"I see." Snape couldn't say if Harry's sigh was because of the things that had been written about him or if it was an indication of his physical state. Probably both. "So you have."

Harry nodded curtly. "Sirius and Ron told me about the thing." They had actually shouted out their outrage, Ron finally looking his usual self as he focused on the paper. "And no. Haven't read it. Don't intend to either." He'd read the articles when he'd been younger and had felt like crap after most of them. He didn't need that kind of a feeling right now.

"Are the things in them true?" There was no emotion in Snape's voice.

For a brief moment, Harry considered lying to Snape. He knew he wasn't very good at it, especially when it was about something like this, but it might be worth the try.

Then he nodded silently. "Probably." He couldn't say without reading it, but was pretty certain that the reporters had got most of the details right. "Muggles, the cupboard, bars on the window, them hating everything about the wizarding world and so on."

Snape wasn't fooled by the light tone. He kept his piercing gaze on Harry as he asked, "They say the
Muggles kept you as a servant. Mistreated you and abused you. Didn't allow you to have any friends or outside contacts." He did not miss the flinch. "Are those things true as well?"

It sounded so stupid when Snape put it that way. Harry squirmed, not really knowing how to explain. Words would never tell anyone just exactly what it had been like to live with the Dursleys. How it had been to watch them pamper Dudley, never having anyone or anything of his own. "I guess so."

A very unfamiliar feeling was filling Snape, surpassing his usual annoyance or even rage. Crumpling the paper slightly, he wanted to incinurate the whole thing. He couldn't believe Dumbledore had allowed this to go on for years and was disgusted by the fact that it was now spread across the whole wizarding world, turning Harry Potter once again into the object of gawking and probably worship as well.

The silence was suffocating. Harry could see the strange mixture of rage and something soft in Snape's gaze. "Don't." He whispered it out, feeling nauseous. "Oh, please don't."

"What are you talking about?" Concerned by the sudden lost expression on Harry, Snape placed the paper on the table.

"Don't feel sorry for me. Don't pity me, or think you need to coddle me now that you know all the bad stuff I've been through." Harry tried to make it sound like he was making fun of the whole thing, but the plea was genuine. He couldn't handle Snape's pity.

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You really do know me so well, Potter. I was just about to start feeling sorry for you." He could see his dry tones made a small smile appear on Harry's lips, feeling disgustingly warm about the whole thing. "Your relatives were cretins. You survived. That's what really matters." He had plenty of other things to say about the Muggles, but held his tongue.

He knew Harry felt guilty about his aunt's death. From what he'd read, he knew that he shouldn't. It was no wonder he wasn't able to really mourn the woman who had abused him as a child.

Harry almost sagged with relief. He'd never really believed that learning about his past would make Snape behave like all those who had wanted to coddle him, but one never knew. Stranger things had happened. "Yeah." He had to agree with Snape.

It was almost as if the word broke a petrifying charm. Snape made a gesture with his hand and then walked to the couch, knowing that he wouldn't have to sit there alone for long.

He couldn't stop thinking about the insanities he'd read about. They didn't paint a picture of an intolerable brat who was well aware of his celebrity and fame. That had all been a notion their world had painted as Harry Potter had returned from the Muggle world.

"I never knew." Musing out quietly, Snape didn't even look at Harry.

Smiling faintly, Harry sat next to him, leaning against him. "I know. You thought I was like Malfoy. A total idiot. A pampered brat who was full of his own fame." He tried to make the words sound carefree, not really wanting this to turn into mush. Snape's words had sounded awfully like... An apology. Or as close as he'd ever get to one.

A snort escaped Snape. "I still think you're an idiot, Potter." He turned to look down at Harry, his eyes glinting with a myriad of emotions. "I doubt anything can change that."

He watched the soft smile caress Harry's lips for a moment. The bright look in his eyes gave enough warning, and he didn't even flinch when Harry leaned against him and kissed him, the movement
slow and measured. It was exactly the kind of a foolish gesture that was expected.

Harry was slowly beginning to relax. He'd been tense ever since Sirius had read through the paper, first trying to evade his godfather's questions and then doing his best to stop the man from turning into his Animagus form so he could run to Surrey to kill the rest of his relatives.

Leaving shortly after, letting Remus handle both an angry Sirius and the tense situation between Ron and Malfoy had felt kind of crummy, but he knew there was really nothing else to do. He had to set a line somewhere or he'd be drowning under every single thing begging for his attention.

He'd chosen the part he couldn't escape, letting others deal with the rest.

Of course following Dumbledore's invitation meant he could also have a moment of pure selfishness, but he chose not to tell that to anyone. Sirius was already trying to work with his anger with the Dursleys; no need to add to it.

He was really tired of seeing his almost peaceful life crumble every time he'd started to relax about it. They were at war, he was trying to deal with his friends and family hurting, and now this. To say it was completely unfair was mildly put.

Gesturing at the papers, Harry muttered, "I really don't need that right now."

"No." Snape had to agree with that. "But you'd better get used to it. I doubt they will stop now." He was willing to bet on it.

Harry didn't say anything, he just sighed and rubbed his eyes.

"Are you having trouble sleeping?" Strange how hard it was to make it sound like he didn't really care. Snape hadn't seen this familiar tired look on Harry's face for some time. "Bad dreams?"

"No... No dreams." It made Harry frown slightly. Now that he thought about it, it didn't really make any sense. He hadn't had a nightmare since they came back from the cottage.

Snape raised a prompting eyebrow. "But?" There was always more. He could tell by the careful way Harry was avoiding his gaze.

There were so many things Harry could say. Ron having a breakdown, Malfoy acting almost like his old self but kind of not. He could talk about the meeting or the war or the fact that people had been staring at him on the way from Hogsmeade, staring and whispering, and he was sick of it.

But there was nothing Snape could do about those things. This was his life now.

"I spent half the night tossing and turning." He shrugged. "I'm not used to sleeping alone anymore."

"I know." The admission slipped out before Snape could really stop it, but the glare following it was enough to make it clear that he hadn't meant to say that.

Harry's eyes widened slightly as an expression of pure astonishment spread on his face. He was intelligent enough not to say anything, he just sat there and smiled at Snape.

It was more than enough.

They ate early lunch together, not really talking about anything. Snape expected Harry to use some excuse to stay for longer; most likely to engage in yet another sexual encounter, and was honestly stunned when Harry simply kissed him, tasting ridiculously of ice cream, and then left for his
meeting with the Headmaster.

Watching the door slam shut after Harry, Snape refused to wonder when he'd be back.

Part 15

The next few days were a blur; an endless flow of people milling around Hogwarts, hours spent engaged in small talk and courtesies that Harry really didn't feel up to. There was no real time to be by himself during the day, and when he finally got home, there was another task waiting for him.

Harry's evenings were once again spent reading. Studying for the N.E.W.T.s had been good practice for reading about war, even though now he wasn't skimming through the subjects that very often made him disgusted, forcing himself to read through every word.

He read everything he could find about wizarding wars, exploring various techniques and tactics. Reading about them made him realize for the first time how dangerous Voldemort was. Never before had a dark wizard had so many willing followers. Never before had there been one who would use young people and a whole House at Hogwarts so ruthlessly. Truly the heir of Slytherin.

After finishing with the history books, Harry went to read through Muggle books about war. Not so much about the ones they'd fought, for that would have been a work of a lifetime. It seemed the Muggles had no idea how to live with each other.

He read about the philosophy of war.

There were evenings when he was too tired to sleep or too afraid he would spend the whole night in the grip of a nightmare. The scenes from the books would play in his mind, tormenting him and morphing into something very much like real memories.

He knew the small potions cabinet downstairs was always filled, the vials and bottles familiar to him. There was a vial full of the *Draught of the Living Death* there as well as *Sleepless Dream* and the ever so popular *Easy Snores*, he'd checked, but he never drank any of it. Maybe it would have helped him to get some rest when his mind refused to shut up, but he didn't want to hide behind potions.

It would be too easy to simply add sleeping potion to his evening routines. Brush his teeth, go to bed and gulp down a dosage so that he'd sleep till morning. He knew Snape would make sure there would be more when he needed it, but he didn't want to need anything.

His days were busy as well. They had lots of plans for Hogsmeade, and everyone seemed to need his approval for every single change they made in the village. Harry didn't really understand that, but since it was rather harmless, he played along, nodding at most of the questions and then letting people work on whatever they saw proper.

The Order of the Phoenix was now openly working, and even though the endless meetings and meaningful conversations were exhausting, Harry was also glad to be actually doing things.

It was no real surprise that all official people from the Ministry were absent. Those like Arthur Weasley were present strictly as members of the Order whenever they attended a meeting.

Harry didn't like it, but he didn't let it affect on what he was doing. After all, he was used to being forced to face things he didn't like.

Things weren't much better at home. The atmosphere was tense at best and most of the time it felt
like studying war techniques and leadership was better than dealing with his friends.

Harry was glad Remus was taking care of whatever was going on between Malfoy and Ron. He was too busy trying to survive the endless meetings and the waiting. He'd thought that trying to fill his head with details about various school subjects had been bad; the details and the nuances about war and diplomacy were definitely worse.

Getting out of the house didn't seem like a respite either. The quick shopping expeditions to Honeydukes were always overshadowed by either Ron or Malfoy tailing after him and trying to look nonchalant when he made his purchases. The only other place he went was Hogwarts; the way people seemed to be drawn to him on the road there and inside the castle were beginning to make Harry feel claustrophobic.

It wasn't a long walk from their house to Hogwarts, but there was always a crowd wherever he went. People needed to greet Harry, to be a part of his life somehow, just a few words or even a nod at him when he walked by. Even though it wasn't pleasant, he allowed it.

He couldn't think of any way he could really make them stop.

Most of the people were gathering in the Great Hall, like they usually did. There were no big official meetings, but everyone seemed to need to be here, to be a part of something. Harry figured it felt better than to just sit and wait.

At least today, Harry and his friends were here so early there wasn't a real crowd forming yet. There were only older Order members present, talking quietly with each other.

Casting a brief look behind him, he led his friends through the door, not surprised to see Ron head to his family as soon as he saw George and Bill. His own gaze searched for Snape. It didn't surprise him to see that the man wasn't here yet.

A relief of sorts.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Whispering quietly, Sirius leaned closer to Remus. This was the first time they were all here together, and Sirius was almost overwhelmed by all the people. He didn't know what to really do, his gaze focusing on Harry, then moving back to Remus.

Harry nodded quietly. "Yes." He was not going to announce Sirius' presence to people, but it was important to him that Sirius was able to walk around openly in his human form, even if it was only in Hogwarts, surrounded by people he could trust.

Maybe not a free man to the spirit of the word, but at least Sirius didn't have to hide inside the house all the time.

Opting to stand behind Remus, Sirius kept his attention on Harry and tried not to panic. He didn't like crowds, especially with so many unknown people here.

He had to wonder if people would recognize him, for some days he looked into the mirror and didn't even recognize himself. The beard looked good on him now that he was actually trimming it, but he doubted he'd ever really get used to the grey in his hair.

Smiling slightly, he leaned even closer to Remus, not realizing that the calm and happy expression was the one thing that would distract people from connecting his face with his name immediately.

Harry wasn't eager to become the center of the crowd that would undoubtedly form sooner or later, so he stood near the wall, where he could pretend to be just with his family. Some of the professors
were talking loudly about Voldemort, and for once the members of the Order were more interested in the debate than in their big hero.

It was definitely a good thing.

Listening to Flitwick's words just as absentmindedly as he had sometimes back in class, Harry wondered if today would be the day when they got to actually do something. It was frustrating to spend hours walking around Hogwarts, to listen to people muse about things he'd known for ages and then go back home to read endless reports and books that were filled with real horrors.

Spending days doing practically nothing was surprisingly tiring.

Sirius' expression darkened, and Harry knew instantly who had just stepped into the room. He'd hoped Snape would arrive when there were more people here, to keep Sirius from making a scene.

The look on Sirius' face indicated that no amount of witnesses would prevent him from confronting Snape.

"Remember, you promised you wouldn't do anything to him!" Trying not to sound desperate, Harry stared at his godfather. When there was no answer, he glanced at Remus, mouthing a silent, "Please."

Already holding Sirius' arm in a gentle grip, Remus leaned closer, "We'd better find a place to sit, Sirius." His persistant tugging seemed to register, and with some effort he managed to pull most of Sirius' attention back to him.

Sirius squeezed his hand into a fist so hard his nails bit into his palm, wanting nothing more than to punch Snape's ugly face and tell him never to come anywhere near Harry again. Maybe if Harry and Remus had stayed behind, he wouldn't have resisted the temptation.

With a conscious effort, he relaxed his hand and leaned even closer to Remus again. He was trying, but no matter what, he couldn't turn his gaze away from the greasy git.

The angry glare seemed to touch Snape as if it was physical. He tilted his head to the side and then turned around to see the small group of men all looking at him. The rage on Black barely registered; he was used to that by now. He ignored him and answered the slight nod from Harry.

It made Black look even angrier.

Snape almost rolled his eyes at that. He was certain Harry was now regretting his brilliant idea of telling his godfather about sleeping with him. Foolish trusting Gryffindor.

Still, seeing Black's obvious discomfort at his presence was slightly gratifying as well. For a moment, Snape wondered what would happen if he adopted one of Draco Malfoy's smirks. The results would be undoubtedly spectacular.

The pleading look in Harry's eyes that was slowly turning into a scowl made him school his expression into its usual indifference.

It seemed to be the right decision.

A moment later Black almost disappeared behind Lupin and then there was no sign of the man as a large black dog padded to stand next to Harry. Snape wasn't surprised; it didn't take much insight to realize that the Animagus form was the mutt's preferred way to deal with emotional turmoil.
Harry stood back as Remus and Snuffles made their way across the hall -- away from where Snape was now standing -- and wondered if he should have just stayed home today. Probably.

"Thank you." Hermione smiled at Terry who held out a cup of tea for her as usual, the gesture a sad reminder of all the hours they'd spent together as Head Boy and Girl.

The last school year had been full of hard work, but there had been small moments of peace and contentment when the two of them had sat down and had a cuppa and talked about everything and nothing.

Terry sat down next to her, inhaling the aroma coming from his cup. "You're welcome."

His tone was always so calm and gentle. Hermione had liked that even before they had been chosen to work together.

"Did you get the book I sent you?"

Hermione liked that as well, the quiet way Terry had always been able to fill silences between them. Unlike her other friends, he really did seem to enjoy studying, holding books in great regard. "Yes. Thank you." As soon as she finished reading it, they would undoubtedly spend hours talking about the fascinating subject of binding charms.

"Good."

They lapsed into silence, both drinking their tea and watching people enter the hall. Hermione liked watching the Order gather together even though they weren't really doing anything important yet. She could tell a lot by just observing people, intrigued by the nuances between them.

She'd seen Snuffles pad across the hall earlier and was secretly glad Sirius had chosen not to show himself openly yet. Even though everyone here was a member of the Order, tension was high and she didn't like the idea of someone accidentally hexing him before Harry could explain everyone that he wasn't a mad killer.

There seemed to be lots of things that needed to be explained, and she didn't think people could handle much more right now. Many were still wary of the three Slytherins in their midst and some of the younger people weren't over the gawking period over everything concerning Voldemort. No matter how everyone trusted Harry, it would take some convincing to have everyone stop seeing Sirius as a dangerous criminal.

She didn't know how Terry would take the news, wondering if she should explain the whole thing to him before Harry made any kind of an announcement.

Turning to glance at him, she sighed. Maybe it was a good idea. She could see how Terry was once again staring at Malfoy and Snape, the looks he cast somewhere between suspicious and outright hostile.

"It's all right." Knowing that her friend was sometimes rigid with his beliefs, Hermione smiled at him. "They're on our side."

Terry looked startled, but smiled a bit sheepishly. "Sorry. It's just... Kind of hard to get used to that."

Deciding not to say anything about the things she was forced to get used to -- including the sappy smiles on Harry's face when he saw Snape and the fact that Ron had apparently gone insane --
Hermione nodded. "You can say that again."

It was definitely different to learn how to work with the Slytherins. Their silent presence in these meetings was unnerving somehow, especially Snape's. He never really said anything unless someone -- that would be either Dumbledore or Harry -- asked for his opinion, but his expression usually spoke more volumes than words.

Hermione didn't know what to think about the man. She had never liked him as a teacher, but as a member of the Order, she had nothing against him. It would almost be possible to ignore him completely if Harry hadn't told her he was somehow involved with him.

Paying no attention to Malfoy was so much easier. She didn't care if there was tension between him and Ron, Remus Lupin was taking care of that and she really didn't want to get involved with anything that had to do with Malfoy.

She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, smiling at the questioning look Blaise Zabini threw at her from across the room. Now there was a Slytherin she might actually learn to like.

"A biscuit?" Terry's voice was slightly tense, as if he wasn't still convinced about Slytherins, but the expression on his face was more relaxed.

Smiling slightly, Hermione nodded. "Thank you."

On the other side of the room, Harry was walking towards a familiar redhead figure. He didn't pay attention to the few cheery calls and brief touches on his shoulder.

Today's aimless wandering around the Great Hall was getting on his nerves, and he decided to do something he hadn't had the chance to do before. It wasn't a unpleasant duty, but he'd postponed this for days anyway, mainly because of the awful choking feeling that assaulted him every time he thought about this.

Harry sat next to George. "Hi."

"Harry!" George grinned like always. His grin looked perfectly normal, devoid of the lurking madness Harry had expected to see. "Good to see you."

Such a happy greeting was definitely unexpected. "Are you going to stay for a while after the meeting? You could come and see Ron's new place if you're not in a hurry." In the light of this levity, Harry couldn't bring himself to say anything about Fred, not even to say that he was sorry.

"I don't know. Depends on how long this takes. Mum always worries if we stay away from the flat for too long." It never really changed; no matter how old the Weasley children grew, their mother would always worry.

"Yes."

"Yes." It was painful to think about Mrs. Weasley. "But I think she has a good reason to worry now." Harry's gaze was sad.

He needed to talk about this with George, even if George was trying to shove all painful memories away. He wondered if it was like it had been with Ron, if George was suppressing all the pain too.

Now there was no sign of laughter on George's face. "Yes." He ground that out with anger. "After what those bastards did to Penny, I don't blame her."

Harry couldn't say anything for a moment. It was worse than anything he'd expected. "Um... Yes." He couldn't really mention Fred now. Didn't want to trigger any kind of mental breakdown with a
huge crowd witnessing everything.

"Oh." Noticing the uncomfortable look on Harry's face, George cocked his head. Sometimes he didn't even really remember why everyone wanted to treat him with such care these days. "Oh. Right. And the thing with Fred. Bloody inconvenient, I say. Even though I'm not really complaining. It's not that bad."

His words were followed by an absolute silence, as Harry could only stare.

George smiled a little, making a small gesture with his hand. He didn't seem to find anything surprising in Harry's behavior, considering that was the reaction he got from everyone. "Snape wants you."

Harry's mouth fell open. So now George wasn't only insane, he was a clairvoyent as well? "Huh?"

"Snape. He's right there coming towards us." Pasting an innocent expression on his face, George greeted the man standing almost behind Harry. "Good morning, Professor. Nice to see you again. Extremely nice! Couldn't be a nicer thing, really. Sorry, must go now. Bye." With a knowing wink at Harry, he hopped to his feet and then scurried away.

Feeling like he'd just fallen off his broom, Harry stared after George.

"Potter, I... Potter? Is everything all right?" The way Harry was simply gawking after Weasley made Snape tense.

"I..." Shaking his head slightly, Harry decided to go with the truth. "There's something going on with the Weasleys."

Snape cocked his head. "Yes?" It was not a surprise. There was always something going on with the Weasleys. "Anything serious?"

Not knowing what to say, Harry just shrugged.

He could see Ron standing nearby and decided not to waste any time worrying. It was best if he just went to him and asked. But first he was going to stand here a moment longer and let all the thoughts disappear.

Enjoy Snape's presence.

No matter how he'd tried, he'd been unable to spend any time alone with Snape. They always exchanged a few painfully polite and impersonal words during these meetings, but that was all, and it was certainly not enough. Even standing here close to the man was better than nothing.

Snape seemed to find it slightly amusing, but accommodated him anyway, standing there as if lost in thought and ignoring the suspicious looks that were aimed at him.

"I should go," Harry muttered, knowing all too well he could stand here for hours. It would definitely be easier than to mingle with the others and try not to show his frustration. Though sooner or later the need to touch Snape would become overwhelming. "I'll... See you later."

He didn't look at Snape but simply walked away.

Snape followed him with his gaze, his expression veiled.

"Harry!" Flashing a happy smile at his friend, Ron ignored the creepy way Snape was staring at
them. "Any news?" These kind of lazy days were okay, but Harry had talked about training and planning.

"No, not really. Ron... Is everything all right?"

Usually Ron could at least guess what the worry was all about even if he didn't really want to think about it -- or Malfoy -- but this time Harry's question came out of nowhere. "Huh?"

Keeping his voice quiet, Harry said, "I spoke with George there."

He didn't really have to say more.

Ron's face fell. "Oh. That. Yeah. I mean no. There are things." That was one way to put it. "Stuff."

He had no idea how to say it so that it made sense.

"It's as if he doesn't acknowledge that Fred is..." Harry paused for a moment before finishing the sentence, "dead."

It was awful to say it out loud again, but he couldn't keep all the painful things unsaid anymore.

Ron looked down at his feet. "It's not that." Knowing that he had to tell Harry the truth no matter how his family might want to keep it quiet, he shrugged. "He knows. I talked to him and he remembers seeing the Death Eaters and Fred."

The choking feeling was back, and it was not easier to talk about this to Harry than it had been to say it to Remus Lupin.

So he simply blurted out, "He just doesn't agree that Fred's dead. Somehow he's got this idea that Fred was merged into him instead of... You know? Like he's both him and Fred now. Sometimes he even talks like that, like they used to make all their weird jokes together. He just says both their lines."

Harry knew his horror and nausea showed on his face, but he couldn't control his expression no matter how he tried. He couldn't even begin to imagine how awful that had to be for the Weasleys. At least Ron had snapped out of his denial. He wondered if George would keep living his fantasy forever.

Still, he couldn't suppress the shimmer of hope completely. "Are you sure he's making it up?" He'd heard crazier things in the wizarding world. Twins who were somehow merged together as one of them was killed wouldn't come even close to the most insane things he'd witnessed.

Ron had known he'd ask that. "No. No one's sure. It can't be tested. Most of the time, we couldn't really tell those two apart. There is nothing Fred said or did that George wouldn't know. And magic just won't work. Even the healers couldn't say if he's..." Once again there was hesitation before the word. "Crazy or not."

"I'm so damn sorry, Ron." Somehow Harry knew the uncertainty was worse than anything. To fear forever that your loved one was insane, but still harboring the faint hope that he might be right after all.

"Yeah." Ron cleared his throat. "Anyway, dad's staying with Bill and George for the night. I'd better go see if they want me to go with them."

Since Charlie was still on his way to recovery, Bill had decided to stay with his family, living with George above the small shop. Everyone thought that was a good idea. There was enough room for
two, and George didn't need to be reminded of the empty space around him.

"They have somehow managed to rig a tellyvision up there, and dad's completely enthralled by it." Genuine laughter on his face, Ron added, "You should see him, he's all happy watching those daily documentaries about that weird Muggle village, or then he goes walking around saying things like 'you're the weakest link' or 'cheesy peas' all the time. It's the funniest thing ever."

Recognizing the clumsy but effective attempt to change the subject, Harry squeezed a thin smile on his lips and nodded. "Okay. You go see your dad. We'll see you back at the house?"

"Yeah."

Harry watched Ron go.

He wished he knew something to say to all these people who were suffering instead of just repeating he was sorry over and over again. It didn't really change anything, and was beginning to sound very old to his ears.

But the fact was that there was really nothing he could do or say to make things better. His friends had suffered more than he could imagine, and maybe it was not his doing, but it was somewhat his fault they had been targeted.

Closing his eyes, Harry refused to watch Ron talk to his father, hating the way Mr. Weasley looked so serious all the time. It just seemed wrong.

"It will be all right, you know."

Harry let out a slight yelp and jumped at the sound of someone muttering that behind him. Shaking, he turned around, peering into the shadowy corner. "What?" He couldn't believe someone had managed to sneak up behind him like this.

"It'll be all right." Now the voice was more recognizable, the deep rumble identifying Bill Weasley. "Things look pretty bad right now, but it'll get better."

Eyes wide with shock, Harry stared at the dark form standing near the wall. He couldn't see Bill well enough to see if he was just saying that or if he really meant it.

Bill let out a sigh before saying firmly. "We don't blame you for what happened at the house, and neither should you. It's war."

"I thought..." Shaking his head slightly, Harry cut off the sentence, deciding against saying anything about Mrs. Weasley or Percy. It was easy to understand why she wasn't there, but seeing Percy always made him feel hollow; as if he wasn't simply grieving but gone mad with the pain and hatred.

Harry wasn't sure he even knew just exactly who or what he hated.

"You thought wrong." Bill was still staying in the shadows. "You almost got killed when they came after me. I know you're not the kind of person who lets others do the fighting and dying for you."

He stepped forward, looking at Harry in the eye for the first time.

There was no anger in Bill's eyes, only pain and weariness. "Those bastards killed my brother. I don't care what some people would say about the reason. I don't care about that. They killed Fred because they like killing, and everything else is just an excuse."
Harry could find no words because his throat was closing in. All he could manage was a curt nod.

It seemed to be enough.

He watched Bill walk to his family, and wondered if this was the way the days were going to play from now on. Short encounters with friends, then watching them walk away.

Maybe he should try a bit more himself, but talking about death and sorrow didn't make him want to start small talk with those around him.

But he really didn't want to wallow in misery and hopelessness either.

Harry ran his fingers through his messy hair, taking a deep breath. This whole so called meeting was a waste of time, but he didn't have to spend the day doing nothing. There were always things that he could do; join a conversation with the professors or ask Dumbledore about their schedule.

There were groups of people looking like they were busy arguing about things, engaged in heated conversations that were drawing others near. It looked like everyone was confirming their place in the Order, bonding with others and truly becoming a part of the whole.

Of course Malfoy and Zabini were simply standing in a corner, talking quietly together and trying to ignore the curious and sometimes even openly hostile glances thrown at them.

Harry hated the way everyone seemed to be able to mingle in the room except for those two.

Yes, Malfoy had always been a prick. Harry was definitely not going to make excuses for him, and he had a funny feeling that Malfoy wouldn't even want him to. Still, he was a member of the Order now, one of them, as was Zabini who had never done anything to hurt anyone.

They shouldn't have to deal with suspicion like this.

It was pretty clear what he should do next. "Malfoy!" Making sure the word held no anger in it, he stepped next to the Slytherin. "Zabini."

Smiling hesitantly, Blaise Zabini looked at him. "Potter."

Harry smiled back, not even forcing the expression. "Good to see you here." There was a short silence as he tried to think of something to say. He'd simply reacted to the glares and silence, and now had no idea how to go on.

"I was wondering if there are any plans for housing in Hogsmeade." Seeing that Potter was desperately thinking about something to say, Draco made a slight gesture towards Blaise. "You were just saying that you'd like to rent a place and the Broomsticks is awfully crowded." Not to mention that most of the patrons weren't happy to share lodgings with a Slytherin.

He kept his expression neutral as Harry smiled a relieved smile and then launched into a ramble about apartments. At least the Gryffindor didn't offer Blaise a place to stay. That would have probably given his housemate a heart attack.

Draco was surprised that Potter was actually going through all this trouble to make Blaise feel welcome, but then again Potter didn't seem to share the universal hatred towards all Slytherins anymore. It was more personal than that; Potter had said nothing but polite greetings to Draco since that evening Weasley had barged into his room.

"We should talk to Albus about that." Glad that he now had something real to focus on, Harry
gestured at the Headmaster. He'd know more about their plans for their new Headquarters.

Without waiting for a reply, he headed towards Dumbledore, gesturing the two Slytherins to come with him.

Blaise looked like he'd just been ran over by the Hogwarts Express, but followed Potter anyway.

Behind him, Draco couldn't help smirking. Potter's actions never changed; he was a Gryffindor through and through. One thought of something and he barged in head first, not considering what it would look like.

This time the rushing made people stare, some simply being aware of their young leader, others casting even more suspicious looks at Draco and Blaise. It wasn't surprising.

The very dark look on Terry Boot's face was.

Ignoring the hatred in the Ravenclaw's eyes, Draco followed Potter. He didn't care what the former Head Boy thought about him. Whatever grievances there had been between him and the Slytherins were of the past.

He knew his sense of letting the things go wasn't universal. Boot was clearly resenting all Slytherins, evading Snape and glaring at him and even Blaise from time to time.

Draco found it childish somehow. The school was over, and it was time to start thinking outside the simple definitions the Hogwarts' House system provided. Reality wasn't Slytherins and Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors, it was much more complicated than that.

Yet he would be the first one to admit that it was also so much simpler. His world had never really acknowledged the possible values of the other Houses, because they didn't matter. It had always been about blood and the purity of old family lines.

The Order didn't seem to recognize that fact, and to Draco it was a serious flaw. Individuals like Potter and Granger and astonishingly even professor Lupin who wasn't simply a half-blood but a werewolf as well were capable of great thoughts -- well, some less than the others -- and deeds. They were however not connected to the ages old traditions that formed the core and foundations of their world. Sure, they were fighting against Voldemort, but what were they fighting for?

Idiots like Terry Boot probably never even bothered their heads with such thoughts, of that Draco was certain.

He just hoped someone did.

On the other side of the Great Hall, Snape was quietly observing the youngsters, keeping an eye on Harry as always, but also assessing the the two young Slytherins in the room.

Seeing that no one else had stayed had been disappointing, but hardly a shock. Snape rarely allowed himself to hope, but he'd at least thought that Juno Sinistra would have held steady and stayed.

Instead of his colleague, it had been two youngsters who had stayed; both Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini had defied their families and peer pressure.

Snape couldn't completely hide his pride in his former students, though he wasn't going to shout his thoughts out from the Astronomy Tower. He could be more subtle than some people, and his Slytherins didn't need extravagant gestures to understand they had his approval.
"It's always strange to watch them grow," observed Minerva McGonagall quietly.

"Yes." It certainly was. Snape watched how young Malfoy and Zabini were listening carefully as Harry said something to Albus, noticing the respectful looks as well as the absence of cringing.

He still thought of those two as students, old habits dying hard.

"Harry looks tired." McGonagall sounded slightly worried, as if she was holding onto her responsibilities as the Head of Gryffindor as well. "The poor boy."

Snape tensed.

"I never did thank you for looking after him and Ron Weasley, did I Severus?"

It was so like Minerva to bring this up now. "No need to thank me." Snape had to wonder if she'd still say this if she knew exactly what had happened at the little hideaway. And afterwards.

The sound McGonagall made was hard to decipher.

Snape cast a look at her, noticing how she was still staring at Harry. He didn't say anything, simply waited.

Finally she turned her gaze to him. "I do hope you know what you're doing."

He couldn't tell if there was disapproval in her voice and it annoyed him for he could usually read his colleagues well. This was the first time she had the advantage over him, though he wasn't surprised she knew about Harry and him. The word discretion didn't seem to be a part of Harry's vocabulary.

"Minerva..." He snapped his mouth shut. Telling her it was none of her business wasn't going to work. She was protective with her students, and would probably fuss over Harry Potter just like everyone else in their world did.

Casting a brief look at the young man, he shook his head slightly. He couldn't tell Minerva the truth; that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing, mostly because he wasn't really doing anything. This whole thing made no sense to him, but he'd be damned if he ever said that out loud.

A very delighted smile spread to Minerva's face, reminding Snape of Albus in his most irritating happy mood. "Good. I'm glad to hear it." She patted his shoulder briefly, the touch as fleeting as always.

Snape didn't say anything. Damn, he'd never understand Gryffindors!

Part 16

"We'll be going to the Three Broomsticks tonight!" It was almost an offhand remark.

Harry barely lifted his gaze from the book. "Mmm hmm." He turned the page, his attention back in the text before the last humming sound died in the room.

"The Weird Sisters are there tonight." This time Ron was definitely talking to Harry. "It's going to be a blast! Everyone's going!"

They'd been talking about that for hours today, while Harry had made his way through the crowd, talking about important stuff and concentrating on the business. Terry Boot had been really excited about the whole thing, and of course that meant that most of the others from their year had decided to
go. Ron was glad Terry's enthusiasm was contagious. It even got into Hermione, who was presently doing something to her hair in the bathroom downstairs.

"That's nice, Ron."

Ron grabbed the book and held it high enough that Harry couldn't reach it. He could tell by the startled look in his friend's eyes that he had absolutely no idea what he'd just said. "Okay. What did I just say?"

Frowning, Harry tried to figure out what he'd been talking about. Something about broomsticks. Quidditch? That was always a possibility, but why would Ron be so annoyed at him if it was about Quidditch? "Er... Broomsticks?"

"Yes! The Weird Sisters are going to play there tonight, and Madam Rosmerta told me she was reserving us her best table! So what do you say? Are we going or are we going?" It was clear what Ron was thinking.

Harry sighed, both with relief at Ron not noticing how completely lost he'd been and with something close to genuine regret. "You can go. Have fun. I still have to finish reading for tomorrow's..."

"Come on, Harry!" Ron bounced on the balls of his feet. "You've been doing this every evening for days, nose buried in a bloody book."

He wasn't going to let go of this. They'd all noticed the too serious look in Harry's eyes. It simply wasn't healthy to spend every single evening reading about war. Ron was still convinced that too much knowledge was bad for your brain.

Maybe going out would help. It would be good to sit down and maybe drink some real beer. Spend some time away from this house and maybe ogle girls. Definitely ogle girls! That would be a nice and healthy thing to do.

Ron was definitely not thinking about anything he might need to stop thinking about, but an evening with alcohol and music and girls would be good for Harry. Even if he wanted boys with his alcohol and music, that would be fine as well. He was certain Sirius would be grateful forever if Harry found some younger guy to pine over.

And Merlin, it would be good to go out and do something nice. He was sick and tired of sitting here and avoiding talking to Remus about things he definitely didn't want and glaring at Malfoy who was stupid enough to keep his word that he wouldn't approach him.

Not that he really wanted Malfoy anywhere around him. He didn't. The mere thought of that git coming close to him and laying his hands on him was definitely -- and he wasn't going to go anywhere near that thought again!

"Please?" His wheedling was honest. He wanted Harry out of here, even just for one evening. He wanted to go out and have fun and it could be like the old days, when it was just him and Hermione and Harry.

"Oh, all right." Harry nodded. He was not going to get any reading done anyway. Besides, maybe he could have a good night's sleep if he spent the evening doing something other than studying war.

Ron raised his arms up, accidentally flinging the book to the other end of the room where it landed on top of Crookshanks. The cat let out a very irritated growl and stared at Ron as if trying to think of where to scratch the next time the young man came close enough. "Cool!"
Harry had barely time to tell Sirius he would be going out before Ron was already pushing him out of the door. Then it was just him and Ron and Hermione walking through the streets together like they'd just been transported back in time.

He spent only a moment wondering why Malfoy wasn't here with them before the crowd distracted his thoughts. A bit hesitant about this whole outing, he kept his mouth shut until they reached the pub, biting his tongue when he saw the bright lights and heard the noise.

The place was packed. It almost looked like everyone was staying in Hogsmeade these days and the sound of people talking to each other was almost deafening.

Of course the general sound of murmured conversations turned into something else as soon as the Gryffindor trio stepped into the pub.

"Hey, it's Harry! Harry Potter!"

Sighing, Harry waved back at the witches screaming out his name.

"Hermione! Harry! Good to see you," Terry grinned so hard his face had to hurt. "Ron! Have a beer!" He pushed a foaming pint to Ron's hand.

"Thanks, mate," Ron grinned back at him before sipping the drink. It left a foamy moustache on his upper lip. "Did the Sisters start yet?"

Terry guided them towards an empty table. "No, I think they were waiting for you to arrive."

"Cool!"

Harry didn't agree with Ron on that, but didn't say anything.

As soon as they sat down, a waitress was there with a tray full of drinks, compliments of Madam Rosmerta. It made Hermione roll her eyes as she saw the enthusiasm with which Ron emptied his pint just to grab another one, but otherwise no one made a comment about the free beer.

It took a moment for Harry to squeeze the thank you out of his suddenly dry throat. Sipping the beer didn't really help with the tight feeling; he sat back and just listened to the others talk until the Weird Sisters appeared on the makeshift platform.

At least they weren't talking about the war.

When Dean and Seamus arrived, it was almost like the old times for a moment. A group of Gryffindors and a few Ravenclaws hanging out at the Hogsmeade weekend. The only thing absent was the almost intoxicating sugar rush that always followed a day's shopping.

"Good evening, Hogsmeade!" It had got dark without anyone really paying attention and people startled at the familiar words spoken softly into the microphone.

The silence was followed by cheers.

"I see you're ready to party!" Myron Wagtail, the lead singer of the Sisters gestured at the drummer who started the familiar beat. "Let me see your hands in the air!"

There was a grinding sound as everyone pushed their chairs back and got up and raised their hands.

Never really good at dancing, Harry swayed to the music the best he could and settled for mouthing the lyrics unlike Seamus who was singing loud enough to make people around him glare.
Some Hufflepuffs seemed to think that it was a good idea to dance while holding your pint and sipping every once in a while. Ron's eyes lit up as he saw that and he made a move towards the table before Hermione stepped in front of him and refused to budge.

"Harry!"

Turning to see who was yelling into his ear, Harry stared at Susan Bones. "Yeah?"

"I was thinking..." She looked a bit flustered. "If you'd like to dance with me?" The question was followed by a nod towards the dance floor where other couples were busy bouncing around.

Harry shook his head, thinking of a polite way to decline. "I don't really dance." Jumping up and down to the rhythm of the Hippogriff wasn't actually dancing. "Sorry."

Her face fell, but she nodded. "Okay."

Before Harry could say anything else, she was already walking away to find someone else to dance with.

It wasn't a lie; dancing really wasn't Harry's forte. He used that as an excuse to decline every offer to dance when other girls came to try, always polite but showing clearly that he wasn't interested.

After a while people seemed to realize he wasn't going to accept any of the offers, and no one approached him anymore, even though there were still yearning looks cast in his direction. When Ron disappeared into the loo and Hermione went to dance with Terry, he simply sat down at their table, refusing to meet anyone's gaze.

A very effective way to just sit there and relax.

Harry was nursing his beer, still not certain he really liked the taste. It was about the only thing here he was uncertain of.

He'd wondered if this was a good idea or not, but watching all the others mill around the pub was an eye opener. Ron had been right, he needed to see this; the young witches and wizards talking, drinking and dancing, everyone having a great time.

It wasn't exactly the way he'd imagined it. He was actually having fun, mostly because of the mellow atmosphere and the music, a curious mix between traditional wizarding airs and the contemporary Muggle tunes. Very pleasing. Sipping his beer, he had to admit that he rather enjoyed the drink as well. It wasn't as disgusting as some of the other things he'd tried.

Spending an evening here was all right, but he wasn't going to make a habit out of it. That was the one thing he knew for sure.

He wouldn't miss the looks, the overly bright smiles. It would be a relief to get away from the naked lust so clear on some faces, knowing it wasn't for him but the image of him.

Sometimes he wondered if he was making a too big a fuss about all the hype concerning his life. Such a shameful thought, really, but every once in a while he had to stop to think about what was reality and what was simply a figment of his imagination.

He wanted to be wrong, wished he was just paranoid about his fame and that his fears were completely unfounded for. But he hadn't imagined the way he'd been offered a beer as soon as he sat down or how his money had been refused. He wasn't imagining the looks and whispers and the way people seemed to have the need to touch him somehow as they passed him by.
It confirmed his fears, the overwhelming change in his life.

Harry sighed. This was more difficult than he'd dreaded. He didn't want to sit here and be ogled at or watch people who'd known him for years hesitate to approach him. Even other Gryffindors were acting strangely; as if the few short months he'd been away had changed everything.

There was a strange feeling of respect coming from everyone. People much older than Harry treated him like he was above them somehow, or at least their equal. To those he'd shared classes with, he was now someone to look up to, someone whose company was not only appreciated but sought after.

It was worse than anything. The suspicion and the blatant hostility he'd experienced over the years were nothing compared to this adoration.

His gaze met with Cho's. She was sitting with a mixed group of girls from all the Houses, still smiling at something Padma had just said. For a moment, he remembered how it had been to stare at her from afar and hope she would once notice him, or smile at him like that. Now she was more than noticing him, the soft expression on her face almost making him choke.

In his dreams, it would have once been the best thing ever. Here, in reality, he wanted to look away and swallow down the nausea that threatened to overwhelm him.

His crush on her had been the first one, the first perfect love that had never gone anywhere beyond wistful thinking. Everything after her had been somehow less, tinted with regrets and memories of less innocent but also less fulfilling moments.

Until...

Shivering, he wondered how much worse it would be now if he didn't have Snape in his life. If this was all the world could offer him.

Random encounters, brief relationships. Those were the only things he could find in a place like this. For a short while, they had seemed like enough, when he'd first lain in the darkness, held in an embrace. The casual touch had chased the loneliness away, even for just a few moments.

It had been fun, he wasn't going to deny that. Learning things about himself and others had been an adventure. The touch of another person was so different from his own hand and shagging had totally swept him away at first.

He couldn't handle that right now, and if he was honest with himself, probably never again. The short term relationships were somehow even worse than being alone, making him feel like crap afterwards.

Maybe his dad had been right about the Potter men.

Harry liked the thought more than he probably should. There had never been a time in his life when he'd had someone to call his own, a person who was essentially just his. Sirius had come closer than anyone else, but their relationship was special in another way. The thing with Snape was different.

He didn't know if it was wise to put all this trust in Snape. There had been others who had promised him so much more than Snape ever had. All he could really trust Snape to do was to be honest with him, to accept him as he was. It was better than any whispered endearments or promises of forever.

Which had always been lies.
Finishing with his beer, Harry allowed Hermione to pull him into the dancefloor. It was a friendship thing; Hermione insisting on dancing with both him and Ron and he trying hard not to step on her toes.

At least this wasn't formal like the Yule ball. The floor was so full of people no one could see him stumble and flail like a loon.

He had to admit that this wasn't horrible, even though it would be more fun if people didn't crowd him or 'accidentally' grope him. The heat and the beat of the music only seemed to add to the groping, and the fact that most people seemed to be at least half drunk didn't really help.

Harry escaped to the loo a bit later, glad that there didn't seem to be a long line outside the men's room like there always seemed to be outside the ladies' room. It saved him from more groping, but he did have an uncomfortable moment inside the restroom with Justin Finch-Fletchley, who wanted to give him a blowjob in the stall for old time's sake.

"And this is my wonderful world now." Muttering it under his breath, Harry returned to his table.

He didn't like to be surrounded by people like this. Even though most of them were familiar to him -- some even friends -- he didn't like to be in a crowd. Everyone seemed to think they had the right to talk to him or touch him as if the concept of personal space didn't apply to him.

They all seemed to want to possess a part of him, even for a little while and it was suffocating him. He didn't want anything like this; it was intrusive, almost taking his breath away.

He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to block all the looks. It didn't really help. He could still feel people watching and wished once again he was safely away in the dungeons.

Another beer was placed in front of him, and even though he did smile at Madam Rosmerta who'd delivered it personally, he didn't really drink it. Getting drunk and making a fool of himself didn't sound like a good plan, especially since he could be certain a picture of him would end up on the front page of tomorrow's papers with less than flattering headlines.

He simply sat there, holding the large pint between his palms, staring into the dark brown liquid. Smiling weakly whenever someone came to ask him to dance and refusing politely.

The band took another break. Harry waited for a few minutes, trying to see where his friends were and then got up. It seemed to take forever to reach the bar, with half drunken people everywhere trying to get his attention.

At least his friends were in a better shape. He did hide a smile at Hermione's loud giggles, but was glad that she was having a good time.

"Harry!" As usual, it was Terry who noticed him first.

Turning around, Hermione looked puzzled as she saw Harry. "What's wrong?" She didn't think he looked too good.

"Nothing." Everything. "I'm just tired, I guess." It was true on every level.

"Nothing." Everything. "I'm just tired, I guess." It was true on every level.

Fortunately a yawn escaped him as Ron opened his mouth to say something. This way they could see that he wasn't simply using it as an excuse.

"I'm going home." Harry was too tired to really moderate his voice, sounding just as weary as he felt.

"You can stay if you want to. Wouldn't want to spoil your night."
Ron shook his head. "I'll come with you." There was no real point in staying here anyway. His plan to forget about certain things wasn't really working, and he was sure he'd have to be completely drunk to achieve his goal.

Not a good idea, considering that the few times he'd been sloshed had ended with him doing weird things. He didn't want to make a fool out of himself now, or later at their house where there were even more opportunities to act brainlessly.

They left together after making Terry Boot promise he'd escort Hermione home later on. It was clear from Hermione's expression that she didn't think she needed an escort, but fortunately there was so much noise they didn't really hear a word of what she mumbled.

It was a short walk from the Three Broomsticks to their house, and Harry was grateful that the streets of Hogsmeade were practically deserted at this time.

"So I guess you hated it." Seeing the questioning look on Harry's face, Ron added, "The whole thing; spending the evening out."

Harry shook his head. "No, I didn't hate it. Liked the band and the beer wasn't bad." It was an old joke and he was glad that Ron remembered it and shared the smile. "But you know, I'm not really comfortable in a crowd like that."

"But there's always a... oh. I see what you mean." Ron didn't really understand the whole thing, being raised in a huge family. There had always been a crowd. Maybe it was different with Harry. Glad that he didn't have to explain it more, Harry didn't say anything, simply walked a bit faster. It was really good that their house was so close, he didn't like walking here practically in the middle of the night.

Neither he nor Ron was surprised to see the light still burning from the living room window.

"You know, that's kind of nice." Grinning at Harry, Ron pointed at the window as they walked to the door. "Sirius really is a mother hen." He didn't think it was actually a bad thing.

Harry smiled at that. "Yeah, he is." He wondered just how long would his godfather have waited until he'd gone out looking for him. If they had stayed out until the early hours, they would have probably seen a black dog sniffing around the streets when they came back home.

The house was quiet and no one came to greet them as they took off their shoes in the hall. Raising an eyebrow at Ron, Harry made a gesture towards the living room and the two of them sneaked silently to see if there was anyone waiting there.

"Hello boys." Mouthing the words silently, Remus looked up from the book he'd been reading. The reason for his soft smile was quite evident. Sirius was fast asleep on the couch, his head resting in Remus' lap. "Did you have fun?"

Ron nodded. "Yeah." It had been okay.

"Yes." It was clear that Harry was getting better with the lies. This one came out easily, mainly because right now he was kind of happy. Happy to be away from the crowd again.

"Good." Nodding carefully so that he didn't jolt Sirius' head, Remus asked, "And Hermione?"

"She stayed there with Terry." There was a world of innuendo in Ron's voice, but the smile he flashed was not an evil one. "Don't worry, he'll get her home safe."
Remus seemed to accept that, leaning slightly back. It looked like he was perfectly willing to stay here until the last one of them was safely under this roof.

"I think I'll go to bed. Harry, you coming?" Even though they had separate bedrooms now, the question was still instinctive. Sometimes Ron almost forgot they weren't sharing the dormitory anymore.

"No." Grabbing the first piece of paper from the table, barely even looking at it, Harry muttered to Ron, "I still need to catch up on the paperwork." It didn't sound convincing even in his own ears. "See you in the morning." With that he sat down.

Ron opened his mouth to protest, but then he saw the relaxed way Harry was curling on the chair. He realized that maybe he just wanted to sit here with Sirius and Remus. That was fine by Ron. "Yeah. Sure. Good night, Harry."

"Night, Ron."

Harry was glad Ron hadn't asked any questions. It didn't look like Remus objected his presence either; he just looked at him a moment longer and then returned to his book.

Harry didn't want to go to bed yet, the solitude of his room feeling about as appealing as the crowd back at the Three Broomsticks.

This was nice. It wasn't really quiet, with the sound of heavy breathing and pages being turned; both familiar to Harry by now. He was slowly relaxing, and as he sank deeper to the chair, he realized just how tense he'd been all evening.

His back felt like he'd been carrying heavy cauldrons around all day. He'd be damn sore tomorrow.

There was nothing in the reports he really needed to read, and it was too late for him to really concentrate on anything right now. Still, he sat here.

It was undoubtedly the best thing that had happened today.

Watching Sirius cuddle closer to Remus brought a wistful smile to Harry's lips. He was glad his godfather was finally having some peace in his life, but seeing Sirius like this made him inevitably think about what he didn't have. The truth was that no matter how the adoring crowd annoyed him and the emptiness in his bedroom made him miserable, basically he just missed Snape. Missed their conversations, or just the silence between them. It had been a terribly long time since he'd had any chance to be alone with him instead of seeing him across a crowded room.

He had never allowed himself to really pay attention to the horrible void of loneliness before it had been gone. Now it nagged at the edge of his consciousness. All the time.

A soft whimper came from Sirius, pulling Harry out of his thoughts, and was soon followed by other similar sounds. For a moment, Harry wondered if there was something wrong with his godfather. Then he saw the way he twitched in his sleep. Of course. He was dreaming.

It made Harry wonder how the Animagi dreamt. Was Sirius dreaming of ordinary human things, or was his dreamscape Snuffles' playground? Maybe he'd ask that one day, when the thought of bringing up the whole Animagus thing with Sirius didn't make his stomach twist.

Remus turned the page, gaze focused on the text he was reading. His free hand came to rest on Sirius' chest, moving in slight circles, a soothing caress. It seemed like the movement was totally involuntary, like he was reacting to a sound that spoke straight to his instincts.
Trying not to laugh out loud, Harry turned his gaze back to the report. He wondered just how often had his godfather spent his evenings as Snuffles, sleeping next to Remus while Remus scratched his belly.

Probably more often than they could count.

The lines on the page were becoming blurry, and Harry lowered the paper o his lap. He'd just close his eyes for a moment. He wasn't really tired, but his eyes were itching, and the darkness sort of helped.

It had been such a damn long day. A damn long week, really. He wasn't even sure what day it was, for it made no real difference. The Order worked seven days a week, some of them probably concentrating on reports and details during all possible hours.

He wished he could really think of the meetings and the reading as work, but it was so overwhelming it was becoming his whole life. There wasn't anything he could really do about it. He had nothing else to concentrate on.

At least it would keep him too busy to spend any real amount of time being maudlin.

Hearing a rustling sound, Harry opened his eyes to glance at Remus. He saw that Sirius was slowly waking up, stretching his arms above his head. Instead of getting up, he reached out with his hand and gently trailed over one of the scars running down Remus' face with a finger.

Harry closed his eyes again before they could see he was watching.

He was glad Sirius had someone like Remus. It was good to see them like this, when they dropped the pretense of simple friendship, even if just for a moment. Harry had heard how some of the older members of the Order whispered from time to time and understood at least a few of the reasons for their need for privacy. The troublemaker and the intellectual. The escaped prisoner and the werewolf. He didn't know what other comments had driven the secrecy this far, but could relate to them.

It didn't matter that they didn't want to really acknowledge what they had to anyone as long as they felt like they could act normally in their own home.

But even as Harry enjoyed watching the obvious love between those two, every tender gesture made him miss such a connection more. For once, it didn't make him feel annoyed, but simply wistful; remembering casual, simple touches and the silence that didn't feel strained.

Good memories of time spent with Snape were slowly lulling him closer to sleep.

"Harry?" Sirius whispered carefully. "Are you still awake?"

Smiling, Harry muttered, "Yeah, I'm awake." Once again it felt like a half-truth at best. He blinked owlishly at Sirius, wondering why he just smiled at him in response and shook his head.

He ignored it, letting his eyes close slowly. The papers he'd been holding were falling on the floor, but he didn't really care. The chair was nice and soft and with Sirius watching over him he felt safe enough to drift away.
Part 17

Sleeping in the chair hadn't been one of Harry's best ideas. Unlike some enlarged chairs he could mention, the one in his living room had been extremely uncomfortable and hard. It didn't matter the damn thing looked nice.

Trying to stretch the tension away from his shoulders, he looked around the Entrance Hall, sighing as he saw people milling around aimlessly again.

He didn't know when this would end. They were all waiting for things to start happening, but no one seemed to be able to sit and wait.

Everyone was gathering here at Hogwarts, small groups of people talking about the war together or simply sharing ideas.

Harry didn't really wonder why. He didn't like waiting either.

Still, he would have rather stayed home going through the vast amount of old books that had been delivered at their doorstep early this morning. Remus had been overjoyed to see them, spreading books all around the living room and disappearing between the musty pages as soon as they'd finished breakfast.

Reading about dark creatures would definitely be easier than this. Harry shook his head. He was certain Sirius would have preferred coming with him, but since the Death Eater operation with magical beings was still his main focus, he'd stayed behind with Remus.

Harry was actually glad he had. Ron and Hermione -- and of course Malfoy, who seemed to be happy to trail after them quietly -- were with him, and there would be nothing to worry about inside Hogwarts' walls. Besides, having Sirius stay away postponed a scene Harry really didn't wish to witness right now.

He smiled just a little as he stepped into the Great Hall and immediately spotted both Dumbledore and Snape, the two wizards standing together and talking quietly.

Maybe this wasn't going to be such a bad day after all.

"I'm going to talk to Terry," Hermione muttered, looking at her friend who had definitely not used any kinds of hangover cure potions this morning.

Ron nodded after casting a look around the Hall and seeing none of his brothers here today. "Okay. I'll come with you."

They'd been talking about some intriguing ideas last night, and he wanted to go through some of the things with Terry again.

After one hesitant glance at Harry, Draco trailed after them. He didn't think his company was wanted, and since professor Snape was with Dumbledore and Blaise was nowhere in sight, he should just try to find a dark corner and stay there.

Harry watched his friends go. There were things he wanted to talk about with Hermione and Ron, and even with Malfoy, but he didn't think this was the time or the place.
Too many people here.

He nodded slightly at those who called out his name, but didn't stop to talk to anyone. When people realized he was walking towards Dumbledore, they didn't even try to approach him.

It was an odd sort of relief.

"Good morning, Harry. Good to see you."

Smiling at Dumbledore, Harry nodded. "Headmaster. Snape." Facing just the two wizards, he let the smile broaden.

"Potter," Snape muttered, his expression haughty. "I see that unlike most of the teenagers, you didn't spend the whole night partying."

Harry wondered if his face would split from the smile. "Not really my style. I much rather spend the night in quiet company." He barely managed to swallow the descriptions of said company, certain that Snape wouldn't want him to say it in front of Dumbledore.

As expected, his words were followed by a raised eyebrow, but some of the haughtiness seemed to disappear from Snape's face.

Not that it probably meant anything, but Harry chose to feel good about it anyway.

"Severus and I were just talking about the projects in Hogsmeade," Dumbledore stated as if he'd completely missed the looks and the lessening of tension. "I do think Mr. Zabini will be able to move into his own apartment soon."

That was certainly good news.

Of course there were more. The plans they had for the small village were rather extensive, and Dumbledore seemed to enjoy outlining the ideas once more, repeating things they had talked about half a dozen times already.

Harry didn't mind. There were worse ways to spend the day.

Even with his attention on Dumbledore, Harry couldn't help being aware of Snape's presence by his side. He had to concentrate on standing still, otherwise he would have swayed closer to Snape.

An evening spent drinking had definitely been a bad idea. All that damn wallowing made him want to go to Snape and now was not the time for that.

He didn't say anything, he simply hung on the edge of the conversation, enjoying the nuances of Snape's voice as he commented on Dumbledore's plans. He liked the sound of Snape's voice; the sarcastic quips and dry wit delivered smoothly.

He could listen to it all day long and it didn't even matter what Snape was saying. He could lecture about Potions or read from the Daily Prophet for all he cared. Even now most of the things he said didn't register.

Harry was more interested in the way he talked.

He cast a look at Snape's lips and then couldn't take his gaze away. Concentrating on every moue was simply too fascinating.

It was a familiar sight, and he realized he could tell Snape's mood by simply looking at the way he
pursed his lips together.

He was lost in the memories of seeing those lips twist into a sarcastic sneer whenever he said something foolish, the expression never really changing even though there was no malice in the black gaze these days. Sometimes when Snape was relaxed, there were softer imitations of the sneer, even almost-smiles.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Harry tried to stop thinking about Snape's lips or any other body parts right now. This was important.

He was going to have to do something about this. Missing Snape's presence was already pulling his attention away from all the other important things, and he couldn't afford that. Maybe he could stay for tea or something after the day's meetings. Just to spend some time alone with Snape.

Not to have sex, but simply to sit there in the dungeons and feel Snape next to him. Watching him relax slightly, feeling his skin brush against his and who was he trying to convince he wasn't going to have sex with the man anyway?

It was not exactly a good thought for the moment, but Harry couldn't help lingering on the yearning no matter how silly it was.

Professor Flitwick joined them, his eyes bright as ever and his whole being shivering with nervous excitement. Harry tore his attention away from Snape, glad of the distraction, and forced himself to listen as the Charms professor talked about all the inquiries the former members of his House had sent him these past few days.

That was actually intriguing. As far as Harry could tell, the Order had always stayed in the background, never attracting multitudes of members. Maybe now that would change, and it was not a bad turn.

They needed more people to defeat the Death Eaters.

"I will brew more *Veritaserum* then," was all Snape said after Flitwick's exuberant report.

Glaring at his colleague who had the audacity to challenge the integrity of his former students, Flitwick bristled for a moment, but then forgot all about House pride and went on describing charms to Dumbledore who listened avidly and nodded every now and then.

Harry fought against the urge to roll his eyes, pressing his lips together as he saw the dark amusement on Snape's face. He was used to that expression by now, having seen it countless of times, especially when Snape commented on his hormonal behavior.

It was definitely best if he concentrated on something else.

He cast a look around the room, seeing no familiar redheads except for Ron. Hoping it wasn't because any bad news from St. Mungo's, Harry focused on his friends, seeing most of his yearmates gathered near the huge windows.

At first it looked like there was some casual discussion about something going on, Ron and Terry Boot talking and gesturing at Hermione who was actually smiling at Blaise Zabini, but it soon became clear that it wasn't exactly a conversation. Harry could tell when Ron was getting upset, and that point was awfully close.

Frowning, he watched Terry's face get redder, and finally the Ravenclaw snapped out something and then walked away in anger.
"Excuse me." He nodded at the professors -- gaze barely lingering on Snape -- and then went to where Ron and the others were standing. "What was that all about?" Raising an eyebrow, Harry stared at the retreating back. He'd never seen Terry act like that before. He was usually very quiet and composed.

Ron shrugged. "I guess he's just a bit edgy."

They all were. It was no wonder.

This waiting was really getting on Ron's nerves. He liked thinking about strategy when it was about wizard's chess or Quidditch, but not when he should be doing something instead of just talking.

He saw Lee Jordan talking to Seamus and Dean, but didn't feel like going to them. His dad was still at St. Mungo's with Bill, working on getting Charlie better, and he didn't want to spend the day talking to anyone about it.

Like he usually did; talking with Harry and Hermione and the others. Talking and doing nothing really serious about this whole damn war. He hated it, needed to be doing something.

At least it looked like today would be slightly different. Dumbledore was walking towards a side door now, casting a look at them. It was like a sign for something important.

It hit Ron that it probably was a sign. Like other knowing looks and twinkling gazes and a hundred other signs he'd missed along the years.

A look at Harry confirmed his suspicions. He was definitely looking more alert now, getting ready to leave the Great Hall.

Crap.

"Are we supposed to stay here while you go to another secret meeting?" Ron hadn't really understood how that still bothered him until he said it out loud. His voice almost dripped with malice.

He didn't even have to see the way Harry flinched to know that he'd guessed it right.

Harry let out a sigh. He could see how it wasn't really necessary to protect his friends anymore. Sooner or later they would all have to hear the truth, and hearing it now might save their lives later on. "No. You're supposed to come with me to a secret meeting." He managed to even smile at the astonishment on Ron's face. With a glance at Hermione and Malfoy, he gestured at the door. "Let's go then."

Surprised that he was included in Potter's gesture, Draco followed the Gryffindor trio in silence.

There were others going to the Headmaster's office, people who hadn't previously been included in these meetings. Harry nodded slightly at the professors who were here for the first time. It was good to have them here.

Ron tried not to gawk at everyone as he quietly followed the others to Dumbledore's office. There were no couches or comfortable chairs there anymore, simply a round table with wooden chairs around it and he sat between Harry and Hermione. Barely noticing where Malfoy was sitting, he looked around, eyes wide with wonder.

They were definitely the youngest people in the room. There was the Headmaster with professor McGonagall sitting near by. Sprout and Flitwick were talking quietly together while Snape settled on the other side of the table, looking as stern as ever.
He seemed to focus his attention on Harry for a moment, and Ron had to bite his lip to stop the grimace from spreading to his face. He did not like seeing Harry relax ever so slightly when he noticed Snape looking at him.

Since there weren't other teachers here, Ron decided that the ones present had to be here because they were all Heads of the Houses. It made sense. He was definitely glad no one had invited Trelawney. The other people in the room looked familiar from the meeting last spring, but he couldn't remember their names.

Maybe he should ask Harry. He certainly looked like he knew everyone here.

"All right then." Leaning back on his chair, Dumbledore adjusted his glasses and cast a knowing look around the room.

Ron felt shivers go down his back as that piercing gaze met him. It suddenly made this real. He was sitting in Dumbledore's office and this was a very secret Order of the Phoenix meeting! It didn't get much more real than this.

Next to him, Hermione was fussing with a quill and a parchment, and Ron wondered if he should take notes as well. This wasn't class, but he could bet this was more important than anything he'd ever been taught in school. Trying to look nonchalant, he rested his elbows on the table and waited for Dumbledore to go on.

Everyone looked ready for some real action. Even Flitwick looked more alert than in ages.

Feeling the slight tension in the pit of his stomach, Harry wondered if it was because of the boredom of the past days. Was he now thrilled because of the chance to actually do something because he really wanted to fight, or was it because anything was better than just waiting?

He cast a brief look at Dumbledore, not at all surprised to see that the old wizard was avoiding his eyes.

"We have gathered here today to make final plans for the training," Dumbledore said without the usual pleasantries.

It was familiar to Harry, but most of the other people were clearly dismayed. There had been no talk of tea, no Sherbert Lemons or other sweets offered. This was simply business.

No one said a thing as Dumbledore once again introduced people to each other, not even smiling at the silliness of calling out the names of the teachers.

Ron was just glad he wouldn't embarrass himself now that he knew for sure that the witch was Figg and the wizard was Fletcher and not the other way around.

"Now that we've taken care of that..." Dumbledore nodded to his side, his expression softening. "Minerva, would you please?"

Looking down at a parchment, McGonagall read out loud, "We already have people focusing on dark creatures that have been shipped to the country by Voldemort's people." Her voice was firm. "Filius is looking into advanced Charms and Severus is working with Poppy to make sure we have as many stealth potions, antidotes and other medicinal brews in store as possible."

The last comment made everyone tense. Talking about healing meant acknowledging the idea of casualties. They had talked about war and what it really meant before, but the thought of fighting in an actual fight that would cause injuries, seemed to hit some of the people sitting around the table
Flitwick's brow was creased with worry.

"Our main concern right now is the Order itself. Not only the housing in Hogsmeade and secrecy and security, but preparing everyone to what will come."

Muttering quietly, "Finally!" Arabella Figg leaned back on her chair, looking relieved.

McGonagall threw a stern look at her, as if chastising a student in class. The strange thing was that that one simple look made Figg fluster where nothing said in the secret inner circle meetings ever had.

"As I was saying..." McGonagall tapped the parchment. "We have some veterans from the first war, but unfortunately they're in the minority. Most of the adults that have recently joined the Order have at least some extensive training in defense, but the younger witches and wizards need to learn more. Much more than any Defense Against Dark Arts class has covered."

That didn't come as a surprise to Harry. The classes had been difficult, but they had never really dealt with the darkness waiting for them. Voldemort wouldn't send Red Caps to defeat them or use disarming curses.

Dumbledore nodded firmly, casting a knowing look at McGonagall. "We need to have more training for dueling, defense, strategy and basic healing."

The only sound in the room was Hermione's quill scratching on the parchment.

"Yes," McGonagall agreed. "Also, we need to educate people about what really happened, both seventeen years ago and these past few weeks. There are so many lies told as the truth, and people deserve to know who fought against Voldemort and who betrayed us all."

Harry opened his mouth for the first time, managing a half choked, "Yes." He was so tired of the lies and half-truths, and it was about time they could be open about spies and heroes.

He was glad for Sirius, but knew it would be both relieving and painful to have the tale of Peter Pettigrew out in the open. Not to mention the publicity their own spy would receive once Snape's story hit the news.

A very forbidding glare on Snape's face told that his past had better not become a matter of public interest.

"That will be quite a lot of work." Sprout shook her head slightly, wondering how could they ever organize half of what Minerva had just said. "Do you think we have enough time for all that?"

Looking down at the tabletop, Harry listened half heartedly as Dumbledore listed all the plans they had already made. It was almost like he was living through those small meetings again, carried back in time to when there had been just Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape and him here, with Figg, Fletcher, Sirius and Remus coming to join them as often as they could.

They had discussed this back then, Dumbledore painting a very realistic picture of the training they would still need. Harry didn't need to hear it again, he already remembered every word.

It was going to be hard work. Probably harder than any one of them could imagine.

Still, Harry was glad they would start to really do things. The more they trained their people, the
better their chances were. He was not going to let anyone go into the upcoming fights without real skills to actually fight the enemy.

He could see how their plans made Ron and Hermione stare as the enormity of this whole thing finally hit them. This wasn't like one of their adventures, with swift action and a relatively easy victory. Voldemort wouldn't appear at the gates and challenge him. He couldn't go alone to find the enemy and then challenge Voldemort. This would be a real war.

There would be battles and losses and it would probably take a very long time before they could even begin to plan for peace.

Realization in Malfoy's eyes was not as obvious, but Harry could see that their plans for everything unnerved him as well. He'd really have to sit down with Malfoy soon and talk about the different view they had on things, the concepts that were totally alien to him and as familiar as his own skin to Malfoy.

For the first time he felt a small twinge of regret for all those days he'd spent pushing the whole thing away and spending time in Snape's room at the cottage. They should have talked more about this.

Then he looked at Ron, taking in the absolute shock on his face. No, it would never have worked. Ron was barely able to deal with this when Dumbledore was the one outlining their plans. Harry didn't even want to think about how Ron would have reacted to him or Snape saying the same things.

It looked like some people here were having a hard time listening to the Headmaster.

Professor Flitwick was slowly shaking his head, as if he was finding a huge logic loop in Dumbledore's words. Looking around the table, he waited for there to be a pause in the narrative and then raised his hand slightly, asking for a permission to speak.

"You don't have to do that, Filius," Dumbledore said gently. "If you want to say something, say it."

After a hesitant cough, Flitwick asked, "Are we really talking about a war here? A real war against the Death Eaters?"

From the shock reflected on Sprout's face, Harry realized that even after everything that had happened, after all the things they had already talked about, it was hard for some to understand that this was real.

"Yes." Surprisingly, it was Arabella Figg saying that. She'd been sitting in silence as usual, listening to every word said.

Flitwick stared at her for a moment and then turned back to Dumbledore for a confirmation. "Really?"

"Yes, Filius. We're at war, and very soon, it will become clear to the whole wizarding world." There was a note of finality in Dumbledore's voice.

Wondering what more would their world need, Harry shook his head slightly. Two of his colleagues had been attacked, people were killed and still professor Flitwick hesitated? Was this really how people dealt with a situation like this; hid their heads in the sand and wished it'd all go away?

If people really didn't believe Voldemort was back, how could they ever defend themselves?

"Maybe there will be no more attacks." It sounded almost as if Flitwick was still asking a question.
Harry hated to see the glimmer of hope on some faces. He looked up, waiting for Dumbledore to say something. The solemn expression he saw made him almost choke. Dumbledore was looking at him, waiting for him to tell everyone the absolute truth.

He resented it, wanting nothing more than to leave. But he couldn't move. This was indeed his life now, and like it or not, he was going to have to live it.

Not simply in front of a crowd of strangers, but a small group of people he'd known almost half his life.

"Oh, there will be attacks."

Ron jumped at that. It was the first thing Harry had said loud and clear, and he was shocked to hear the words coming from him. He could see Hermione was equally stunned.

Suddenly looking even smaller than he really was, Flitwick asked again, "Really?"

"They'll come for us." Voice perfectly calm, Harry sat there, not looking at anyone. "Once they make the decision, they will come to kill us. Maybe one house or village at the time, maybe a full blown attack, I don't know. But they will come. Not to conquer or take over. They will come to kill us, and at that point, they're not going to ask who's who. They won't care if they kill Muggles or our troops, students or us. They'll just kill everyone."

He was so tired of everyone thinking this wouldn't be a big deal when it was.

Only Dumbledore and Snape nodded at the harsh words, knowing they were not an exaggeration or a morose figment of Harry's imagination. Neither said anything but simply watched in silence as everyone else gaped in obvious shock.

Minerva McGonagall looked at Harry, her expression hard but her gaze misting over with unshed tears. This was breaking her heart, watching her children grow up too soon. It didn't matter Harry was fulfilling his destiny, he was still too young for this.

"That is correct," Dumbledore nodded finally. Here, with the inner most circle of their Order, they would have to be honest with each other. Hiding from the truth would serve no purpose anymore.

"Lots of people will get killed. It doesn't matter how well we plan or how good we are. People are going to die." Harry raised his gaze for the first time, looking at Ron who was now staring fixedly at the tabletop. "How the hell can we prepare them for that?"

There was a silence, filled with pain and sadness.

"We can't. No one can be prepared for that. But we can prepare our people to fight, and to survive." They did have excellent teachers for that.

Harry looked at Dumbledore, nodding curtly. He knew he was right, but hated the feeling of hopelessness. Everyone in the Order would follow him; through flames and pain, to whatever end. He didn't want to think about what that end would be to most. Facing the Death Eaters usually ended in either death or agony.

His expression didn't waver as he said quietly, "We must be honest with our people about what they are about to face. No more lies. They must all understand what this war means. That Voldemort's people show no mercy. They kill. And if they don't kill immediately..." He couldn't say it after all. "We all know what they do to their captives."
No one seemed to breathe for a moment, the tension in the room palpable. As Dumbledore closed his eyes, Harry was finally able to turn his gaze away. He tried not to look at the others, knowing most would know exactly what he was talking about. Fearing that some might not, and he would have to explain.

Draco watched the older members of the Order, wondering what they were thinking. The teachers he'd seen as fools now looked lost in unpleasant thoughts. He'd never seen such anger in the Headmaster or such pain in the usually so jolly Sprout. It was almost as if they were remembering something.

Tasting bile in his mouth, he turned away from the plump herbologist only to meet professor McGonagall's completely empty gaze.

In all his life, he had never felt himself so small; guilt unlike any he'd ever felt was choking him. He was totally unprepared for this. Gryffindors didn't really matter, teachers didn't matter. His life had always been about power and pride and there was no room for regrets in the world where he'd grown up.

"We know." Snape sounded like he was listing the properties of knotgrass. "But the children might not. Whatever they have heard from the older students or their parents, I doubt it's enough. When their training truly begins, everyone should be informed of what they will be facing. Death and torture. Curses they have never even heard of as well as the cruciatus, beatings, rape..."

Draco flinched at the calmly stated list, still unable to turn his gaze from McGonagall's. There had been terrible knowledge in the blue eyes, of all the things Snape had said.

As the familiar voice continued about the Death Eaters, Draco couldn't help thinking about the moment when he'd seen Mordred swoop down from the rafters with a letter in his beak. He'd read the parchment dozens of times before burning it and destroying all the evidence.

He had known. Not everything, but more than most people in the castle. He'd been well aware of his father's plan to take care of some of the most important Order members and those they loved. The list of names and dates had not been long, and he hadn't really concentrated on them, choosing to angst over the big picture and his own future instead.

No matter what his defection had prevented, it hadn't prevented this one person almost dying. He tried not to think about the other things the Death Eaters might have done, but couldn't help wondering.

What a stupid thought. He knew his father and his friends and how they felt about Gryffindors. They would never have passed such an opportunity. He knew without the shadow of a doubt that they had indeed.

Slowly, he turned his gaze to Potter. Did he know? Did he have any idea of what had really happened to the Head of his House when she'd been away? Draco was certain all the teachers at least suspected. But did Potter or his friends know?

He noticed how Potter was sitting completely still, his hand squeezed into a fist. On his side, Weasley was staring with his eyes wide, mouth slightly open.

Draco swallowed. The slight movement made the angry green gaze focus on him, and for a moment he and Potter were looking at each other in perfect understanding.

He knew, had known all along. Draco couldn't even begin to comprehend what else Potter might
know, what he saw as reality. How the hell could Potter offer him a place to stay, knowing what his family was like? Not so long ago, Draco had been more than willing to become like that as well. Like his father was, like Snape had been; a monster.

Still looking into Potter's eyes, he understood for the first time why there was no real enmity between them anymore.

With his silly games and comments, he must appear to be a nuisance, but nothing more. There were people who were the embodiment of evil. After facing such people, no wonder Potter wouldn't spend any time worrying about someone like him.

Draco looked away. It was devastating to finally see just how small his part in this whole thing was. Compared to most of these people, he'd seen nothing. He didn't want to think about McGonagall. Didn't want to think about Snape.

But he couldn't keep his thoughts away from them.

How could they sit here and discuss this when all he wanted to do was to run away and hide in shame? He would never understand them, especially Snape who had once been everything he now hated. How could he bear to sit there and talk about these things?

He looked up to see the black gaze focused on him, revealing nothing of what Snape was thinking.

"But..." Looking pale with shock, professor Sprout was shaking her head, as if she didn't want to believe what she was hearing. "But surely they wouldn't dare. Not now. The Ministry will..."

"The Ministry will do nothing."

There was an awful silence. Draco cringed, refusing to even look at the Transfiguration professor, keeping his gaze on Snape. He wasn't into praying, but right now he begged to the fates and Merlin and anyone who might listen that no one would ask anything.

Minerva McGonagall's voice was icy cold as she went on, "They will turn a blind eye to evidence and truth and will refuse to listen to anyone who tells them about Voldemort or his people and their atrocities." She paused for a moment. "I know Cornelius, and he will never believe that people who are in high places in our society would ever do such horrible things."

Her words couldn't have been clearer even if she had said names out loud. The flicker of completely uncharacteristic pity in Snape's eyes told Draco that he knew the truth as well.

Fortunately no one tried to argue with McGonagall. A moment later Dumbledore raised the question of training again, and everyone seemed to be relieved by the topic.

No more questions were asked about the need of preparing for a fight.

The plans weren't simple by any means, but the calm way Dumbledore talked about teaching and preparing made everything sound so clear. Only the cold look in his eyes spoke of his true anger, and that was somewhat more frightening than anything.

It was not a discussion. Harry had been a part of so many arguments and planning meetings he was actually glad the Headmaster was now stating their plans, not waiting for anyone to say anything intelligent. Everything possible had already been said in this room, over dozens of secret meetings and small gatherings.

No one could pretend this was anything but a war council. Worried and shocked and scared,
everyone simply sat and listened.

Harry didn't have to. He knew all this, knew his part in the grand plan beyond the things that were now said.

He was just glad Dumbledore was the one holding this council, carrying this burden probably for the last time before passing it on.

As soon as Dumbledore indicated the meeting was over, Hermione stood up and left the room. Her expression was fragile, and no one questioned her as she headed towards the door.

She was soon followed by professor Flitwick who looked like he was going to head straight into his quarters and hide under his bed until the war was over. "Why can't there just be honest duels?" he muttered to himself as the door swung closed behind him.

Ron was still staring at the people near him, his gaze going from Dumbledore to McGonagall, then to Snape and back to Dumbledore again. He couldn't comprehend most of what had just happened. Sure, he'd heard every word said, but he still couldn't comprehend what they really meant.

He realized he didn't want to be here anymore. This reality of the Order, of the war was too horrible to deal with. Why was he here anyway? Shouldn't his dad be here? Or Bill?

Merlin! He was glad they weren't! He never wanted them to know what he now suspected.

"Harry?" Ron's whisper was frantic. "Do you think that the Death Eaters... That when they had professor McGonagall... That they... They couldn't have, right?" He couldn't be right, because that just didn't happen. Not to old professors, not to someone he cared about.

There was a moment of utter silence before Harry swallowed. "Yes. They probably did." He hadn't asked Snape, and never would. But he did know the reality.

He didn't want to think about it, but seeing the bewildered look in Ron's eyes forced him to sit here and discuss the matter. At least Ron was asking him and not Hermione. He had seen her hurry out of the room when their meeting was over. There was no way she could handle talking about this.

Draco slammed the door shut behind him and walked away. He didn't want to hear Potter explain his friend that the Death Eaters probably had. Didn't want to see the way Weasley would crumble at the words and be reminded of other Weasleys that were dead. He certainly didn't want to hear the name that was connected to both acts of violence, the pureblood family pride making him sick for the first time ever.

Inside the Headmaster's office, Ron was not crumbling. He was still staring at Harry, as if his words made absolutely no sense.

"But... Why?" He didn't know if any answer would be enough.

Harry shook his head, hating the way Ron was staring at him. He looked so damn young, too young to know these things, and it didn't matter that Ron was actually months older than he was. "I don't know."

Because they could. Because it was a show of force and contempt and Lucius Malfoy and his cohorts were sadistic bastards who would take pleasure in ravaging and torturing and killing people.

He wasn't surprised when Ron turned his agitated gaze to McGonagall and then flinched as if someone had hit him. However, he was glad that Ron said nothing and simply got up and scurried
out of the Headmaster's office.

Harry was pretty sure they would never talk about this again.

It was a relief, for he was feeling too raw to even try to deal with this in a reasonable way.

He walked across the room, reluctantly discarding his earlier plans to stay and spend some time with Snape. The meeting had been draining, for all of them, and he suspected that once in the dungeons he couldn't really leave any time soon. Having Hermione and Ron go home all agitated would alarm Sirius, and whatever the outcome was, it wouldn't be pretty.

Still, he couldn't just leave.

Since Dumbledore was staring out of a window Harry had never really noticed before and the others were busy trying to get out, Harry tried to be as unobtrusive as possible.

By the table, McGonagall was muttering quietly to Snape who was scribbling something on a parchment. It almost looked like she was keeping herself occupied so that no one could approach her with questions. She didn't need to bother. Everyone was already abandoning the room as if it were on fire.

Snape nodded slightly. "I will get that to you the first thing tomorrow. It's a simple potion, I could make it in my sleep."

"Thank you, Severus." Touching his arm lightly, McGonagall nodded before leaving. There was no answer, not that she had expected one.

Harry had watched the whole thing from the distance, needing a moment with Snape before going home alone again. He was surprised by the professor's gesture, since she never touched anyone anymore. The only exceptions seemed to be Snape and Dumbledore.

Was it because it had been Snape who had finally rescued her? He had no idea. He wanted to ask, but didn't know if he really should. He didn't want to remind Snape of that night.

"Was there something you wanted, Potter?" Collecting his parchments, Snape cast a glare at Harry. He didn't think he would do anything stupid with people still in the room, but one never knew with the Gryffindors.

The familiar tone made Harry smile wistfully. "Not really. I just..." Realizing he couldn't say anything about how he missed Snape and how he would do anything to spend just a little more time with him without sounding like a real wanker, he said instead, "I'm glad professor McGonagall is all right with you."

Right after the words came out, he cursed his stupidity, hearing how they could be interpreted wrong. "I mean, since she obviously doesn't trust people right now." That felt even more stupid to say. A very awkward way to say something he couldn't really put into words.

"How preceptive of you," Snape muttered, looking actually amused instead of angry. Then all amusement disappeared as he added quietly, "Minerva has a very good reason for not trusting people." He had seen the looks on the teenagers earlier and knew Harry was well aware of what he was speaking of.

Harry nodded. "I know." He wished he didn't know, but now that he did, he wanted to thank Snape again for rescuing McGonagall from even more pain and humiliation and a certain death. "Yeah." There were no words enough to show his gratitude, and he doubted any would be appreciated.
Finishing with his parchments, Snape cast another look at him. He wondered what Harry was thinking about right now. Probably about the things they had just said, most likely about everything they hadn't said out loud but knew nevertheless. Even with his insane notions of trust and other emotional things, he doubted Harry had ever really forgot about his past.

It made no real sense, but Snape didn't want to ask for Harry's reasons for overlooking everything the ugly mark on his arm meant. Those so called reasons would probably be foolish and based on intuition anyway, but something compelled him to say, "She has nothing to fear from me. I have never..." He fell silent. No, he had never felt the need to explain his past to Harry and would not do so now.

Without other words, he squeezed the parchments against his chest and walked away from the table.

The very quiet, "I know," followed him, but he pretended he hadn't heard it. It made no difference what Harry thought he knew, even though there was a very small part of Snape that was actually pleased that he would say that.

Harry let Snape escape, realizing that there was nothing either one of them wanted to say right now. Staying together in a blessed silence was impossible, no matter how he craved it. He'd settle for the second best thing; battered and tired, he felt like he needed a long hot shower followed by a large mug of hot chocolate.

Quite likely a hug from Sirius.

There were still people milling around in the hallways, but Harry paid no attention to them. After talking about the realities of the very ugly war waiting for them, he didn't want to stay here and talk about trivialities. He could see that Ron and Hermione hadn't waited for him, but Draco Malfoy was standing in the shadows of the Entrance Hall. Once again there was no arrogance in his posture, only tired sadness, and that was the one thing that made Harry walk to him.

"Are you going back home?" Harry asked quietly.

Draco nodded, keeping his gaze down. He didn't know what to expect, but he was certain he wouldn't like it.

To his surprise, Potter didn't say anything. He simply joined him on the way back to Hogsmeade, strangely relaxed to walk next to him.

There were other people on the road, but Draco didn't pay attention to them, not even when there was a flurry of action as a flock of hungry looking reporters descended upon them.

It was good to walk in silence; there was nothing to say anyway. For the first time Draco was actually grateful of Potter's discretion and wasn't sure if he should be pleased or annoyed by it. He chose simply to enjoy it, enjoy the silence that was so much better than accusations or questions.

The two older Gryffindors were waiting for them in the living room, both looking worried. Apparently both Weasley and Granger had come home in shock, and they were now anxious to coddle Potter.

Draco ignored Black, who was completely focused on Potter anyway, and Lupin's knowing glances. He simply walked up the stairs to his room.

No amount of coddling or soft words would make him feel any better right now.

Instead of looking for comfort, he wanted to go to Weasley, to pick a fight or yell at him, shag him,
whatever it took to get a reaction from the annoying man and lose himself in whatever emotion that wasn't pain.

Yet the same time, the mere thought of touching Weasley in any way made him physically ill.

He didn't want to think about Gryffindors. Or sex. Definitely not sex with Gryffindors. They all should curse him and his name anyway.

Slamming his door shut behind him, he squeezed his hands into fists so hard that he could feel his nails bite into the soft skin on his palms. The pain was a surprising thing, a strangely good feeling that could never compete with the ache inside but was somehow able to dull it.

He would not waste one more moment thinking about what had or may have happened to anyone. He hadn't done monstrous things, he wasn't a monster, though some people would undoubtedly see him as such.

It was pointless to wallow in this ridiculous guilt! Nothing in his power could change what had happened. He was not to blame for things others had done and damn it he was not going to let his mind linger on thoughts that said otherwise.

Grasping the oldest, deepest notion he had buried into his mind so firmly he didn't have to even think about to summon it, he disregarded the hollow feeling inside and repeated to himself quietly, "I'm a Malfoy, the heir of my House and no matter what, I'm going to act like one!"

That meant he couldn't show any weakness. No matter what happened from now on, he could take it. After all the shocking things he'd had to witness by now, nothing would break him.

Absolutely nothing!

Ignoring the dirty feeling he'd had ever since he'd looked into McGonagall's eyes, he straightened his robes, head held up high.

Part 18

There was no happy small talk during the breakfast the next day.

Not that it surprised Harry. He wasn't in the mood for talking with anyone, and he was the one who'd been prepared to hear all the awful truths. The only thing that actually surprised him was the fact that they were all able to come downstairs for breakfast and no one had exploded yet.

It was probably just a matter of time, but Harry wished he didn't have to witness whatever happened when the silence became too much for them to bear.

He sipped his tea half heartedly, not noticing the taste.

As the house elves finally cleaned up the table, Crookshanks left his place at Hermione's feet and followed Eppy to the kitchen, holding his tail high as he seemed to wobble just as slowly as she did. He'd taken an instant liking on Eppy. For what reason, no one really knew.

Harry suspected it had something to do with the fact that Eppy had an unlimited access to their food supply.

Too bad it wasn't as simple with people as well. Not even the best chocolate in the world could distract him long enough to stop him thinking about the war.
He was more than familiar with people trying to cope with things they didn't want to see or hear, and it wasn't a big surprise to see Hermione fuss with her breakfast or Ron glance around every five seconds as if he was expecting something to attack him.

It was however slightly odd to see Malfoy look as aloof as he had back in school, when he had been the leader of the young Slytherins. Everything was in place; the slick hairdo, the completely emotionless stare. Only the smirk slipped every once in a while, turning into something akin to a grimace.

Harry noticed Remus casting a worried glance at Malfoy, but hoped he wouldn't interfere. He doubted Malfoy could actually deal with talking right now. Not if he didn't go looking for someone to listen.

He just wondered if Malfoy would be completely insufferable for days now.

It wasn't actually surprising that Malfoy would do this after yesterday's meeting. It wasn't better than the groveling at the cottage, and Harry was sure it was about as genuine as the spineless act he'd tried back then.

Somehow it made him think of the countless nights when he'd padded across the hallways back in Hogwarts, wearing the Invisibility cloak over his pajamas. He had been so lost back then, trying to find a way out of all the misery, and it felt like Malfoy was trying to find his way now as well.

He didn't think Malfoy's search would be any easier than his own had been.

Remus made a gesture at Sirius and the two of them excused themselves, clearly going back to the books.

Seeing the door close behind the two older Gryffindors seemed to make Malfoy relax a little. Harry wasn't surprised. He doubted Malfoy was ready for more personal revelations or quiet time with any of them. Not after yesterday.

He pretended not to look up as Malfoy left the room. It wasn't his place to shake him and tell him to drop the act; Malfoy would have to figure that out himself.

Sighing, Harry grabbed a piece of chocolate from the bowl Remus had left on the table and concentrated on the taste melting on his tongue.

"So... Are we going to Hogwarts today?" Ron sounded like he didn't really want to go. He didn't look at Hermione either, clearly not wanting to see the expression on her face.

Harry nodded. "We'd better. I want to talk to Dumbledore about actually starting the training. We've already wasted enough time talking..." He left it hanging, not wanting to say they'd been talking about nothing of importance.

Before anyone could comment on his tone, he excused himself and went to the loo. It was as good an excuse as any, and he bet no one would return to the previous topic when he came back.

Walking to the hallway, wiping his still wet fingers on his robe, he stopped as he saw Ron pace by the front door, waving his hands in the air and muttering curses. Hermione was right there beside him, looking irritated.

There was a sound of almost hysterical laughter coming from the living room.

"What is it?" Looking from Ron's livid face to Hermione, Harry wondered what could have
happened in the five minutes he'd been gone.

Ron refused to say anything, he just waved his hands in the air again, shaking his fist at something invisible.

"It's..." Sighing, Hermione raised the day's Daily Prophet so that Harry could see. There was a huge black and white photo on the front page, two very familiar young men.

Harry let out a groan even before reading the text screaming above the picture. His own face greeted him with a wink, Malfoy standing next to him, looking as expressionless there as in reality.

At the background, Ron was muttering curses.

Obviously embarrassed, Hermione pointed at the header saying, 'The Boy Who Lived and his Saucy Slytherin Sweetheart'. "The article is about as discreet as that says. All about our lives here in Hogsmeade. They even got some parts right. Not the parts about you and Malfoy, though." There was actually a faint flicker of amusement in her gaze.

"What?" Hands almost grabbing the paper, Harry stilled and then simply stared at the article. He didn't want to read it, but couldn't tear his gaze away.

He and Malfoy? Sweethearts? No wonder Sirius was still laughing behind the closed living room door, sounding like he was choking in glee.

Why was everyone so damn enthusiastic about pairing him up with Malfoy? First Remus, now this. Had anything in their long acquaintance ever even hinted that they'd be anything but enemies?

Harry couldn't understand the whole thing. Not that he really understood the mutual hatred and lust that was sometimes kind of obvious between Malfoy and Ron either, but there had never been any lust between him and Malfoy! Even though Malfoy wasn't a complete bastard anymore, he was definitely opinionated and often malevolent. Not that those traits couldn't be damn attractive, but... just no. Not on Malfoy.

He rubbed his forehead and then chuckled helplessly. "Boy did they get that wrong." It was absurd.

His words did nothing to calm Ron down.

Neither he nor Hermione said anything about it on the way to Hogwarts. When Terry Boot joined them on the short walk, she pulled him to the side and whispered to him for a while, obviously telling him not to comment on the lies in the article.

Harry didn't really care of what Terry or anyone else thought. After the initial laughter, he was now bristling with annoyance. It didn't matter that the whole thing wasn't true, the idiots at the Daily Prophet had no right to write about his life like that.

Not even if it had been true.

He could see most people had read the articles, judging by the odd looks and whispers that followed him through the castle grounds and into the school.

Even his former housemates seemed way too interested in the whole thing, Seamus and Dean staring at him in a slight shock and Lavender and Parvati giggling in a corner. Harry chose not to pay any attention to them.

There were however those whose opinion mattered.
Seeing disapproval on professor McGonagall's face was somehow warming, especially when it didn't seem to be aimed at him. Dumbledore's twinkling gaze was as exasperating as always.

Harry had to take a deep breath before he moved his gaze to the man standing next to the Headmaster.

He couldn't decipher Snape's expression at first, the obsidian gaze revealing absolutely nothing. He could however see the slightly crumpled Daily Prophet on the floor next to the man and wondered if he found the whole thing as irritating as he did.

Casting a look at the newspaper, he then rolled his eyes, trying to convey the absurdity of it all without words.

To his amazement, Snape's expression thawed immediately into a very evil smirk, the blank look in his eyes turning into a glitter of malevolent amusement.

Harry made a face. So Snape thought this was funny? He wasn't really surprised.

He didn't want to sneak around in the shadows, but seeing how this stupid rumor made everyone act weirdly chilled him. If the thought of him seeing Draco Malfoy shocked everyone like this, how would it be if people knew the truth? Snape's earlier words came to his mind as clearly as if he'd heard them a moment ago. The famous Harry Potter can't be with a former Death Eater.

"I hate this!" Hissing it under his breath, Harry glared at Snape and then turned away before he could say anything else. He wasn't mad at him, he was mad at their whole world.

He was also mad at how big a deal this was. People were interested in his sex life when no one paid attention to the very real war that was upon them. This was eating away the more important things, his private actions somehow larger than matters of life and death.

After yesterday's meeting and the following shock to his two best friends, he didn't want to deal with something like this.

Whispers all around him. Even Sprout was looking at him all askew, as if she couldn't understand him right now. It was somehow sickening; like she was already over her shock and moving on.

It wasn't completely fair to hate people for hiding from things that were too big to deal with, but Harry still resented the stares and the whispers. His life had been like this all along, and he wished nothing more than to be away from the maddening crowd, somewhere he could find peace.

The whispers stopped for a moment as Malfoy stepped into the room.

Harry sighed as he saw the familiar sneer on his lips. That would definitely not help. Indeed, the whispers were starting again, this time louder than just a moment ago.

Slightly shocked by all the attention but not showing it, Draco cast a furtive look around the room. It didn't seem that people were about to attack him for the rumors, but one never knew what was going to happen when Potter was involved.

He could see that there was annoyance in Potter's eyes, but it didn't feel like it was focused at him. For some strange reason it was a complete relief. Draco didn't mind the blatant anger on Weasley's face. Weasley was always angry at him, nothing new there.

Anger was a good emotion. It was better than the foolish regrets and guilt and other insane things that could still haunt him.
Such a Gryffindor thing, really. He'd noticed that Potter liked to wallow in all the things he couldn't change, and decided not to follow his example. It was a waste of time. He was a Malfoy. Malfoys did not wallow.

There was a flurry of action at the door, and people moved away to make way for the small group of reporters. They were rarely seen here so openly, usually just one or two wizards hanging outside the door with a quill in hand and a camera hanging around his neck.

Now it almost looked like they were expecting a press release of some kind. Not about the Order and their plans but about something far more interesting.

Harry turned slowly to watch the reporters flock inside the Entrance Hall, still unable to really comprehend that they had the audacity to do this. To his knowledge, there had been no real stories about the deaths -- aside from those laying the blame on Dumbledore -- or the Order meetings. Would they possibly dare to come here for this?

Apparently they did.

One of the reporters spotted him and called out, "Mr. Potter!" The others were quick to follow her lead.

For a moment the room was filled with excited babble. Then a silence fell as Harry stood there, looking slightly disgusted. Everyone wanted to hear the questions, and more importantly, the answers.

"Mr. Potter, there have been allegations in the Daily Prophet..."

Harry glared at the reporter, his expression astonishingly familiar to anyone who'd ever taken Potions at Hogwarts. "Unfortunately I don't have the time to read such... fabrications." His voice clearly showed his disgust.

That of course sent dozens of people into a frenzy. A few tried to ask him to be more specific about his criticism while others yelled out loud the questions about him and Malfoy. A small group from the Daily Prophet was looking at him with open hostility they hid as soon as they realized people were watching.

Waiting for the storm to calm a bit, Harry sighed. He should have known this would happen. "All right! I get the point. You think I'm seeing Malfoy?" Even after actually seeing the headlines, he still couldn't keep his shocked amusement hidden.

"So you're not denying it either?" It seemed to be very important to the witch that he answered that. When only a silence followed her question, she added, "The people want to know."

That was something Harry had never understood. Why would anyone care? "Why?" So that they could marvel at his life? Or that people could harass him more?

His question was clearly so preposterous everyone chose to ignore it. Following the life of the Boy
Who Lived had been a part of good journalism for seven years now, people simply wanted to know! "Mr. Potter, how do you respond to the suggestion that you may prefer wizards to witches?"

Harry had lots of things to say about that, but he knew that nothing would make any difference. "It's still my personal business. Now if you'll excuse me..." With that, he pushed his way through the crowd.

Hermione looked at him worriedly while Ron was obviously having problems keeping his expression straight. "Are you all right?"

"No." Shaking his head slightly, Harry glared at the group of reporters who were all muttering and staring at him. Fortunately they were staying at the doorway. He didn't know what he'd do if one more idiot tried to approach him about this matter right now.

"You know..." Hermione bit her lip, but decided to say it anyway. "It wouldn't be such a bad thing to say that you actually like wizards as well. Not everyone in the wizarding world is as open minded as we are."

"No."

"I know you don't like the attention." It simply didn't make sense to Hermione. She had spent the past year setting an example for the younger students at Hogwarts. Harry could do so much good with just one simple comment about life. Didn't he see it? "But people look up to you and showing them it's all right would make a difference."

"I refuse to be the Gay Icon of the wizarding world." Harry hated that. More titles and names heaped on him. He didn't want to be a celebrity, not because of the war, not because something like this. "I want to live my life, not be some kind of an example."

Hermione frowned. "But some people need..."

"If people need my permission to be gay or whatever, then our world is lost already!" It came out more angrily than Harry intended.

None of the three said anything for a long moment. Harry felt bad for snapping at Hermione, but he wasn't going to apologize. Still trying not to show his disgust at this whole thing, Ron just kept hovering next to Hermione, casting furtive looks around the hall.

"I'm sorry."

Harry hated the fact that he'd been quiet and forced her to actually say it first. "Yeah, and I'm sorry for snapping at you."

That brought a small smile on Hermione's face. "I know. But you were right. It's none of my business, really."

"Yes it is. You're my friend, Hermione, and it is your business whether or not I'm seeing someone. It's just not theirs." Harry's gesture was mostly aimed at the reporters still massing at the doorway.

Hermione looked like she wanted to say more, but in the end she simply nodded. "Okay."

"It's not that I want to hide. It's not. But if I give them one answer, they'll have a thousand other questions ready and it'll never end."

Harry didn't want to spin a web of lies, knowing he couldn't answer all the questions truthfully, and
to be quite honest, he didn't think he would even if he could. This was his life, the one thing he really had for himself and he wasn't going to share it with people he didn't even know.

Noticing that the reporters were now turning to harass Malfoy, he wondered for a moment what the Slytherin would say. Then he discarded the worry. Malfoy wasn't a complete moron. He wouldn't say anything that would get him hexed.

"Mr. Malfoy!" Quills ready, the witches and wizards descended on Draco like a flock of dragons. "Care to comment?"

"On what?" Raising his eyebrow slightly, Draco kept a cold stare on the reporters, almost daring them to utter their nonsense again.

"On the allegations that you are seeing Harry Potter of course!"

It was quite incredulous some people couldn't understand the concept of contempt or sarcasm. "Oh. That."

Mutters and nods echoed in the room as a reply to the barely patient huff.

Draco sneered. "Do you honestly think I would associate myself with someone like Potter?" His voice held a hint of outrage.

There was an absolute silence. A few of the reporters stared with their mouths hanging open. No one had ever talked about Harry Potter like that. They all worshipped or doubted him, but everyone wanted to be associated with him somehow.

"It would not be proper for me to be involved with someone of his... background." There was finality in Draco's voice. He had spent months perfecting the cool aloofness once his voice had finally stopped moving from a deep baritone into a quite embarrassing falsetto between words. The tone sounded completely natural.

"Mr. Malfoy, do you mean that you hold his parentage against him?" one of the reporters asked, the question starting out quite firmly and then dying out as he seemed to realize how foolish it sounded.

Asking a Malfoy if they held the purity of blood important was like asking Minister Fudge on the record if he believed in the importance of all the wizarding laws.

Draco's expression was an answer enough. Not bothering to even voice his thoughts on the question, he turned around -- the very theatrical twirl making his robes billow -- and walked away from the reporters.

Outraged whispers filled the hallway, accompanied by furious scribbling as the Daily Prophet witches and wizards wrote down all the things that had just been said.

There would definitely be an article about this in the papers tomorrow.

The very dramatic exit Draco had planned was somewhat spoiled when he realized he had no idea where to go. He looked around, grimacing when he couldn't see professor Snape or Blaise near by. That meant he would have to stand somewhere all by himself and try to act as if he didn't notice all the glares.

"Malfoy!"

Hearing his name, Draco was slightly shocked to see Potter gesturing at him. He hid his shock well,
sauntering towards their great hero with a self confident smirk on his face. "Potter."

He could almost feel all the curious looks on him, but chose to ignore them.

A house elf appeared next to him, holding a tray full of steaming cups, and he accepted one with a nod. Sipping tea, standing next to Harry Potter was probably the greatest dream of some people in here -- or at least those standing at the doorway like a pack of wild crups -- but Draco refused to consider this as anything special.

He was a Malfoy; Malfoys did not fawn over people, especially not in front of a crowd.

"The reporters could have an excellent second career exterminating Boggarts," muttered Harry. He was not going to take this seriously and could bet that neither would Malfoy.

"True." For a second, Draco wondered just what exactly had his father thought when he'd seen the headers. The mere thought made him almost choke on his tea.

Not only because of the most likely accurate mental image of his father suffering a major stroke over the whole thing, but because he shouldn't really care what the bastard thought about anything anymore.

"Where do these people get the ideas?" Harry still didn't get it. Sure, they were living in the same house, but of all the people under that roof, him and Malfoy? "Idiots."

The contempt sounded almost Slytherin, and Draco muttered before really thinking, "Yes, it's not exactly like you're my type."

Since it couldn't be the fact that he was a Gryffindor, Harry could think of only one thing. "Of course. Pureblood issues?"

Draco couldn't tell if that was a real question or not, but for the first time ever, Potter didn't seem to be ready to punch him when the issue was raised. He simply shrugged.

Harry grinned at Malfoy, a surprisingly open expression. "I do believe you're the only person I know who would be embarrassed about being my boyfriend because of who I am." It was the very first completely personal comment he'd said to Malfoy and the ease of the words slipping out was overwhelming.

There was an air of indifference in Malfoy, making it easier to deal with him than Hermione's honest concern or Ron's barely veiled anger.

Keeping his gaze away from Snape, knowing that people were definitely watching, Draco shrugged. "Oh, I don't know about that." He saw the flicker of hurt in Potter's gaze and hurried to add, "Not everyone would be ready to admit they're having an affair with a Gryffindor."

The way he sniffed the name of that House out spoke volumes of what he thought about the matter.

At first, Harry looked startled. Then he simply said, "You do have a point there." He knew there were those who would probably rather drink Bubotuber pus, including the Head of the Slytherin House.

Ron had arrived at his side to hear the last few comments and he was trying very hard not to think about the fact that they were most likely talking about Snape. He didn't like it, didn't like the way Harry spoke about it so easily, and with Malfoy of all people.
So maybe after everything he'd talked about with Remus Lupin, he didn't want to curse Malfoy with Avada Kedavra or jump off the Astronomy Tower anymore, but he wasn't going to start liking the git either.

"I know." Draco had noticed Weasley arriving, but he ignored his presence, focusing on Potter. There had been a rather tentative beginning of something resembling camaraderie between them before they'd moved into Potter's house.

The insane way his life had plunged to depths unknown and then been tossed here and there without him having any real say on anything had to stop. Now. The wallowing was too tiresome, eating away everything if he allowed it to. The games took too much energy, just as corrosive as self pity.

To hell with Weasley and his disapproval. He was going to say what was on his mind no matter what. "Of course if it was a pureblooded Gryffindor, then it would be quite different."

Harry had expected something like that, especially when there had been no sign of cringing in Malfoy today. Still, he was slightly shocked he would say it in front of Ron.

For once, Ron was completely speechless. He couldn't even splutter. Was Malfoy serious?

Taking a deep breath, he finally gasped, "You mean it would be all right to shag me 'cause I'm a fucking pureblood?" He just couldn't believe he was saying this out loud, but he had to ask.

Draco cocked his head. Sometimes these idealistic Gryffindors were too hilarious. They really didn't have any clue on how things were done in the real world. "No. I mean it would be all right for me to admit shagging you 'cause you are a pureblood."

It was actually a twist of the old rules.

Ron growled at that. "You're not going to admit anything to anyone, Malfoy!" He didn't even want to think about what it would do to his mother to hear that he had sort of shagged with a Malfoy. The mere fact that they were living under the same roof had already driven her into an icy silence.

He cast an angry look at Harry before storming away. This wasn't something he wanted to be a part of. Shagging and Malfoy were definitely two words he never wanted to connect again.

Harry watched him go, but didn't even try to follow him. He didn't want to get involved; there was nothing he could really do anyway. Ron had shown often enough that he wasn't comfortable talking about Malfoy, so they wouldn't talk.

"I didn't exactly mean it like that." It was extremely annoying how Weasley could still make Draco feel a slight twinge of discomfort even when he'd decided he wasn't going to let things touch him like that anymore. It wasn't real guilt anymore, he had done with the wallowing, but it still made him wince.

"You mean you didn't just say that Slytherin pure{}bloods prefer purebloods, even if they might come from the wrong House?"

The flinch was instinctive, Draco's expression hardening as he waited for the angry words to come. Gryffindors were always treating this matter as a joke, even when it was nothing like that. After a moment he realized that Potter was actually bantering. It was quite incredible. "Yes."

"You know..." Unable to keep the laughter from bubbling out, Harry chuckled before continuing, "You guys always concentrate on people's ancestry and strut around with your pureblood arrogance."
Draco bristled, but couldn’t deny it. "You know it's important to us." He swallowed as he realized what the words implicated. "To us Slytherins."

He knew Potter didn't mean it the way most people would, but it was too close to things he heard every day. You traitors. You Death Eaters. He was sick of it, sick of seeing Slytherin and pureblood equal darkness.

"Yes." Harry wondered how true it really was. He would have to ask Snape about it, even though he'd never noticed any hints that the man cared about things like that. "You know, there is one thing that has always amazed me about pureblood wizards, especially those that come from Slytherin."

"And what is that?" Prepared for another slur, Draco raised an eyebrow.

"How those who hold their pureblood ancestry so high would follow a Muggle raised 'mudblood' so eagerly." No anger in Harry's voice, even when he said the epithet accompanied by his fingers drawing quotation marks in the air.

For a moment, Draco couldn't think of anything to say. He stared at Potter, not even flinching as he saw a hint of pity in him.

Did Harry really mean what Draco thought he meant? He couldn't! Draco would have known. Somehow there would have been real rumors and he would have known. "Are you saying lord Voldemort isn't a pureblood?"

Harry was stunned by the question for he'd honestly thought everyone knew. But then again who would tell that to the Slytherins, who had probably been fed the story of their supremacy since they'd been infants? "Yes. Tom Riddle, the man who calls himself Voldemort, is a Muggleborn. And he was raised mostly by Muggles."

Draco's ears were ringing. He couldn't believe this! It had to be a mudblood joke. His father would never ever crawl in front of... He wouldn't sacrifice everything, his own son for a... "Voldemort's a mudblood?" It sounded so brittle he wanted to die.

"Yes." For once, Harry didn't say anything about the derision. He simply nodded. "He is."

He didn't really expect a reply. The way Malfoy gathered his robes around him as if he was about to shatter and then walked away without a word wasn't shocking either.

Such a strange thing to feel sympathy for Malfoy. It wasn't even pity anymore. Harry watched him go, wishing there had been something he could have said to his former enemy to make this easier. Knowing there wasn't anything he could really say.

From the doorway, curious faces focused on him, and somewhere in the distance, cameras were flashing and clicking, capturing the lonely hero for tomorrow's newspaper.

Part 19

Things were spinning slowly out of control, and Harry couldn't do anything but watch.

He'd woken up long before dawn, lying wide awake in bed and knowing he couldn't fall back to sleep even if he tried. Though insomnia had been his companion for years, he'd hoped he'd finally got rid of it.

No such luck.
Not wanting to wake anyone else up, he'd sneaked downstairs in his pajama bottoms and his favorite burgundy sweater to make a cup of tea. There had been a lot of time for him to think about the war and the Order and Fudge and Malfoy and stupid reporters and Weasleys before faint noise from Sirius and Remus' room had told him it was time to get back upstairs and grab a shower so that no one would know he'd been up half the night. Enough time to realize he couldn't do a thing to change what really bothered him.

He didn't like this strange narrowing of focus; life seemed to be a perpetual now, with the plans they made for the future almost an afterthought. Things that had happened barely weeks ago were a dream, a distant memory.

It made sense. Harry knew this was the most important thing in his life, but he still couldn't help worrying about losing himself somehow.

This was even worse than the stay at the cottage, not hiding from the reality but concentrating on it too hard. They were merely days away from actually putting everything in motion, and the hours simply couldn't pass quickly enough.

Life was a routine. Harry Potter the Great Hero went to Hogwarts, mingled with the Order, waited in vain for something to happen, for the Ministry to show some interest in the reality. Then he came home and stopped existing for a few hours, becoming Harry again.

He didn't know how long he could do this.

Hogwarts was becoming a scene of a play or a neverending nightmare, and the walls seemed to close in on him, the image made real by the multitudes of people massing around him whenever he wasn't standing by Dumbledore's side.

The forced smile turned very slowly into a passive mask or a scowl, heralding a time when such blatant expressions of adoration and thoughtless words would not be allowed anymore.

During the silent hours of the night, he'd had a stray thought of turning into what everyone wanted to see, and the nausea that had brought had been overwhelming. Sometimes he wondered if the only cure was to stop feeling.

Harry knew it was definitely time to figure out how to take some time for himself before he went totally insane.

But not now. He'd already promised Dumbledore he'd attend a small meeting about the housing in Hogsmeade and then there would be the thing about Beauxbatons and the giants followed by another meeting about something that was probably not important after all.

Sighing, Harry excused himself and walked from Ron and Hermione towards Dumbledore.

He noticed how he would pass Snape on his way, and his body tingled with yearning. It had been so damn long since he'd really talked to the man or just spent time alone with him in silence, but he couldn't even imagine staying with him now. There were simply too many semi-important things to focus on.

This was worse torture than anything. He saw Snape every day, could talk to him about trivial things, but he could never really be alone with him or touch him. Right now, he would settle for brushing his fingers against his cheek or leaning against him.

He missed Snape.
It was as simple as that.

The futility of the meetings and talking about the things he'd heard dozens of times already made him insane. Everyone wanted to talk, share things with him, and he had to stand here and pretend he was interested.

Yes, he agreed it would be great to have the new headquarters at Hogsmeade. Sure, they needed more new houses there as well. Hagrid's letter from France was welcome, and too bad about the arguments amongst the giants.

It never ended. By the time he was heading back to Dumbledore after a very detailed report about an upgraded wizarding plumbing system being installed to certain new houses in Hogsmeade, Harry was ready to hop on a broom and go looking for an evil Dark Lord to slay just to get rid of all this stupidity.

He saw that Dumbledore was standing quietly next to Minerva McGonagall, listening to her with a serious look on his face, and took a detour so that those two could talk in private.

Ron was talking to Seamus and Dean while Hermione seemed to be drinking tea with Terry Boot again. Some Hufflepuffs Harry remembered from the Arithmancy classes were ogling him, as if waiting for him to approach so they could attach to him like leeches.

"Impressive shadows under your eyes, Potter. I can see you haven't been sleeping."

Relief flooded through Harry, even though the sudden comment did make him jump. "I've been busy." A genuine smile spread on his face as he looked at Snape standing close by. "Hi."

"Yes." Snape nodded slightly. "I've noticed."

It was impossible to ignore the rumors that had been spreading ever since the great Order meeting. Their world was excited about the return of Harry Potter, and Snape had been unable to escape the very enthusiastic comments made by his colleagues every morning.

Harry's decision to live with Lupin and his friends and Draco Malfoy had stunned almost everyone. It was a miracle no one had spotted Black there yet, but Snape didn't doubt that would become news any day soon. Then there had been whispers about Potter partying in the night, none of the professors actually saying he'd been drinking and shagging around, but it was implied in every word and gesture.

Snape had never cared about the rumors. Not even when everything he heard sounded completely ludicrous.

He did however listen, and every tale, every outrageous lie made him angrier. These days, the house elves didn't even show in his rooms with the Daily Prophet anymore. The newspaper simply appeared on the table every morning.

"Anything I can do to help?" The offer slipped out before he could think, and was followed by a glare. "A potion, perhaps?"

He knew all too well it hadn't been the first thing on his mind.

Harry shook his head. "No thanks. I'm not too fond of taking stuff anyway." There were things that Snape could do and they would help, but there was no way he could slip away with the man into the dungeons and simply breathe freely right now.
"Yes, I know." Seeing the dark smudges under Harry's eyes, Snape wondered if the stubborn fool would even consider sleeping potions.

"But... Thanks for offering." Thanks for caring, Harry wanted to say, but the words refused to come out.

He wanted to say it, even just to see the way Snape glared and to hear the snort. Wanted to share the dark amusement, the intimacy of an inside joke no one else could possibly understand and simply have this moment with Snape.

Looking down at his feet, he remained silent. He was already trying his best not to snap and sharing something private with Snape would destroy all the effort.

It was best to just go talk about whatever insignificant things he could think of with Dumbledore before he lost it.

Snape leaned close to Harry, worried by the way he looked. It was becoming very clear that sleepless nights were probably the least of his problems.

"Don't!" Harry flinched away as he felt the sleeve brush against his arm. The simple touch felt like an electric jolt through his whole body. "Please don't touch me!"

The words hit Snape in a way that stunned him completely. Harry had never before told him not to touch him, and he realized he didn't like the refusal or what it implied. He had certainly become too casual with the lack of physical boundaries with Harry.

Angered by the uncertainty it made him feel, he opened his mouth to snarl out something vicious and only then saw the naked need in Harry's eyes.

"Please, Snape. You touch me now, and there'll be a new set of interesting headlines in tomorrow's papers." Harry was certain there would be an extra edition of the Prophet. The Boy Who Lived mauls his former professor in the Great Hall of Hogwarts.

Snape raised an eyebrow. Of course he should have realized what this was all about. "I see."

"I..." Harry let out a choked laugh, the bitter sound reaching farther than he'd thought, making people stare at him in shock. "This is ridiculous." His gaze turned hard. "I want to..."

He had spent days doing nothing but the work that had been given to him, enduring unpleasant attention from the press and people he thought he knew. Now all he wanted was to touch Snape, to be with him, and he couldn't.

There was a lot for him to do even though it was almost dinner time. For a semi-secret organization, they had a lot of paperwork and when there were no more things to talk about, he'd spend hours reading before going to bed and spending a few hours staring at the wall.

"Then maybe you should." Voice level, Snape looked into Harry's eyes. Whatever stress and pressure was making Harry look like a walking corpse had to stop. "You can take a break. The world won't come to an end if you spend a few hours away from the Order."

Harry almost choked at the words fighting their way out of his mouth. "You really mean that?"

There was an almost desperate hope in his eyes.

They both knew exactly what they were talking about.
Snape nodded. He didn't consider this as encouraging the idiot with his silly notions, though he wasn't delusional enough to think of anything else that might describe the invitation to the dungeons.

His back turned to the crowd, Harry didn't even try to suppress the shudder that came from imagining just going away with Snape.

Just the two of them in the dungeons, with no urgent conversations about insignificant things, no papers to read no people to meet. The twinge of guilt followed the thought immediately, but Harry crushed it mercilessly, seeing it as it was; the first step towards a total burnout, the madness he'd wanted to escape the very first day his tired steps took him to the dungeons.

"Wait here," he snapped.

Snape watched Harry turn around and walk away with measured steps. He could feel everyone's gaze on him but chose to ignore it.

He saw Harry say something curt to Weasley. They were too far for him to really hear what was said, but it was definitely something Weasley didn't want to hear. The boy went absolutely red in the face and he said something that made Harry stiffen with anger.

Whatever was said next didn't exactly help the situation.

It was painfully obvious where this would lead even before Harry turned and stalked back to Snape. His expression was full of dark anger and it made most people standing nearby flinch back in shock.

This was their leader, who always listened, who rarely spoke harshly, and now they could see why the Dark Lord might actually fear him.

"Snape." Harry tried to calm down a little, but his words still came out from between clenched teeth. "I need to talk to you. In private." He nodded towards the doorway. "Now."

Snape simply gestured for him to lead the way, not at all surprised when he headed straight towards the hallway that would lead to the dungeons.

The few people who came across them took one look at Harry's face and chose not to stop for a chat after all. No one envied Snape for the attention he was getting. It was clear that he was in trouble.

Harry was grinding his teeth by the time they finally reached the dungeons. Damn it! He didn't remember the hallways being this long. Keeping his gaze on the floor, he rushed onwards, knowing that if he looked at Snape, he'd probably break and try to crawl under his robes right now.

He said nothing when they reached the door and Snape opened it. Silent, he stepped into the familiar room and waited for the door to slam shut.

"Do you think you could have..." Snape's words were cut off by very enthusiastic lips covering his. It was an instinct by now to simply raise his hand and cradle the back of Harry's head while they kissed.

With desperation, Harry grabbed Snape's frock coat, fisting the black cloth hard as he kept kissing the man like he was starving for the contact.

He'd thought it would be enough to be here, to share the silence with Snape and hide from all the things that made him despair. He'd been wrong. The need to be as close to Snape as possible was overwhelming, maddening, and he tried to squirm closer, almost losing his balance. Only the strong arm around his waist kept him from tumbling to the floor.
"Snape..." He had to gasp for air, hating the loss of contact immediately. Nibbling on Snape's jaw, he let his hands roam wherever they could reach, fuzzily wondering if Snape had actually locked the door behind them.

It didn't really matter as long as he could do this right now.

He'd never felt this needy, this desperate before, not even that first time he'd tried to undress Snape, and after a moment he discarded the notion of opening buttons and simply ground his body against Snape's.

Coming in his robes wouldn't be that bad as long as he could feel Snape's touch.

Trying to keep his sneer firmly in place, Snape asked. "Could you please restrain your urges until we get to the bedroom?" Considering how hungry Harry's expression had been, he was amazed they had managed to get inside the dungeons before Harry started to rip his robes off with his teeth.

His self control was actually astonishing.

"No," Harry mumbled before kissing Snape again. "I really can't." He had made it here. There was no way he was going to wait till they got to the bed.

Tearing off his pants with one hand and then kicking them off, he reached for his wand with the other. He pointed it at the chair he'd become to think as his. "Engorgio!" He didn't even wait till the chair was fully enlarged before pushing Snape to sit down.

Hands fumbling, he attacked Snape's robes, needing to get rid of the clothes as quickly as possible.

Snape didn't say anything, even though comments about impatient idiots were right there waiting to come out as soon as he opened his mouth. He couldn't exactly criticize Harry's need when he could feel it burn him as well. Denying it was foolish, he'd got too used to Harry's presence in both his life and his bed.

Letting out a sigh, he moved to help Harry with his clothes.

Seeing the naked skin made Harry squirm against Snape. He almost fell on the floor as he tried to get as close to Snape as possible and only the firm grip on his shoulders held him on the chair as he flailed around without any grace or coordination.

His blinding need couldn't even embarrass him anymore. Whatever shame he might feel by his frantic movements and needy gasps could wait. "Snape?" he muttered between kisses. "Lubricant!"

He'd lost his own wand somewhere around yanking Snape's trousers open and was not about to waste any time looking for it on the floor. Or going to the bedroom to get the bottle. Snape probably had something appropriate right here.

Allowing the snort escape, Snape pointed his wand towards the small potions cupboard and muttered the charm that brought a jar full of the pale cream to him. He placed his wand on the chair, close enough to grab it if he needed it, but away from Harry's flailing limbs.

"Good." Yes, it was one of the perks of being involved with a Potions master, they'd always have slippery ointments. Harry smiled happily as he dug into the jar. This would do just fine.

His hands were slippery, spreading the cream all over Snape and ignoring the way he managed to let some of it drop on the chair as well. They could clean later. This was important right now, more important than anything in the world.
"Give me that." Realizing that Harry was far too frantic to get anything done correctly, Snape took the lubricant away from him. "What do you want?"

Harry was glad he'd asked. "This." His still slippery hands went to Snape's erection. "In me." That would have to do, he was incapable of any coherent instructions, and he hoped Snape wouldn't be evil enough to ask for more specific details. It would probably make Harry explode with need.

Fortunately for him, Snape didn't feel like asking more questions. The blatant need in Harry was contagious, burning in his veins. Pulling the eager body closer, he moved to prepare him.

It was so good, just what Harry wanted right now. He spread his legs wider, holding onto Snape like he was his only lifeline. He had missed this, missed the closeness and the touches, the scent of Snape's skin, the faint memory of potions ingredients always clinging to him.

Being unable to touch or taste him had been awful, these past few days a pure torment.

This was the opposite. Bliss. Moving against Snape's touches, Harry leaned forward to nibble his neck, urging him to go faster with soft gasps. He was ready, more than ready, and wanted to feel Snape inside him.

Snape wiped his hand on the ruins of his robe and then grabbed Harry's hips. He didn't have to say anything, Harry was already moving into a better position, straddling him properly. Halting for just a moment, Snape caressed the soft skin under his fingers, reveling in the anticipation. Allowing the desire coil in his belly before guiding Harry down.

A hiss escaped Harry as he lowered himself on Snape, feeling the hardness claim him. He tried to impale himself with one thrust, but the firm grip on his hips held tight, forcing him to take Snape in agonizingly slowly.

He sat still as he felt the fullness inside him. Snape's hands were once again moving slowly on his skin, touching his back, tracing patterns on his sides.

"Oh fu..." Harry clamped his mouth shut before the expletive could escape. Squeezing his eyes shut, he muttered frantically, "Wait! Snape, wait." He was going to come in seconds if he moved right now.

Snape didn't say anything, but his expression spoke volumes.

Wrapping his arms around Snape's neck, Harry lifted himself slowly, sinking back down with an undulating motion.

There was no finesse in their movements. Too lost in the need, Harry simply clung to Snape and rocked against him, planting sloppy kisses everywhere he could reach.

It made perfect sense to Snape; the desperation to touch someone even after such a relatively short time. The stubborn idiot was still clinging to the notion that they were somehow having a relationship, and even though there had to be dozens of others proposing to their big hero, Harry had clearly chosen not to take any of their offers.

Such a Gryffindor thing, or a teenage thing; seeing the world so simply, in terms of loyalty and hope and trust, but it did somehow make sense, even to Snape.

So it resulted in a very naked and frantic Harry Potter attacking him, moving erratically so that he had to grab his hips and guide him into a smoother rhythm that made him gasp for breath as if he was drowning. Snape couldn't resent that. Even with his haste, there was something incredibly honest in
Harry's obvious hunger.

He brought Harry back down, harder than before, the urgency burning somewhere in his belly driving amusement and control away.

Harry let out a pleased groan.

The grip on his hips was firm but not bruising. Harry clutched onto Snape's arms as he felt him lift him up. Feeling the strong muscles work under his touch, Harry couldn't keep silent, muttering nonsense words.

Snape stared into the green eyes that were focused on his face, seeing desire and affection shine there with equal force.

"Damn I've missed you." It came out as a desperate moan as Harry lowered himself on him again. The movement was slow, almost pained, just like the sound escaping him. "Missed... you..."

The words touched something inside Snape; a small memory of hurt he'd never acknowledged before. Harry's insane need for his touch was just as captivating as the frantic movements.

He let his fingers loosen their hold on Harry's hips, allowing him to move faster. Harry's gaze soon lost its focus, growing distant and dark at the same time.

"Snape, Snape, Snape..." Harry moaned the name over and over again, his head lolling down, lips brushing against Snape's neck. Nothing in the world mattered right now, everything beyond this grinding motion had ceased to exist.

Snape shuddered at the desperate sounds Harry was making, his hips jerking up hard. The desire coursing through him was different from the simple pleasure of their previous encounters. Meeting Harry's thrusts with his own, he let the passion build on its own course, not even trying to hold onto control anymore.

The frantic movements should have been hilarious, just like the way Harry's chin hit his nose when he tried to kiss him. But he didn't care about appearances.

All that mattered was Harry's body slamming against his, all the nonsense words turning into sobs gasped out against his ear.

This was not going to last long.

Lost in the waves of pleasure, Harry clung onto Snape, feeling Snape's breath caress his neck as he came and then catch as Snape shuddered beneath him.

Harry's mind was totally empty. Everything was a haze of pure contentment and all he could do was to trail his fingers up Snape's chest, marveling at the wetness there. His semen on Snape's skin, Snape's hands still on his hips, his own harsh breathing the only real sound in the room.

He leaned closer to Snape, holding him as tight as possible. A moment later Snape's arms came to embrace him; not pushing him away, simply holding him there.

This was awfully close to perfect happiness.

Voice still hoarse, Harry muttered, "Really missed you." He nuzzled against Snape, smiling slightly as he felt the strong arms tighten around him. He didn't mind the silence, knowing that there would be no reply.
"I may have noticed your absence as well," Snape managed to say calmly. Encouraging or not, it was the truth.

Harry tensed. He couldn't believe his ears. Had Snape just said that out loud, or was it a figment of his imagination? He managed to lift his head for long enough to look into Snape's eyes and then nuzzled against his neck again, knowing that he'd heard right. Closing his eyes, he let out a satisfied hum. "That's nice." Perfection indeed.

They sat there for a moment. Then Snape took a deep breath. It was getting late and they would have a long day tomorrow. As pleasant as this was, he couldn't ignore the fact that he had work to do. Squirming a bit, he tried to get the young man realize he wanted him to get up.

Harry refused to let go. "No." He felt wonderfully relaxed, and was not going to move until he absolutely had to.

Not exactly what Snape had in mind. "Get up, Potter." He fidgeted a little, frowning as Harry's grip on him tightened. It was clear he wouldn't be able to get up without some co-operation. "I do not intend to stay here for the whole evening when there is a perfectly good bed in the bedroom. Now get off me, so we can shower and then sleep."

There was a small protesting sound coming from Harry, but eventually he did let go. He still refused to let Snape out of his sight, following him to the bathroom and squeezing next to him in the shower stall.

Snape couldn't really shove him out all naked and messy, so he allowed the intrusion.

Just like he allowed Harry to wash his back -- logical, really, since he couldn't reach everything by himself -- and then join him in his bed later on. This way Harry would actually get a full night's sleep, curled against him and snoring softly.

Neither mentioned the time nor the crowd still probably waiting for their great hero in the Great Hall.

Part 20

Trying to explain Harry's absence without actually letting anyone know where he was spending the morning -- or the previous night and a good part of the evening -- was getting on Ron's nerves.

It had been bad enough to stay at his new home without saying something that would have destroyed the extremely fragile peace. They had all known where Harry had gone to, but no one said a word about it. Not even Malfoy who had probably read Sirius' expression just as well as the rest of them and realized that one stray comment would cause an explosion.

Escaping the potentially disastrous situation, Ron and Hermione decided to eat breakfast at the Three Broomsticks.

Madam Rosmerta looked as happy to see them as always, offering them a free table and a free meal. It made Hermione look slightly uncomfortable, but Ron nudged her into silence. Even with the free lodging and all, he still couldn't afford things like this.

Being Harry's best friend did have its perks, and he for one wasn't going to make anyone feel bad by refusing such generosity.

It was great to just sit here with Hermione, almost like some of the very early Sunday mornings back at Hogwarts, when they were the first ones awake and enjoying the peace and quiet in the almost
deserted Great Hall. The sausage and eggs were just as good as the food the house elves made.

He wanted to spend this day as carefree as he had on those long gone Sundays, thinking none of the unthinkable things, or mentioning any people and places they might be in doing stuff with creepy greasy gits.

Too much thinking, or concentrating too hard on not thinking about things you'll think anyway was too hard. Made people lose focus and start moping, like so many seemed to be these days. It was always best to concentrate on the bright side of life.

"We should plan something grand for Harry's birthday." Ron was sure a big party would cheer everyone up.

"I agree. He's been under too much stress lately. I was kind of thinking we could throw him a party right here at the Broomsticks," said Hermione. "Terry and I already talked about it a few days ago."

"Oh, cool!" This way the thing was bound to go all right. Ron knew Terry was excellent at organizing parties from years of experience.

Hermione nodded. "It's the least we can do. He's been so stressed out lately he needs to relax." She didn't think it would be wise to say that Harry would probably prefer a quiet weekend back at Hogwarts.

They wouldn't plan a huge and public party, just a thing for their housemates and friends. It would be fun. Maybe they could have the Weird Sisters perform or something. They probably would, for Harry.

Mind already racing with ideas, Ron grabbed his glass and sipped his juice while trying to think of something cool for Harry. He couldn't really afford a big present, so he'd make sure the party was the best they'd ever had.

He saw a familiar face on the other side of the room and grinned, raising his glass and saluting Terry Boot.

Of all the Ravenclaws he knew, Terry was the best. Ron really liked hanging out with Terry now that he didn't have to be all Head Boy all the time and encourage creepy things like studying.

Too bad he seemed to be kind of interested in Hermione. He would have made a lot better boyfriend for Harry than someone Ron could have mentioned. Not that he would mention anyone.

He had to wonder how much energy it would take to *obliterate* himself.

On the short walk to Hogwarts, while Ron listened to Hermione babble with Terry, he had to admit that he liked the Ravenclaw for another reason as well. Sometimes Terry seemed to have problems with the Slytherins, and it was nice to see that he wasn't the only one to have darker feelings towards them.

Not that he had feelings! Just a shiver of disgust when he saw Malfoy lurking around in the shadows as usual. Mild nausea as he saw Harry appear from a side door a moment before Snape, looking well rested and happy.

"Morning Harry," Hermione's voice was chipper. "You look good. Slept well?"

Ron almost made a nasty comment before remembering he really shouldn't gag in front of others. He didn't want anyone to know about Harry being insane with Snape of all people.
Not even bothering to moderate his bright smile, Harry nodded. "Yup. You don't look so bad yourself."

"Well, thank you." Casting pointed looks at both Ron and Terry, Hermione asked, "Has anyone seen Lavender?"

Being a gentleman, Terry didn't comment on the change of subject and escorted Hermione to where the other girls were gathering. Ron on the other hand couldn't have cared less about being nice and letting Harry bask in the happiness alone.

What kind of a friend would he be if he didn't try to look after a mate?

"So... everything's all right then?" He didn't want to know details, but he had to ask. Merlin knew no one else was about to. Hermione seemed to think everything was all right already. Remus was probably more worried about Sirius, who wouldn't ask anything fearing someone actually answered.

Harry looked at his friend, his smile waning a bit. "I don't know what you want me to say, Ron." He didn't want a repetition of yesterday's discussion where Ron had made his opinion clear once again.

That was tricky; Ron had no idea either. "I..." He didn't want to know anything about... that! But he worried about Harry.

"I worry about you." Truth was always the simplest thing to say.

Grinning, Harry slapped Ron's shoulder. "And you call Sirius mother hen. Come on, Ron. I'm fine. I'm better than fine." He thought for a moment and then admitted, "Happy."

Ron tried to think of something to say, something that didn't involve the words 'are you insane?' or spluttering. He couldn't think of anything.

Fortunately he didn't have to.

"Mr. Potter." Voice quiet, McGonagall called out as she stepped next to them. "The Headmaster wishes to see you in private."

Harry nodded, glad that he didn't have to fight with Ron about Snape right now. Actually, he'd be perfectly happy never to have to go through that conversation again. "Yes, professor."

He even managed a slightly apologetic smile at Ron as he followed after McGonagall.

Ron stared after Harry and McGonagall, wondering what that was all about. There were so many things it could be about and trying to guess would be a waste of time. He'd probably hear about it later on.

Sighing, he turned to go and find Hermione, and almost stumbled into Malfoy and Zabini who were standing by the wall, talking quietly. Zabini's startled yelp stopped the angry words on Ron's lips, but he still glared at Malfoy. Damn him and that weary look in his eyes!

There was still something about the bastard that made Ron's hands itch.

He would have to deal with that soon.

Harry kept trailing after McGonagall, not particularly worried about what Dumbledore wanted to talk. Even though McGonagall kept her silence, it didn't feel cold like the time she'd escorted him and Ron to hear about killings.
Of course thinking about that made Harry's stomach churn.

"Professor... Is something wrong?" His steps faltered as he saw the familiar gargoyle.

McGonagall turned to look at him, surprise clear on her face. Then realization dawned on her. "Oh I'm sorry, Mr. Potter. I didn't think... No. It's nothing like that." She managed to smile at him. "I do apologize."

He couldn't be upset at her. "It's okay." It felt like the answering smile on his lips was at least slightly goofy, but he didn't really mind.

The trip up the turning stairwell was familiar, but Harry tried to stay alert and keep a few paces behind professor McGonagall. He didn't want to make it seem too obvious, but didn't want to make her uncomfortable by standing too close.

It was somehow weird to do this without either Snape or Sirius and Remus in the room. Harry hesitated for a moment at the door, simply watching as McGonagall went to sit by the wall. Even with a small group in the room, it seemed cold and empty.

He was almost glad that these meetings today would be amongst the last they would hold here. The Order was getting too big to be gathered here anymore and it wasn't safe to travel even this short distance every day for meetings.

The crowd here today was different from usual. None of the older members of Order were attending. Actually as Harry looked around the room he could see there were no Order members here at all, just people he hardly recognized. Only when one of the wizards present pulled a parchment from under his robes and wrote down something frantically did he realize that these were the same people who had lined the road here every day, asking questions and begging for comments.

There were also those who had been overly interested in him and Malfoy.

His back stiffened, and he turned to glare at Dumbledore. What the hell were these reporters doing here?

"I have asked you here today to discuss the interest you have been showing at Hogwarts and Mr. Potter these past few days." Dumbledore looked around the room.

That made Harry blink.

He wasn't sure he wanted to even hear this. The pathetic recount of his childhood had already made his blood boil -- and people look at him with barely hidden pity in their eyes. The mess with Malfoy was mostly ridiculous, but he didn't really want to talk about that either.

But would Dumbledore look so serious if it was just about stupid rumors? Harry glanced at McGonagall, the need to see the expression on the Head of his House as instinctive now as it had been when he'd still been in his early teens. He didn't like what he saw.

One of the reporters was writing furiously, his quill scratching against the parchment.

Another cleared her throat. "Begging your pardon, sir, but we do have the right to publish facts about any member of our world. Even Mr. Potter." She flashed a fawning look at Harry.

Who was definitely not impressed. "From what I've heard this far, your facts are Muggle bashing and speculations about my love life."
No one cared to actually comment on that.

Dumbledore waited for a moment before continuing, "No matter how... distasteful some of the stories have been, they have been harmless. Until now." There was a hint of steel in his gaze.

That made Harry tense. Stupidity never made Dumbledore look like that.

"I must say I found today's articles both offensive and rude." McGonagall's voice was full of barely hidden disgust. "Not only the things that were written. I can not even imagine how someone would dare to pursue such a story."

Harry had no idea what that had been about. He still wouldn't read any of the papers, and for some reason his friends hadn't commented on anything for a few days. Of course he hadn't really been home this morning.

Some of the reporters actually looked embarrassed.

Breaking the short silence, Dumbledore nodded, "I would have to agree on that. Such behavior at a Muggle funeral was truly disgraceful."

The words made Harry flinch. He looked up from his hands, completely shocked. "You went and talked to my relatives at Aunt Petunia's..." He couldn't even finish the sentence. Seeing the way none of the reporters would meet his gaze, he closed his eyes in pain.

It didn't matter that his uncle and cousin would never want to see him again. He could understand that. He wouldn't want to see him either if he was either of them. It didn't matter that he still could only feel guilt for not feeling any kind of grief over his aunt's death. The Dursleys had lost someone dear to them, and the wizarding world had once again interfered with their lives, making everything worse.

He knew it must have been awful for them to try to collect what was left of their lives after the attack. Number 4 Privet Drive was uninhabitable. According to Hermione, the Muggle press had made a huge number out of the whole thing as well, writing about a probable terrorist attack. It had taken the investigators and the coroners forever to release Aunt Petunia to be buried.

And now this.

"There will be no more interviews. No harassing my Muggle relatives." Harry was surprised of how calm his voice sounded. "You will not come anywhere near me or my friends, not here, not in Hogsmeade."

He felt hollow somehow, didn't want this group anywhere near his home.

His words caused loud protests and yells. Every reporter raised their voice, reminding him of the freedom of press and quoting wizard laws.

"I don't give a damn. You are not welcome in Hogsmeade anymore." It was final. If Dumbledore wanted him to organize the Order into a real army, he couldn't do it with the press everywhere. Harry glanced at the Headmaster, the message clear in his gaze. Dumbledore wanted him to make decisions? Well here was one.

Everyone turned to look at the old wizard, looking expectant. One of the reporters even called out his name, quill ready to catch a quote as soon as he said something.

Dumbledore thought for a moment, his gaze moving slowly over the people waiting. "This isn't a
simple matter. I have always thought that Hogwarts is a public place, so we have nothing to hide..."

That made the small group of reporters mutter happily.

"However, Hogsmeade is not school grounds." The small village had always been considered a part of Hogwarts, being governed by the Headmaster. It was mostly an ancient custom with no basis in law or current business. "I would have to say it's Harry's decision. No reporters or photographers allowed in Hogsmeade."

There were many reasons for that. Whether they wanted it or not, they were at war. Allowing daily columns to be written of their main base would be too stupid for even the wizarding world.

Before the outraged babble could grow into a full blown shouting match, he added, "I know Minister Fudge will agree with Harry on this. He might even declare the Ministry as off grounds for the duration of our struggle against Voldemort."

The protests stopped as if the sound had been cut by a knife.

Harry felt relief mix with the disgust. Casting one more look at the reporters, he muttered, "And this is what we're willing to die for." It made him want to laugh hysterically. Ideals were one thing, but the reality was never as easy to care about.

Nodding slightly, Dumbledore muttered back, "It is indeed."

The group of reporters looked like first year Hufflepuffs after their first Potions class as they left the Headmaster's office. There was a very satisfying slam as the door closed after them.

There was a brief silence before Dumbledore said, "I do apologize."

Harry didn't really know what he was apologizing for and he didn't want to ask. Apologies didn't change anything, they didn't win the war and they most certainly wouldn't make the Dursleys' loss any less poignant. "Don't bother." It didn't come out exactly the way he'd intended, but even the rather startled look on McGonagall's face didn't make him apologize his tone.

That wouldn't change anything either.

Pushing away both the irritation and the slight twinge of guilt, Harry asked, "So when will the new headquarters be ready?" As important as the housing projects were, this was even more important.

Harry understood Dumbledore's reluctance to use the school as a training ground, but he still wanted to get on with the whole thing. After reading about various conflicts in the wizarding world, he knew that sometimes war was all about negotiations, but this was one war that would be won or lost on the battlefield.

That meant actual training and a real war council.

Dumbledore shook his head slowly. "It shouldn't take more than a few days now."

"Good." Harry nodded.

It was about time.

Part 21

"Come on, bubble already." Muttering to himself, Draco stared at the pot, waiting for the water to
start boiling. It was annoying how long this took.

He had finally managed to learn how the stove worked, and was now immensely proud of the fact that he could make tea properly without having to suffer the watery taste that always seemed to linger on the magically heated brew. It hadn't been as difficult as he'd thought, but it had been hard work nevertheless. He hadn't felt comfortable asking anyone and the house elves had disappeared somewhere.

Of course he could have waited until later, when Potter came back from whatever meeting he was attending to with the older Gryffindors. They always seemed to have a snack before going to bed.

He'd just felt like having a cup of tea right now.

Fidgeting with the tea and the cup, he tried not to stare at the still not boiling water. Yes, it would be good to read something and drink hot tea, maybe even grab a chunk of chocolate while he was at it. After the past few days, he deserved all comfort he could get.

He was still getting used to living with a group of Gryffindors. Thank Merlin they had Eppy and Bobbler living here as well. At least he didn't have to worry about chores on top of all this madness.

It would have probably made Granger deliriously happy to watch him slave over menial tasks.

Fortunately, she seemed to be content with casting disapproving looks at him, looking shockingly like professor McGonagall did when she took House points from Slytherin.

Draco didn't know if angry words would have had better or worse.

The way the Gryffindors treated him was a mystery to him. No one had blamed him for attacking Weasley earlier. Instead professor -- well, not a professor anymore -- Lupin had asked him if he was all right and then offered him some chocolate that he'd accepted in near shock.

He remembered Lupin from Hogwarts, being a silly teacher who'd turned out to be an almost Dark creature with his curse. The approaching full moon was slightly disconcerting, but Draco was certain Snape would brew the werewolf a potion that would restrain his killer urges. Anything to keep them safe.

Like with other professors, Draco had never really paid much attention to someone he knew to be a halfblood. He did have to admit now that Lupin wasn't a complete fool. The way he'd talked to him about Weasley had been slightly patronizing and had annoyed him at first, but it was definitely better to be preached to than to endure uncomfortable silences.

He didn't mind Remus Lupin, ignored Granger and was slightly baffled by the vague friendliness Potter showed at him.

Sirius Black was another thing completely.

There weren't many things Draco admitted he feared, but Sirius Black was definitely on the top of that list.

Those black eyes were full of suspicion every time the man looked at him. He didn't know why; probably because of his father. Him being a Slytherin could also help, considering what he'd heard the man say about his House and its Head.

Hatred towards Slytherins and Snape were things Draco had already got used to since most people showed obvious distaste every time he walked by, muttering dark things about him.
Black didn't mutter. He simply looked at him with those scary eyes of his.

It was mostly his reputation that got to Draco. A pureblood Gryffindor who had been in Azkaban for over a decade for a murder he hadn't committed. Draco wanted to claim that the respect he tried to show to the man was for him being a pureblood, but knew that it was the Azkaban-part that really influenced his behavior.

Everyone knew that people didn't last there for a week without becoming at least slightly crazy.

Something touched the back of Draco's legs, and he jumped, letting out a yelp as he tried not to burn himself with the pot and grab his wand at the same time. He looked around in panic and then glared at the orange hairball that was walking away with his tail held high.

Damn the cat! Draco was certain the little creature was laughing at him.

Turning his back on the animal who looked like he was thinking of scratching him, Draco went to take the pot and poured the water into the cup.

Granger's cat was really getting on his nerves. Why couldn't he behave like Potter's owl who hooted at him every time he walked past her? The weird purring and butting his head on his legs were really disconsenting, especially since Draco wasn't sure he even liked cats.

Must be because the furball's owner hated him. He wouldn't be surprised if Crookshanks clawed him some day, like Granger would probably like the cat to do.

He grabbed the sugar, ignoring the memories that assaulted him. His mother had always liked her tea extra sweet, and his father had always commented on it, especially when Draco had followed her example.

There were moments when he missed that. He didn't want to, but he did. It was now not even the memory of perfection he'd held dear ever since he'd betrayed it, but an illusion.

It was over. There was no reason to continue thinking about his past as something perfect, for it meant that he would have to lie to himself about everything.

He was tired of lies.

He knew exactly what had happened at the Weasley place. The others didn't even have to tell him about his father's part in that little scene. He knew how much his father hated the Weasleys and could well imagine how he had enjoyed killing them, just like he'd enjoyed torturing professor McGonagall.

No matter how much he'd always looked up to his father, he couldn't comprehend that. Yes, he wanted to be respected and sometimes pointing out people's weaknesses and stupidity was just too much fun. There was a line he didn't want to cross, though, now that he realized such a line existed.

He saw no need to please anyone -- there were so few people whose opinion might matter to him -- but he didn't think that cruelty was any better than crawling.

Taunting Ron Weasley didn't feel like much of a game anymore; he didn't need to be distracted from his own worries that badly. There was plenty enough for him to do here now. Work. Reading. Preparing to fight against the Dark Lord. Things would be frantic enough without using Weasley for amusement.

He was actually stunned by how he was thinking of the fight as his own now. It wasn't simply good
versus evil like most seemed to think. He was in it to wipe out a lie.

Trust wasn’t easy for him. He had known that Potter had believed in what he’d told him earlier, but he’d still confirmed it from Snape. It had been one of the most horrifying moments in his life, asking the man if Lord Voldemort was indeed the same person as Tom Riddle, and if he was truly a mudblood.

Snape’s cold stare had told him the answer even before he said it out loud, and Draco had been glad of the darkness of the dungeons, because he hadn’t been able to hide his shock and revulsion.

The horror of that revelation had been stronger than any memories, even stronger than the dull ache he still felt when he thought of the Malfoy Mansion and his mother. It changed everything. All the things he’d believed had turned into lies, his ancestral home where generations of purebloods had dwelled was in the hands of a maniac who defiled everything he held dear.

He could have understood his father if it really was about pureblood pride and need to gain a better position in their world. To rape and pillage and kill people whose blood was just as pure as theirs just because a crazy mudblood told him to? That was incomprehensible.

Realizing he’d put at least ten lumps of sugar into his cup, lost in thought, Draco let out a sigh and then poured the whole thing down the drain. He still had enough hot water to make himself another cup.

There was nothing to distract him here, so he would probably spend the whole evening brooding over the stupidity of this war. He hoped tomorrow there would be a meeting he could attend as well, anything to break the boredom.

For there was nothing he could really do to change the way things were right now.

A slight sound from the doorway barely registered at first and Draco shrugged it off as Granger’s cat again. Then the sound was repeated, somewhere between a sigh and a snort and he glanced over his shoulder to see Weasley standing there.

He didn’t make eye contact or stare. Instead he returned his attention to his tea.

Unable to turn around and walk away, Ron stared at Malfoy. He hadn't thought he'd be in here. Malfoy had stayed out of his way for days now, always finding something else to do when he was around. He should really go back to the living room and raid the cupboards when he was certain the kitchen was empty.

He didn't move. Somehow, it was too quiet in the house, with no one else around, and Ron didn't want to run away from here only to hide in the silence. He could handle Draco Malfoy’s presence, especially since he wasn’t being his arrogant self.

It was strange, but watching Malfoy work on something as simple as tea was making Ron's hands tremble. Hiding the slight movement by squeezing his hands into fists, he stared at Malfoy.

Maybe he should have joined Hermione and Terry at the Broomsticks tonight. It would have been better than this, but he sometimes felt like a third wheel when he was out with those two, and he definitely didn't want to spend the evening drinking and fighting stupid thoughts. At least this way he wouldn't have a blinding headache tomorrow morning.

It wasn't as if the crowd could really take away all the weird and disgusting thoughts still popping into his mind from his insane subconscious.
He wondered if he should say something to Malfoy. It was always tempting to use some of the names Sirius used on Slytherins and then watch him flinch or try to hide the discomfort that always showed in those damn pale eyes.

Ron wasn’t certain if he wanted to break the silence with fighting, even though just being in the same room with Malfoy made him feel as uncomfortable as always.

Licking his suddenly dry lips, he watched Malfoy reach for a small pouch of tea, distracted by those nimble fingers working on the knot that tied it shut. He wished Malfoy would hurry up and get lost so that he could have a snack as well and then try to go to bed.

He wondered if Malfoy was planning on taking his own snack upstairs to eat while reading something and then going to bed before the others came home. The git would probably take a shower and spend ages naked under the spray and use most of the warm water, just to force Ron to charm the heater again.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

Draco fussed with the tea leaves, confident with this part. It was not difficult to make tea if one excelled in Potions, the trickiest part had always been to get the stove working.

He watched the clear water turn to pale brown as the leaves steeped, ignoring everything else.

Weasley. The one person in the world he didn't really want to see right now. They could barely stay in the same room when there were others around, and he was sure that any time spent alone together would lead to violence.

Trying to act like the stare he could feel between his shoulder blades wasn't affecting him at all, he finished brewing his tea. He took his cup and then turned to leave the kitchen. He raised an eyebrow slightly, as a silent request for Weasley to get out of his way.

Still not saying a word, Ron raised his hand slowly, as if he wasn't sure what he was doing. He certainly didn't want to touch Malfoy unless he was hitting him, and he definitely didn't want to think about Malfoy naked in the shower. Or anywhere else. He was cool with Harry liking guys, but his own preferences lay elsewhere, and thinking about naked men made him feel like he'd been punched in the stomach.

Like he felt now, a fluttering ache spreading through his body so fast it felt like he was on fire.

He was a bit stunned by the way his hand didn't tremble anymore. It didn't clench into a fist either. He tried to hold still, but the movement continued in a graceful arch without any hesitations.

Malfoy was still a prat, a disgusting slimy Slytherin who used people and lied to them even without saying a word. And yet here he was with Malfoy whom he'd always hated, who had always hated him. Who had taunted him and hit him and tried to crawl inside his skin when he had been unsure of everything.

It should be a nightmare. A disgusting memory sending him to scrub himself clean in the shower until he bled.

He grabbed Malfoy's cup and tossed it to the side. The sound of porcelain shattering against the wall was somehow appropriate, as was the shock on Malfoy's face. Ron's hands itched to grab him, and he did nothing to suppress that urge.

It was so easy. He simply reached out and took a hold of Malfoy. With a firm push, he pressed him
against the wall, ignoring the tea that was staining the wallpaper. He needed this like he needed the air to breathe.

Inhale. Then his lips met Malfoy's in a frantic kiss.

Draco was frozen still. He'd thought Weasley would hit him again and had been prepared to either walk away or fight. The kiss came as a surprise, the instant desire coursing through his body didn't.

This was so much better than fighting or sitting alone in his room drinking tea and wondering what the hell had happened to his perfect life. Wrapping his arms around Weasley, he answered the kiss eagerly. There was an ocean of violence just underneath the lust, waiting to flood over the touch. Some of it seeped through the caress, making him bite Weasley's lower lip almost hard enough to break the soft skin.

Ron groaned as he felt the sharp bite on his mouth. He couldn't understand how Malfoy was making him throb with need, but he couldn't let it happen again like this.

Not like this.

He stepped away from the kiss. "I shouldn't have done that." The words made him sound like Hagrid, but he couldn't think of anything else to say. There was no way in hell he would ever apologize to Malfoy.

"Why not?" Licking his lips, Draco looked up from under his eyelashes. He didn't really understand why Weasley insisted on doing this; touching him as if he wanted to shag him blind and then moving away in clear agony. Gryffindors didn't play games Snape had said, but this seemed awfully like one.

"I don't like you, Malfoy!" Ron almost laughed at his own brutally honest and painfully obvious words. "I don't like you and I still..." Kissed you? Want you?

Draco raised an eyebrow, the sneer slipping back on his lips without a conscious thought. He wasn't surprised, nothing had ever indicated that Weasley liked him. "Tell me something I don't already know."

Looking a little embarrassed, Ron ground out, "Shut up, Malfoy. I'm trying here!" Why did the git always have to be so damn annoying?

"Let me guess. You're trying to tell me that you don't like me but you want to shag me anyway and now you're going through some very Gryffindor angsting over the fact that you can't resist me." It was good to say it out loud. Even better to see the look in Weasley's eyes.

Some days Ron didn't know whether to laugh at Malfoy or hit him. He'd tried both, and the results were never really what he wanted.

He couldn't deny Malfoy's words. He did want him, of course he did. Malfoy was... He was... Well he was something all right! Kind of sexy in an irritating way. And he did know what to do with his mouth. And hands. Ron was convinced he was at least part Veela with that hair and that smirk. Not to mention that arse. Yes, he had noticed the arse.

Malfoy was also right about the angsting, even though Ron wouldn't put it that way himself. He was simply being considerate. Reasonable. It wasn't a nice thing to lust after someone you also wanted to punch. That was something people like him just didn't do, they didn't want guys like Malfoy and didn't really want to hurt anyone.

Except that he kind of did; wanted Malfoy, and at the same time wanted to grab him so hard he
bruised him or bite him until he bled. "You sure have a high opinion of yourself." Not that he would just admit that want to anyone. He'd barely managed to even admit it to himself.

Draco didn't say anything. He simply looked down Weasley's body, his gaze focusing on his groin. When he looked back up on his face, he smiled at the obvious embarrassment there.

"Oh shut up!" Exasperated, Ron grabbed Malfoy's arm. "You want to shag or not?"

Not even bothering to hide his amusement, Draco said, "How eloquent! And yes, I want to shag." He leaned closer to Weasley, his breath tickling his ear as he added, "You're quite shaggable."

Ron knew this was wrong. It was Malfoy and Malfoy was evil and he hated Malfoy more than he'd ever even thought of hating anyone. He shouldn't want this, shouldn't be here or talk to him like they were actually wanting the same thing.

His mind was rebelling against the need, but his body was already committed.

He pushed Malfoy onto the table, shoving the teapot and a jar of marmalade out of his way. The pot fell on the floor, shattering into a mess of shards and tea. He didn't really care. There was one thing Malfoy had been wrong about; he wasn't going to be 'shaggable', not ever. Otherwise, he was all game.

The door opened slightly. "What are they doing?" came a whisper full of outrage.

"Eppy, Bob, get the hell out of here!" Not bothering to even look at the house elves, Ron moved to open his trousers.

He knew he was at least slightly mad. Usually, the slamming door and the patter of bare feet echoing down the hall would have destroyed the mood and made him cringe. There was something about Malfoy that just made him lose his mind; instead of thinking with his brains, he was now operating on lust only.

Naked, he needed to get naked right now, and the way Malfoy was squirming on the table and trying to get his shirt off made him realize the need was mutual.

Ron didn't manage to go very far with his own clothes, too busy helping Malfoy with his, his hands itching with the need to touch the pale skin. Settling with pushing his trousers down, he pulled Malfoy's off, almost choking as he saw the green boxer shorts trimmed with silver.

Slytherins!

Then all amusement left him as Malfoy spread his legs, the movement a surprisingly elegant invitation. He stared, unable to believe that he was staring at Malfoy's hard prick without feeling any disgust, and then took that one step closer, bumping their erections together and almost tripping on his trousers.

Embarrassment didn't even register. It was all right to trip on his own trousers if that brought him grinding against Malfoy. Grinding was good, better than good and Ron couldn't believe how good the simple idea of thrusting against Malfoy until he came was.

Apparently he was the only one with that idea. "Wait! Weasley... Oh, fuck, wait!" Knowing the way his legs kept pulling Weasley even closer kind of contradicted his words, Draco forced himself to relax.

Slowing the frantic thrusting wasn't easy, but Ron did his best.
"We need something!" Draco was perfectly happy to do this on the kitchen table, but he was not going to have Weasley shag him dry. There was a limit to his masochism.

Ron paused completely, his eyes going a little wild. He was fine with this as long as he didn't really have to think about anything. "What?" He knew what he needed. A working brain. Or someone to tell him he was insane, because he simply didn't believe himself anymore.

"Lubrication." When Weasley's eyes went wider, Draco sighed, "Something slippery." When the very familiar look of confusion didn't change, he said very slowly, "You need something slippery, so you can put it in me and then on your prick before you shove it up my arse. Get it?"

A wheezing sound of shock escaped Ron. How could Malfoy say something like that? About his arse and pricks and did he really need slippery stuff to that?

His prick. Up Malfoy's arse. Slippery stuff. Okay. He could do that.

Trousers and pants still bunched up at his ankles, Ron stared around the kitchen trying to find something that would be slippery enough to gain Malfoy's approval. He didn't want to leave the kitchen; to pull up his trousers and go in search for some kind of a lotion. That would just bring the moment he freaked out closer, and he wanted to have sex before that.

His mind was in a total chaos, but he managed to focus on something near the bread basket. "Accio butter!" He grabbed the jar that came flying and then dropped his wand on the table.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Butter?" He tried to remember how it had tasted on a toast, if it was too salty or not. "That might sting. Can't you go and get something more appropriate, like real lubricant?" Somehow using butter as lubricant sounded awfully stupid. Not to mention that the fact that they were already doing this on the kitchen table would make eating here later on kind of awkward.

Fingers already dipped in the jar, Ron still managed to glare. "No." Where the heck would he find real lubricant anyway? Go and rummage through Harry's room? Not likely.

"Oh fine!" Leaning back against his elbows, Draco spread his legs wider. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He was sure Weasley would ignore whatever he said until he got hurt.

Ron paused for a moment to gawk at the sight in front of him. Malfoy lying on the table, half naked, looking naughty and sexy as hell at the same time. A very good combination, he had to admit. Ignoring the fact that his fingers were trembling a little, he leaned closer.

The hiss escaping Draco was half surprise half warning. His relaxed posture didn't exactly scream that he hated the clumsy touches.

It was weird. Ron's mind was playing an endless, 'My fingers are up Malfoy's arse!' and he couldn't decide if it was worth panicking or not. Could one panic with a hard on? Apparently yes.

Deciding he needed to speed this up or Weasley would just stand there and use his fingers on him until breakfast tomorrow morning, Draco grabbed some of the butter and then reached out for Weasley's prick. "You can move on now." Impatience was clear in his husky voice.

He stared at Weasley, his glistening erection, and a smile started to tug at his lips. Trying very hard not to laugh out loud, he closed his eyes. It didn't help.

"What's so funny?" Ron asked, feeling the raw anger raise at the familiar mocking sight.
There was nothing but honest mirth in Draco's eyes as he finally looked up. "I... I'm...
He let out a muffled sound of laughter. "I'm greasing the weasel!"

Ron shook his head at the hysterical comment, refusing to find it funny even though it kind of was. He didn't want to collapse into a laughing heap right now. Oh no. He wanted to do something else. Looking into Malfoy's eyes, he ground out, "I am going to fuck you so hard you won't sit for days."

Draco's laughter died. He stared at Weasley for a moment and then grinned ferally at the words. "You can always try!" He knew it would make Weasley growl, and when the sound reverberated in the room, he grinned even wider.

Things got a bit blurry then. Try as he might, Ron couldn't remember just exactly when he'd grabbed Malfoy's hip and how he'd got close enough without tripping on his trousers, but suddenly he was there, pushing into a tight hotness and Malfoy's fingers were squeezing his arm so hard it hurt.

"Oh yeah..." Arching his back a little, Draco let his head hit the table as he felt Weasley inside him. He was definitely not going to complain about the direct tactic of simply shoving it in. After all, this was Weasley; holding him a little tighter than necessary, pushing his prick in without much finesse and looking at him with a totally bewildered expression on his face.

Ron was in a happy place. There was nothing but the hot and tight squeeze in the world, sucking his brains out and leaving him tingling. Not that he was complaining. He couldn't form any words even if he tried, all he could do was twist his hips and thrust into Malfoy.

"Merlin, you're huge!" Panting it out, Draco grabbed the edge of the table and held on. "Fucking huge..."

He'd thought he would probably control this, knowing the lack of sophistication Weasley possessed, but now it seemed he was just as lost as he was. Weasley really was huge, and he was filling him completely and it felt better than anything in ages.

The words penetrated the haze in Ron's mind, and he let out a growl as he looked down at what would undoubtedly be a smirk. Seeing that Malfoy's face was a grimace between pain and pleasure was completely surreal like everything seemed to be right now.

Ron liked the look. It was better than anything he'd ever seen.

There were other things he liked just as much, the way Malfoy gasped and let out a litany of curses when he thrust back in, Malfoy's hands reaching out for him and then pulling him closer.

He liked the way Malfoy was tight and hot and at the same time so damn open for him.

"Oh fuck, Weasley! You're so good..." Moaning out the words, Draco clawed at the strong shoulders he was gripping, needing more. He knew he'd be bruised tomorrow, and didn't care. "Come on! Harder!"

Ron tightened his hold on Malfoy, moving his hips faster. He smiled darkly at the string of nonsense that escaped him, enjoying the knowledge that he was making Malfoy lose himself like this and that he wasn't alone in this whirlwind of mindless pleasure.

The table underneath them shook with the force of his thrusts.

Reaching down to fist his own prick, Draco grunted with every thrust. Weasley was holding him down, slamming hard -- almost violently but not quite -- into him. No one had ever overpowered him this way before, and he reveled in it.
He knew this was absolutely safe. He would never have allowed anything like this with another Slytherin, but with Weasley things were different; he had no idea of the games that were as natural to Draco as breathing. It was all about strength and need and lust but not a game of domination.

It was so easy to surrender to that.

"Harder!" Draco groaned, his voice barely a whisper. "Fuck, Weasley, harder!"

Ron couldn't really comprehend any words, but he could hear the hunger in Malfoy's voice.

Slamming into Malfoy, squeezing his hips so hard there would definitely be hand shaped bruises there for days, he let out muffled curses as he came. Through the haze of bliss he could barely feel Malfoy's hand moving harder on his own prick.

He wasn't a complete bastard! Trying to figure out how to pull out of Malfoy's arse without making a total mess, Ron muttered, "Hey, I... I can..." His brains weren't really ready to process anything as complicated as giving Malfoy a hand.

Fortunately Malfoy didn't need his help.

Ron stared at Malfoy as he convulsed, arching his back so that it looked almost painful. Then it didn't matter what Malfoy looked like, as the heat around his prick clenched and the shock of Malfoy's climax swept over him.

It was a miracle he managed to keep standing instead of just slumping on the floor as his legs went totally boneless.

Ron tried to catch his breath, holding onto the table for as long as he felt all wobbly, not minding the way he was slowly slipping out of Malfoy's body. He wasn't in any hurry.

The need to flee and wash the sweat and come and Malfoy's smell off his skin was peculiar in its absence.

He waited for it to come when he finally slipped free, but no, there was still no panic. He picked up his wand, but there was no urge to hex anyone, just the kind of tingle that meant he'd shagged himself silly. Or shagged someone else silly.

Since Malfoy looked a bit hesitant, Ron patted his stomach, ignoring the way his palm got wet and gooey, and smiled at him. He could see that his behavior just turned the hesitation into real worry.

It was all right. He didn't really care. As long as this post orgasmic good feeling remained and the anxiety stayed away, everything was fine.

Leaving Malfoy there on the table, he grabbed his trousers and yanked them up before padding to the door without looking back. The house was dark and quiet, and for the first time in ages Ron felt genuinely tired and had the hunch that for once there wouldn't be any weird dreams.

Strange, the mellow feeling followed him to sleep and greeted him the first thing the next morning. Going through his morning routines of fishing socks from under the bed and scratching his head until his hair was in some resemblance of an order, Ron had completely inappropriate thoughts about Malfoy having a magical arse that healed every worry and the mental image of a mediwizard prescribing him some of that arse made him laugh on his way down for breakfast.

There had to be something very wrong with him.
The bathroom stop made him reconsider his theory of Malfoy's magical arse, and he cursed loudly while trying to find some ointment to put on his stinging prick.

Not that there would ever be a second time of shagging with Malfoy on the kitchen table, but if he would consider kitchen tables in the far future, he would forgo the butter. Definitely.

It was early and he simply padded to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. Harry was there already, and soon there were sounds of the other taking showers and eventually everyone gathered around the table.

The first tingle of anger slithered up his spine as he watched Malfoy sit on his usual place on the other side of the table and didn't regret shagging him. He had no idea why he wasn't angry at the git, or at himself. It was more like he was angry at not being angry.

Made no sense really.

He just knew that seeing Malfoy look well shagged made him feel like a million Galleons. It blew the anger away, bringing forth a smug satisfaction.

These mood swings were kind of scary if he allowed himself to concentrate on them. Instead he concentrated on stuffing his face with sausages, feeling energetic.

Sipping coffee that had the weird side taste of cardamom in it as usual, Ron watched the others eat and make plans for the day. He was feeling too good to bother joining the conversation. It was looking like a good day, no matter what they would do.

He stayed behind in the kitchen after the others had finished their breakfast, enjoying the mellow feeling for a moment longer. He ignored the way Eppy was staring at him and the way Bob was running around with a rag in his hand.

"Hey Ron... Are you coming to Hogwarts with us or not?" Harry asked, standing at the doorway.

Ron shrugged. "Sure." He remembered Harry saying something about moving their meetings to Hogsmeade, and he had to wonder if this was the last time they'd spend the day milling around the Great Hall. "I'll just finish my coffee."

"Okay." Yawning, Harry leaned against the doorway and scratched his head.

The house elves kept scurrying around the room, both apparently finding the intrusion annoying. Eppy kept piling the dishes in the sink, the sound of porcelain hitting silverware making Harry cringe.

He couldn't remember Eppy ever actually breaking any of the china, so the sound was just a bit irritating. He was used to her and her cranky ways but watching the younger house elf's frantic movements was a bit weirder.

Since it seemed to take Ron forever to finish his coffee, the house elves simply finished with their cleaning and walked out of the kitchen without words. Bobbler seemed to find it necessary to run a rag over the table top one more time on his way out.

"Oh." Ron hadn't realized he was taking so long. Time seemed to fly when one's mind was full of happy thoughts. "I'll just wash my cup and we can go."

He was certain Eppy wouldn't like him to just leave the cup in the sink.
Harry looked up at Ron, expression mild. Something wasn't right in here. "Bob seemed to have some problems with the table. He kept scrubbing it every time he walked by. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it now would you?"

"Oh fuck!" Blinking, Ron spun around to stare at his best friend. It was fortunate that he had already put the cup in the sink or he'd have to try to explain shards of porcelain as well.

What the hell could he tell Harry? Not the truth. Never the truth. "I kind of..." Something intelligent! Spilled something on the table! Dropped a used sock on it! Threw up on it after getting totally drunk! Anything but the truth. "I kind of shagged Malfoy there last night."

He could hear the words come out but couldn't believe he was really saying it out loud.

"You shagged Malfoy?" Harry stared at Ron, not believing he could joke about something like that after all that had happened between those two. Ron had never seemed to tolerate any comments about Malfoy, not back at the cottage, not when they'd moved here together, and this offhand quip didn't sound at all funny. Then he realized that he was telling the truth. No stupid joke could ever make him look that shocked. "You shagged Malfoy."

It was quite strange to be saying it out loud like that. For the first time, Harry realized just how it must have felt to hear that he was shagging Snape.

At least they had never done it on the kitchen table.

"You shagged Draco Malfoy on the kitchen table? Our kitchen table?" Somehow the fact that they had done it here and he had eaten breakfast on this very table this morning was worse than the fact that Ron had actually had sex with Malfoy.

Ron's ears went hot.

Yeah. He had shagged Malfoy and it had been the best shag of his life. He had no idea why he wasn't freaking out, he should be horrified by the shagging itself, not to mention the fact that he'd actually told Harry about it.

Harry really didn't want to deal with this, but he had to ask, "Was it consensual?" When Ron said nothing and simply stared, he walked closer and nudged him. "Ron! Did Malfoy force you into something?" He didn't even want to think if he should ask if Ron forced Malfoy into something.

Blinking, Ron looked up and mumbled, "I shagged Malfoy on the table." He sounded ridiculously proud of himself, and the grin spreading to his face just added to it.

"Please never say that to me again." Harry was definitely going to replace the table. However, he was glad Ron wasn't going to have another panic attack because of this. "And Ron?" Waiting until his friend was looking at him, he smirked. "You shagged Malfoy?"

"Oh shut up!" It wasn't like he was planning to shag him again! He'd needed to do this with Malfoy and now he'd done it, he would never again touch him. He didn't want Malfoy like that. Once was enough to prove he was the man and now he needed nothing more from the Slytherin.

Glowering at the way Harry was now openly laughing at him, Ron ignored the little voice in his head calling him a liar.

Part 22
Hogsmeade had always seemed like a busy little village every time Harry had been out there with the others from Hogwarts, but it was beginning to look like a real town these days.

Looking around the big room, taking in the smell of still fresh paint, Harry wondered how on earth had they managed to build this place so fast even using magic. The project had been managed mostly by Dumbledore and Flitwick, but even with their combined talents, it should have taken longer.

Not that he was complaining. Having a place for the Order was a good thing, allowing them to finally take action instead of the endless talking.

With the headquarters finished and people gathering here, they would start training. It was still early, with only a handful of witches and wizards roaming through the hallways, but soon enough they would all come here to learn. To train in things that wouldn't be easy for anyone.

Exploring the other parts of the building would have to wait, the offices, big meeting halls and even the mess hall would come in secondary. Talking about the war was not as important as training was; it would all begin right here.

This place reminded Harry of the gymnasium in the Muggle school he'd attended before Hogwarts. Even the atmosphere was familiar; people milling around and waiting for instructions, their footsteps echoing in the vast room.

"This certainly brings back memories." Ron hopped on the raised platform, staring at the ornaments on the floor. "Remember how Snape kicked Lockhart's arse in the dueling club? That was so cool!" One of his most cherished memories.

Harry couldn't help grinning at that. Yes, he did remember that. It had been the highlight of his second year, the first time ever he had actually felt something other than resentment towards his Potions professor. It hadn't lasted for long, but there had been that moment of utter glee.

He didn't get to say anything as a voice rang out from behind him. "How delightful to hear such praise from you, Mr. Weasley. I may not survive the shock."

"Oh shi... Er... Good morning, sir." Ron's face went beet red as he stared at Snape. Why did that git always have to appear when he was saying something about him?

Snape cast a knowing look at him, and then looked at Harry and Hermione. "Miss Granger. Potter."

The greeting was accompanied by a nod.

"Good morning, professor," Hermione said, feeling sorry for the way Ron was still squirming. Of course it was kind of his own fault, but she felt sorry for him anyway.

Harry's gaze brightened. "Good morning, Snape." His whole body twitched with the urge to go to the man. With some effort, he controlled himself, seeing that there were people behind Snape. He did notice there was a very knowing glint in Snape's eyes as the man stepped further in to the room, allowing the others to enter as well.

The room felt warmer with the familiar people all around. Harry felt himself relax slightly. It was good to see everyone again, even with Sirius absent from the crowd.

It hadn't been easy to convince the man to stay behind, but the possibility that there would be Ministry people coming to see their first training session had been a reason enough to keep Sirius from joining them.

Still, Harry was half expecting to see the familiar dog skulk in the corners any moment now.
He was glad they had come here this early. This was definitely not going to be fun, and he wanted to get prepared to facing a crowd once again.

Since it wasn't exactly a good idea to try to hide from everything by focusing on a certain Potions master all the time and Hermione was pointing out something to Ron and talking entusiastically, Harry looked around, trying to figure out what to do.

Ignoring the very cheery expression on Terry Boot, Harry nodded at him before looking away. Sometimes he really couldn't deal with overly happy people.

His gaze moved over a small crowd, taking in some of the teachers and Arabella Figg who promptly winked at him. Feeling slightly better, he noticed that Malfoy had followed them here as well. He was standing in a corner, with a haughty expression on his face.

Harry walked to Malfoy, trying to make it look casual. He hadn't had a chance to talk to him since he had told him the truth about Voldemort. Every time they bumped into each other home, Malfoy walked away.

Of course it could be because of that thing with the kitchen table. Somehow he doubted that, though. He'd never seen Malfoy as someone who had qualms about sex.

"This really brings back memories, doesn't it?"

He knew Malfoy would know what he meant, the dueling club was something neither would be able to forget. The memory was not especially pleasant, but it was one of the least painful they shared.

"Yes, it does." A slight smile flickered on Draco's face. "Too bad Snape interfered with our fight. Otherwise it would have been even more interesting."

It was clear what he meant by that. The challenge was obvious.

To his utter surprise, Harry found himself laughing at that. No matter what happened, Malfoy never changed. Arrogant bastard! He realized he rather liked that.

Whatever else, it was honest.

He watched shock appear on Malfoy's face, chased away by honest amusement. It seemed like he wasn't brooding over the big revelation anymore. That was good, for Harry was beginning to realize that the Order would indeed need him and his expertise.

Keeping that in mind, Harry said, "Yes. You would have spent an interesting evening at the infirmary with a bruised backside." He knew it was an empty boast. If they had continued the duel, it would have been him suffering from bruises, not Malfoy.

They both knew that.

Draco raised an eyebrow. He was still amazed that Potter wasn't mocking him for his beliefs. He'd expected at least a veiled comment, or a warning to stay away from Weasley. There weren't any. Only this.

He didn't know if it was a reply to his challenge, but that was as good an interpretation as any. "Indeed? You must have hit your head harder that day than I thought. I believe it would have been you coddled by Madam Pomfrey that night."

The air between them was sizzling with expectation, both knowing perfectly well where this would
lead, both enjoying it immensely. This was simple. No hidden tension swirling between them.

Harry knew there was still time before their training session would begin, and this would be a good way to relax.

Being able to finally do something was good, but he was still nervous about his role in this. He was essentially being forced to address another crowd, his role even more clearly one of a leader than previously, and it was making his stomach cramp.

A duel would be simple, familiar. Those evenings he'd sparred against Figg or sometimes even Dumbledore had always cleared his head. The nights following had been spent sleeping instead of angsting.

He made a small gesture at the platform. "Care for a rematch then?"

"Why not?" Nodding eagerly, Draco pulled out his wand.

"Harry?" Seeing the way Malfoy was pointing at his friend with his wand, Ron sauntered closer to them. "Is everything all right here?" He cast a worried look at Malfoy as well. The git had been awfully quiet the past few days, if he didn't count the very persistent moaning and begging he was really trying to forget already.

Not that he really cared. But he was concerned anyway.

"Everything's fine. Malfoy and I are going to spar a little, that's all."

That didn't exactly make Ron relax. He looked even more worried as the two of them hopped on the platform. This was not a good idea.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked, stepping next to her friend. She could read the tension in Ron, wondering what this was all about. She didn't have to wonder for long. Even as Ron leaned closer to explain, Harry's voice rang in the room, telling everyone they were about to test the arena.

Hermione had to agree with Ron. This was probably one of the silliest things she'd seen for a while.

Unable to stop smirking, Draco stood up on the platform, waiting for Potter to take the offense. He was willing to give him the first strike but that was about the only courtesy he'd get.

As if on cue, Potter flung a feeble jelly-legs jinx at him. It was easy to brush it off. Draco threw a disarming charm at him, almost sighing as Potter barely managed to shield himself against it and then promptly stumbled on his own robes.

This would not last for long.

People gathered closer to the walkway to watch the fight. Muttering quietly, Figg was pointing out something to Fletcher, who nodded every once in a while. Remus had a soft smile on his lips. He was glad Sirius wasn't here, for he would have undoubtedly attacked Malfoy by now, seeing the way Harry was faltering.

"This doesn't look good," Hermione whispered, as Harry was almost hit by another curse. She could see him try, but it was obviously not enough against Malfoy's skill.

Next to her, Ron nodded. He'd known Harry wasn't really that good at defense. There had been enough DADA classes where he'd seen Harry's enthusiasm over learning to fight dwindling a few years back, after the Death Eaters had almost killed them all.
Ron had never understood that. If anything, Harry should have wanted to learn more, like he had. All his own skills in dueling came from that fall, his sixth year, and even those skills weren't great or anything, they were obviously better than Harry's.

Sure, Harry was good with theory, but he was a dismal duelist.

Fear creeping slowly into his mind, he wondered how Harry could have survived any attack. It was a miracle he'd managed to kill any of those Death Eaters.

He was clumsy. Hesitating before saying out the curses so weakly they wouldn't have done much harm even if they had hit Malfoy.

Groaning, Ron watched as the duel went on. Harry was so going to lose, and he could bet that Malfoy would be intolerable about the whole thing later on, smirking smugly even if he didn't actually say anything.

Snape squinted his eyes as he heard the way Harry mumbled out yet another charm. *Horn tongue?* That was ridiculous!

He hadn't seen Harry fight a controlled duel since the dismal failure of the dueling club years earlier. There had been such fire in him back then, anger and determination. There was nothing like that in him now, almost looking like Harry was holding the wand for the first time ever.

A very faint smile flickered on Snape's lips for just a second before disappearing. He'd always known Harry was too theatrical for his own good, but this was preposterous.

The reports in their long meetings had always been meticulously detailed, Harry recounting his encounters with the Death Eaters with blank voice, describing his actions to the chosen few. Those fights had been real.

Not like the farce before his eyes.

Draco Malfoy had always loved games, but he didn't seem to recognize this as one. It didn't surprise Snape. He knew how people mistook the eagerness in Harry's eyes for stupidity, Merlin knew he'd thought that for a long time. Not anymore.

Another smile threatened him as Malfoy's disarming charm made Harry stumble again. This time he couldn't regain his balance and fell flat on his face, his wand still held in a firm grip.

The silence in the room was shocked.

For a casual watcher, the fight seemed to be over. Years of witnessing battles like this had honed Snape's perception, though. He was keeping his gaze on Harry's slumped form, seeing the ragged breathing and the shaking shoulders as what they really were, a deception to lull his adversary into believing he was harmless.

"You want to yield?" Keeping his wand pointed at Potter's direction, Draco smiled slightly. He couldn't keep his triumph out of his voice, even though winning this whole thing so easily was not good.

His father and his people saw Harry Potter as their most important target. He'd hoped the annoying Gryffindor would prove to be a difficult one to kill, one who couldn't be beaten by simple hexes.

Now here he was, kneeling on the ground utterly defeated, and Draco hadn't even thrown any of the Unforgivables at him.
Harry drew in a shuddering breath. Then he looked up, his expression calm, eyes bright as he stared at Draco. "Yielding to such an incompetent foe would be rather embarrassing, don't you think?" His hand that had seemed too weak to hold his wand snapped up. "Conjunctivito!"

Eyes losing focus, Malfoy staggered back. Burning tears pooled down his cheeks as he cast the protective charm around his eyes. He cursed himself as his sight returned to normal and saw Potter standing there, smiling.

Sneaky bastard.

He didn't waste any time gawking at Potter. It was clear this was far from over. "Incendio!" Aiming the fire charm at Harry's wand, Draco dove to the left as he saw the flick of the wrist deflecting it and then bouncing the charm back. Realizing the charm had barely missed his hair, he growled, and cast another curse.

Harry smiled wider as the fight became more real. This was only a spar, but he never believed in doing things sloppily. Unless it was Divinations homework.

Knowing all too well that Malfoy knew more about Dark Arts than someone his age should, he hurled hexes at him without much fear that he'd actually hurt him.

Neither paid any attention on the people already at the gym gathering around the arena to gawk at them.

Ron was staring at Harry with his mouth open. He couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed. First, it had looked like every other time Harry had dueled with other wizards, the clumsiness and the hesitation reminding him of Lockhart somehow. Malfoy's sneer had been predictable, just like the triumphant look on his face.

Then something had happened. Harry, his cool friend Harry had shrugged once, as if throwing his Invisibility Cloak off. Instead of cowering in front of that damn Malfoy, he was now fighting back. Fighting back, and obviously winning.

It was strange to watch the duel. Snape kept his eyes on Harry, already familiar with Malfoy's fighting skills. This was fascinating. He'd heard about the times Harry had fought Death Eaters, both from Lucius and his cohorts and the boy himself, so he wasn't exactly stunned to see that he could actually fight.

He was surprised by the calm mannerism with which the boy fought, never giving into the battle rage. That would probably come later, when it was for real.

The moves Harry used reminded him of things past. Some of the hexes were obviously taught to him by Arabella, who was famous for using people's weaknesses against them. The acrobatics probably came from Quidditch practice. The complete ruthlessness reminded him of Albus and the hard look that sometimes replaced the twinkle, revealing a man who would do anything for the cause he deemed just.

Snape watched, realizing that Harry was right. He wasn't exactly a child anymore. This wasn't the display of a petulant teenager, even though it was clear from the way his green eyes gleamed that he was enjoying the opportunity of showing Malfoy his place. His actions were precisely measured, not simply reacting to the situation, but actually well thought out. Amazing.

It made Snape wonder just when had this happened. To grow up and face the responsibilities of his
actions was something most wizards never even thought about before leaving Hogwarts. Some didn’t bother afterwise either.

He had never been asked to train Harry in fights like this and for some reason he was grateful of that. With his duties as a Potions master and his old spying routine, it would have exhausted him. Harry hadn't needed an old Death Eater to teach him the dark curses. Arabella had been able to do that on her own, of that he was sure.

Twirling around, barely keeping his balance, Draco hissed out a disarming curse, knowing it wouldn't work. Potter was too good at this, countering every charm he could remember, every single hex and curse they had taught at school, and even the ones that had never been used by the goody-goody teachers.

His mind was a whirlwind of rage, blood pounding in his ears. He could not let Potter win, not with Snape and Weasley and all the others watching.

"Damn you!" It wasn't a magical curse, but it came straight from his heart. He hated losing. It was the first thing he'd ever been taught, one that his father had reminded him every single time they met. He could never afford to lose. "Cruci..."

"Expelliarmus!"

"Petrificus Totalis!"

The two charms were cast simultaneously, both hitting Malfoy before he could finish his own. His wand flew to the ground, his body following a moment later, making a dull thumping sound as he lay there stiffly, like he'd just been turned into a statue.

Snape kept his wand aimed at the boy. It was just an instinct; he didn't believe Malfoy could actually break the charm.

An instinct like coming to Harry's aid, something he wasn't going to examine too closely.

"Not bad." Walking slowly towards Malfoy, Harry smiled. "You lost it there at the end, though. Anger just makes you blunder, Malfoy. It can get you killed."

There was both anger and curiosity in Draco's gaze. He'd thought Potter would gloat, but this sounded like a simple advice.

"Finite Incantatem." With a flick of his wand, Harry released his opponent from the body bind and then held out his hand to help him up. "Wanna try it again?" He sounded exhilarated.

Draco had to blink at that. Not many people would be like that after almost being cursed with excruciating pain. He realized he was grinning back at Potter. "Sure."

The room was full of excited babble as the older Order members commented on the fight. Snape moved back into the shadows, shoving his wand under his robes with an angry gesture. The charm had been instinctive; to protect Harry Potter, like he always did.

He was just glad the crowd was more focused on Harry and Malfoy than on his actions.

Before Harry could move back into position again, Hermione and Ron got to him, both completely stunned.

"That was incredible!" It was the only comment Hermione managed to get out.
"I didn't know you could do that!" Ron exclaimed, still looking overwhelmed. He was a little in awe with Harry. That fight had been totally cool!

Harry shrugged. "It's a way to protect people." He didn't want to make a big deal out of it, for it really was mostly for show. He could fight off a fairly competent adversary in a single combat. Facing more than one, he would not last long.

Sometimes he wondered if any of his friends understood it. This war wouldn't be about facing the enemy like they were in a dueling club. The fights wouldn't be fair, the Death Eaters would come, and they never came alone.

His coordination wasn't good enough for such fights. A small smile flickered on his lips as he realized what Snape would undoubtedly say to him later on about details. He could concentrate well on one opponent, but more than one was a distraction.

Kind of like the large crowd of people now entering the room.

Now that this wasn't just about his friends and a couple of familiar teachers, Harry shoved his wand inside his robes, not wanting to exercise more. He didn't want to make it seem like he was showing off, not really.

Even though it had been rather fun.

Watching people mill around reminded him of the endless days they'd already spent doing absolutely nothing of importance at Hogwarts. He could see that almost everyone seemed to be marveling at the building itself; walking in and out of the training hall, probably going for a tour around the huge house.

He could see some people were making comments about the dueling platforms and other markings that showed the true purpose of the hall. It was good to see that at least the older members of the Order seemed to realize exactly why they were here.

Arabella seemed to be already organizing something at the other side of the room, and Harry couldn't help smiling as he saw two younger Hufflepuffs try out a few simple curses on each other.

Apparently he wasn't the only one getting really annoyed by the waste of time.

Harry didn't want to seem overly assertive and start making noise and giving orders. He was waiting, even though he had no idea what he was waiting for. Dumbledore had made it painfully clear that he was not going to show up here today.

He knew that the reluctance to actually take charge of anything was a huge flaw, but he couldn't bring himself to actually stand here and order people around.

More people were now moving around and pairing off, trying simple charms on each other and moving clumsily away from whatever others were throwing at them.

It looked like a group of first years waiting to be sorted. Harry could see the excitement shining on most faces, people laughing and talking as if this was just another exercise, an amusement to break the boring routine of talking about housing.

This didn't even look like a dueling club, for at least then everyone had been prepared and actually paid attention.

Harry could see disapproval on those who had already fought one war and couldn't blame them. This
was stupid. Playing around and calling it a training session might be exactly what most people wanted this to be, but that would simply get all of them dead.

He had to wonder if people would stop talking and laughing and flinging useless charms at each other even if he jumped back on the platform and told them what fighting really was.

Words alone would probably fail.

He looked to the left, seeing Malfoy standing there with an expression of smug superiority on his face. For once he didn't hate the expression. "Malfoy?"

"Yes?" Raising an eyebrow, Draco turned to look at Potter. "Entertaining, isn't it?"

"I know a few other words I might use..." Harry muttered. "I was wondering if you'd care to spar with me again." He gestured at the raised arena, trying really hard to ignore the two witches standing nearby and sending tickling charms at each other.

Draco wasn't surprised by the question. He'd seen the annoyance on Potter's face, the same emotion that manifested as an evil smirk on his own. "Of course." It was about time.

There were soft mutters and stares as they climbed back to the main arena, people turning to see what was happening. As soon as they realized that something was indeed going on, they started moving closer to the platform, eyes shining with anticipation.

It wasn't too hard to figure out what was going to happen next.

"Oh and Malfoy?" Before taking his place on the other side of the platform, Harry muttered, "As far as I'm concerned, there is only one Unforgivable that we can never use in this room."

That melted the smirk off Malfoy's face, but it was replaced by dark amusement instead of fear. It was kind of what Harry had expected to see.

Moving to face each other again, Harry and Draco held their wands in front of them. Not poised for an attack, but ready to lift any moment.

"People, may I have your attention, please!" There was already a silence, occasionally broken by a muffled giggle. Harry waited until the blonde witch who was still doubling over with laughter got herself under control before continuing. "Malfoy here has kindly agreed to spar with me. Again."

There were a few catcalls from his yearmates.

"Since we have both agreed to this, it's important that everyone puts down their wands and allow us to do this in peace. No interruptions, no matter what."

Seeing people nod, he glanced at the far end of the room, meeting the dark gaze for a moment. He didn't have to say anything else; Snape seemed to understand that the words had meant him as well.

"Ready?" He glanced at Malfoy.

Draco didn't even bother to reply. With a swish and flick of his wand, he sent a simple levitation charm at Potter, rolling his eyes as their audience let out an awed sigh.

There had to be lots of Hufflepuffs in here.

Both of them continued the duel slowly. Harry wanted to teach a lesson no one in the room would forget. To Draco, this was a very good opportunity to show off. He'd always been theatrical and
enjoyed the way people looked at him with awe in their eyes.

It was better than the open hostility he usually encountered these days.

Flicking his wand almost negligently, casting aside yet another fire charm, Harry smirked and declared, "Serpensortia!" Like the last time that charm had been used in front of an audience, there were loud gasps and startled exclamations coming from around him. Some of those who'd been present at Lockhart's unforgettable dueling club laughed out loud.

On the floor, a large snake uncoiled and hissed angrily.

"Vipera evanesca!" Draco's smirk was the mirror image of the expression on Harry's face. He was astonished at how much he enjoyed this.

Even before the snake disappeared in golden sparks, the next curses were already flying across the room.

Various fire charms, from the most innocent that would simply heat the other one's wand so they'd drop it to ones that would burst people into flames. Illusions. Harry even threw a charm that would make one's bones disappear at Malfoy, figuring that since they were already strolling down the memory lane, he might as well use it as his advantage.

To his disappointment, it didn't hit.

Both young men seemed equal, neither gaining the upper hand in the duel. They had already used most of the regular charms and curses. Throwing curses as fast as he could, Harry knew that the next one flung at him would quite probably be one that most people in the room would never use.

He would have to talk with Malfoy about the way he squinted his eyes. It gave him away every time, allowing him plenty of time to dodge.

"Crucio!" With a flick of his wrist, Draco sent the curse towards Potter. Then he repeated the word, aiming to the left, knowing by now that it was where Potter liked to jump to evade the curses.

The room filled with shocked babble. People were staring at Draco with eyes wide with terror. A moment later the shock turned into silent dismay as Harry responded to the curse with one of his own, hurling the possibility of unimaginable pain at the blond Slytherin.

Now there were no other sounds in the room. People had barely had the time to register that someone amongst them was using an Unforgivable. Now they were witnessing their great hero using the same curse.

It was unbelievable.

Keeping his attention on Malfoy, Harry flung another curse at him, wondering just exactly how many dark curses he knew. They'd have to talk about it sooner or later. Maybe it would be a good idea to ask him to train some of these people. Harry wouldn't say it out loud, but they both knew that Malfoy had been trained to be the ideal Death Eater as well as the heir of the Malfoy house. He would be well versed in all the things their Order would encounter.

Sparks of blue and silver were flying all around them, some of the simpler curses manifesting in brightness that was almost beautiful. If they hit anyone, the result would be far from nice, though.

Sweat was running down Harry's back. This was invigorating. Malfoy was definitely not holding back or making allowances because of his fame. If anything, he seemed to be determined to win this.
Harry knew that this time he had to defeat him all on his own. Snape wouldn't interfere and neither would any of the other older Order members who were standing in a group near the wall and looking apprehensive. This was his lesson, and he was about to make sure it would be remembered.

Waiting for Malfoy to finish with his muttered curse and deflecting it, he ground out, "Imperio!" He knew exactly where to aim and the amount of determination he had to put behind the command.

Malfoy froze.

In the eerie silence of the room, people stared at the blond young man as he stood there, his wand already raised for the next curse. Malfoy didn't move for a moment, simply stood there, staring at Harry. Then he lowered his wand slowly on the floor, sitting down next to it a moment later, looking like he was calmly waiting for further instructions.

Harry looked around him, his expression grim. "If you want to practice tickling charms or simple disarming curses, I suggest you all do it on your own time." He walked to Malfoy, once again helping him up after releasing him from his hold. Smiling slightly, he said, "Good fight."

"Could have been better." Showing neither amusement nor annoyance, Draco brushed his pantlegs with his palm. The floor definitely needed dusting, there was sawdust all over his trousers.

There was a knowing glint in Harry's eyes as he nodded. "Probably, yes."

People were starting to whisper to each other, all shocked by the fight they had just seen. The older Order members made comments about the fighting style, ignoring the use of forbidden and highly dubious curses.

Still standing in the shadows, Snape simply watched.

"All right. Settle down." It was said quietly, but everyone stopped talking anyway. Harry made a slight gesture with his hand, pointing at the older witches and wizards who were still standing as a tight group. "I'd like to introduce you to your teachers. Arabella Figg is here to teach you curses and charms. Mundungus Fletcher will help you with defensive moves."

Figg waved cheerily, still amused by the little show her old student had put on. She'd always thought Harry Potter had an evil streak in him. Next to her, Fletcher simply nodded.

Harry turned to the left, staring into the shadowy corner. "You all know professor Snape. He will teach you defense against dark curses." Pausing for a moment to nod at Snape, he added, "He will also teach you how to use some of those curses."

The nervous mutters were exactly what Harry had expected. Most people in the room looked absolutely horrified.

Not wanting to give anyone time to panic, he turned to where Remus was standing, looking strange without the black dog looming near by, he went on, "And this is professor Lupin, who will teach you about defense against dark creatures. We expect there to be many working for Voldemort. I'd suggest you study your old books before attending his classes. Know your basics, people."

Nervous tittering followed his words, as well as groans from those who had left the school only weeks ago. Just as they'd finished studying for N.E.W.T.s, they had to do this. It just wasn't fair.

Harry was feeling uncomfortable standing here. He would have much rather stayed in the background, but since Dumbledore had asked him to start these classes, he had to obey. After all, he was a member of the Order and not above anyone else. If he was assigned to this, he was going to do
his work well.

Deciding it was about time for him to leave, he put his wand under his robes. With one last look at everyone, he said, "When you go out there, you'll be facing people who have no problems using curses against you. They will hex you with anything, and they will definitely be using the Unforgivables. No one will be forced to use them here in class, but I think you should be prepared. So learn the curses, all of them. And practice those you can."

With that, he walked out of the room. He saw how everyone stepped to the side to give him a clear exit, and sighed. The shocked awe and giving way to him was better than the suffocating touching and crowding, but he had the sinking feeling that this too would be utter hell.

Harry Potter, the living legend, showing his troops how to maim or kill others. He knew it was the only way to keep people alive, but he didn't enjoy it. The press would undoubtedly hear about today, and there would be even more articles, more speculations and wonder.

He steeled himself, walking out of the room with head held high. So this was totally unfair and he hated it, he still had a part to play in this war and by now it was painfully obvious that no one else was going to make these decisions in his stead.

The reporters could go and hang themselves. Any Ministry official who cowered behind a desk and then disapproved of him could do the same.

He tried not to notice the way Dean and Seamus seemed pretty hyped or how Terry Boot was staring at him with something akin to horror. He simply walked out of the room.

"Potter!"

The usual sneer in the voice came as a relief as Harry turned around to face Snape. He looked past the man at the huge doors that were now blocking the way to the practicing room, for an insane moment wondering what would happen if he ran to Snape and crawled inside his robes.

He didn't think it would be wise to risk it. "Yes?"

Snape's gaze was blank. "It's not every day you manage to surprise me, Potter." There was open approval in his voice.

"I know." Smiling slightly, Harry nodded. "We did some extra practicing with Arabella last fall." They had scheduled some basic training for everyone in the Order, but by necessity, his had been a bit more than that.

Not even bothering to say that it wasn't exactly what he'd meant, Snape simply raised an eyebrow.

Harry let the smile fade away. "But yeah. That." He ran his hand across his face. "It was... I don't know. Fighting Malfoy was fun, but the rest of it..." He didn't know a word to describe it. "Sometimes I do wonder if I'm doing it right after all." Unfortunately there was no guidebook on how to be the great hero.

He knew almost everyone would expect him to just miraculously defeat Voldemort with some pure good magic, but he knew no 'good' charms that would keep him alive while facing Unforgivables. Maybe it wasn't about legends and heroes but simply about surviving and keeping others alive.

That he could do. At least he hoped so.

"I'm certain someone will tell you when you're doing it wrong." There was just enough harshness in
Snape's voice to indicate that he would definitely be that someone.

"That would be appreciated." Harry doubted anyone else would really criticize him openly. Even though Arabella had been a stern teacher, she'd only focused on the concrete aspects of hexing and fighting and no one else had ever commented on how he acted under duress.

Dumbledore was the only man who would even think about guiding him, and Harry had noticed how he was keeping his distance these days.

He was on his own now, pushed to the center stage of this insane play even though he sometimes had no idea what he was doing. It was a relief that at least Snape remained the same. The cutting comments he was bound to make sooner or later wouldn't be a nuisance.

They might well be the very thing that would keep him alive in battle.

But he didn't want to think of Snape just as an ally or a teacher. That in mind, he muttered. "I... I will come over to Hogwarts tomorrow morning. To see Dumbledore." Their last big meeting at the school. Harry kept his gaze on Snape's. "I was thinking we could have lunch together afterwards."

Snape let out a snort. He knew exactly where such a luncheon would lead. "You know where to find me."

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**Part 23**

"I can't believe the things the papers have been writing! Two days! We've been working here for two days and they already know all about the whole thing." Hermione looked like she was swallowing lots of angry expletives while muttering quietly enough that others walking down the hallway didn't hear her gripe. "There has to be someone in here who's handing out information."

Trying to keep up with her, Terry Boot huffed out, "You mean a rat?" He sounded a bit strained. That made both Ron and Hermione flinch. The words hit a bit too close to be comfortable.

"You might say that." It still made Ron's skin crawl, the mere memory of the deranged Animagus was enough to make him want to hit someone.

Hermione chose not to say anything about that. "Anyway, I really liked today's training. Remus really knows his Dark Creatures. It will be a pleasure to assist him in the class." The annoyance in her voice turned into smug pleasure. "I think it's a good idea to have classes during the morning and practical training during the afternoon. There's a lot to do and we..."

Ignoring whatever Hermione was saying, Ron simply trudged behind her and Terry, barely noticing Blaise when he joined their little group.

He for one wasn't that enthusiastic about classes. Sure, he knew they had a lot to do and that the Death Eaters were definitely not going to just disappear, but the idea of sitting in a room awfully similar to the classrooms back at Hogwarts and listening to someone that looked an awful lot like a teacher was quite frankly... awful.

Fighting was quite different. He was definitely not going to skip one of the training sessions.

Other than the classes, things were looking good. Ron couldn't think of anything that was going wrong; Charlie was getting better, slowly but still, and any annoying people he might mention were keeping out of his way. Then there was Harry's birthday coming up. Yeah, things were definitely...
looking good.

He wasn't stupid enough to jinx it by saying it, but he was thinking about it anyway.

It was a nice, even though a bit too warm, day. Ron stepped out first, inhaling deep.

He liked the new place. Walking here was less of a bother than the road to Hogwarts. Everything in here felt different too, the smells, the new furniture. Even people looked better here, more alert somehow.

Except for Terry. He'd been looking weird ever since yesterday, like he wasn't feeling all that well.

"Ron? Hello?"

Startled, Ron turned to stare at Hermione. "Huh?" He realized he'd been so deep in thought he hadn't heard her ask him something. "Sorry. You were saying?"

"We're going to get something to eat." Hermione made a gesture to add both Terry and Blaise to her comment, not even bothering to say anything about Ron daydreaming. "Are you coming?"

Ron looked a bit puzzled. "I thought we agreed to wait for the others and go eat at the mess hall." They'd probably spend yet another lunch break talking business. It made him long for the more relaxed meals back at Hogwarts.

Even though he certainly didn't miss the Cannons bashing.

"Well, Terry's hungry, and quite frankly so am I and we're both tired of the crowd. We'll go ahead, tell Harry we'll be at the Three Broomsticks." It was probable the others would follow in no time. Hermione had never known any of her former classmates to be too late for lunch.

Already regretting his decision to actually wait for Harry, Ron nodded. He was starving. The morning had been full of work and if Harry didn't appear in a couple of minutes, he'd just go after Hermione and the others.

He leaned against the wall, muttering to himself. Of course Harry would be late. There were dozens of people waiting for him so they could harass him with stupid questions. Or maybe Dumbledore had wanted to talk to him about something important.

He just hoped Harry wouldn't go back to Hogwarts for lunch like he had yesterday. Thinking about the hours he'd been away and the happy smile on his face made Ron shudder and drop the thought immediately.

No, he didn't want to know anything about that.

The door next to him opened, and Malfoy stepped out, raising an eyebrow at seeing him standing there alone.

"Where did everyone go?" Draco had thought Blaise and the others would wait for him. Or at least Blaise.

No matter how relaxed Weasley seemed around him these days -- ever since shagging him through the table -- he didn't feel comfortable with him. The very predictable freaked out Weasley had been a lot easier to deal with.

At least then he could have tried to control the situation with a haughty expression instead of just
standing here and acting like they were nothing but two people with a similar goal in life.

Ron shrugged, still feeling a bit annoyed and for once deciding not to take it on Malfoy. "They were hungry. I thought we should wait for Harry. We'll go to the Three Broomsticks!" That at least came out with a happy sigh.

"All right." Nodding, Draco agreed with that, even though his stomach cramped with the thought of sitting there and letting Potter pay for his meal. There was no real alternative, but it was humiliating nevertheless.

He wondered if he should just say that he wasn't really hungry yet since he'd eaten a huge breakfast. Then again that would be idiotic; staying alone at their headquarters and dodging people who seemed to sort of hate him. At least now he could talk to Blaise, who had fortunately regained his appetite now that he wasn't under Pansy's thumb. Or any other body part. "We'll wait for Potter and then go find Blaise and Granger."

"And Terry." It came out instinctively now. Ron knew it was petty, but he enjoyed reminding Malfoy of the Ravenclaw's existence. The clear dislike between those two had always been rather enjoyable

Too bad Terry was actually making an effort these days. Soon he'd probably be all nice and friendly with all the Slytherins and Ron would have to find his enjoyment somewhere else.

Not in actively taunting Malfoy. No, he wasn't going to be the kind of person who lost his mind, shagged someone and then went on being a total prick. He was not taunting Malfoy. Not shagging him again either, but that was beside the point.

Looking up with a frown on his brow, Draco asked, "Boot?" He saw a nod. "Strange. I didn't think he was in any condition to eat." He'd noticed the way he'd been all pale and sweaty all morning. "Looked like he was coming down with something." If Draco didn't know better, he'd think Boot was about to take an exam and was angsting over it.

"Terry? Nah. I think it's just nerves." Ron knew he would never be as brave as Terry, even if he had such a nice singing voice. "You heard what he said yesterday. He's just nervous because he's going to sing at the party when... Hey Harry!" Glad that he had faced the door, he switched the topic mid explanation.

He'd almost babbled about their big secret. Hermione would have strangled him!

"Hi, Ron." Casting a puzzled look at his friend, Harry blinked in the bright sunlight. He'd been cooped up inside all morning, going through some documents and his eyes were getting tired from all the reading. Grabbing his glasses, he rubbed the heel of his hand against his right eye.

He hoped that there would be something more interesting to do after lunch. Otherwise he'd have to give in and ask Snape for something for his headache.

"Are you ready to go and have some lunch now?" There was some hesitation in Ron's voice. Lately, that tired look on his friend meant that Harry went to spend time with Snape. He wished he wouldn't do that now. "Terry and Hermione decided we should go to the Three Broomsticks."

Harry nodded, pushing his glasses back in place. He was definitely ready to have lunch, preferably something sweet for dessert as well. He really needed a sugar rush right now. "Sure."

Smiling, Ron pushed himself away from the wall and started walking down the street with Harry in tow. After taking a few steps, he stopped, realizing that Malfoy hadn't made a move.
"Are you coming or not?"

Draco was staring at the ground, looking confused. "I..." There was a very unpleasant crawling sensation moving down his spine. "Boot said he's hungry? It was his decision to go ahead?"

"Yes. So what?" Since Ron's stomach was now growling, he could well understand why Terry and the others hadn't waited.

There was a short silence as Draco stood there, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts. He had no idea why the notion was making him feel so tense; it could be because of the bad blood between him and Boot. Maybe he was just imagining things, but he couldn't stop thinking about how the Ravenclaw had been behaving all the time. There was something wrong about him, like he was too good to be true.

Shining too brightly like a false Galleon.

"Wasn't he all worried about July being almost over?" Draco mused out loud. It wasn't really a question. He could still remember how Granger had mentioned it a few days ago, with Weasley laughing at the strange feelings people had got used to after years at school.

Ron had sworn that he wouldn't resort to violence again, but if this went on for long, he would definitely go back to the good old ways. "So what?"

All the short hair at the nape of Draco's neck were standing up. "He didn't seem happy about the fighting. Something's been troubling me..." he muttered under his breath. Then he looked up. "And it was his decision to go to the Three Broomsticks? Just as it was his decision to throw Potter that party?" Urgency in his voice now.

"Malfoy!" Outraged, Ron stared at him. "Shut up!" He was ruining everything.

Harry ignored Ron's wail. He was staring at Malfoy, meeting the worried gaze. "And?" He felt like there was still more.

"And it's three days until the full moon. The last full moon before your birthday." Draco didn't like thinking about the instructions his father had given him when he'd still been the Slytherin golden boy, but there had been dates.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Snape's paranoia was definitely rubbing off on Harry, for he didn't even pause to wonder if his thoughts were wrong.

"If you're thinking that I'm saying that Boot is quite possibly a Death Eater and is about to kill or kidnap someone, then yes." And he was out there with Blaise. Yet another one of the Dark Lord's follower-to-be who had strayed from that path.

Not bothering to say anything more, Draco reached out for his wand. Then he was running through the narrow streets of Hogsmeade as fast as he could, shoes slipping on the cobblestones.

Harry was right behind him.

"What the fuck?" So stunned that he couldn't even move for a moment, Ron gawked. Then he spun into action, following Harry and Malfoy. He couldn't believe what Malfoy had just said, accusing a friend like that! He would make him apologize if he was wrong.

He was praying this was one of the occasions Malfoy wasn't right.
They ran in silence, the only sound was their footsteps and heavy breathing. Ron tried to grab his wand, cursing as he couldn't reach it. Stupid robes anyway! He needed to mend the hole in the inner pocket. Squirming, almost falling down, he finally reached his wand a moment before they came to the end of the road.

The sound of people screaming greeted them as they came around the corner. Ron's stomach clenched as he smelled the awful stench of burning flesh in the air.

Oh, Merlin! Malfoy had been absolutely right about Terry, and Ron couldn't comprehend what that really meant, except that everything was turning out so wrong and they were too late.

"Petrificus Totalis!" The charm made a cracking sound as it hit the wall. Small pebbles showered on the street.

Harry ducked instinctively. He'd recognize Hermione's voice anywhere, but he didn't know just where she was aiming at. A swift glance around the street located both her and her adversary.

So many things were happening at once. People running around in panic. The huge glass window at Honeydukes' had broken, and one of the clerks was standing next to the empty panes, staring at the street with blank look on his face. The air was tingling with magic.

Harry catalogued all those details within seconds, dismissing them as insignificant. All that mattered was Hermione standing there, hair wild and standing on end, tiny electrical sparks flying all around her as she stood between the slumped form of Blaise Zabini and Terry Boot who was aiming his wand at her.

"Terry!" Yelling the name out, Harry pointed his wand straight at the Ravenclaw. "You can't win. Drop your wand."

He could sense both Ron and Malfoy step next to him, both aiming with their wands.

Terry Boot froze at the sound of his own name, his aim still focused on Hermione. He seemed to almost collapse onto himself, turning from a strong young man into a wraith in front of their eyes. Taking a deep breath, he spun around, his gaze full of hatred. "Ava..."

Four other voices rang out, all barking out the Unforgivable, "Avada Kedavra!" The force of the green sparks threw Boot backwards, sending him sprawling on the ground like a ragdoll.

It was over.

There was a moment of utter silence. Everything had happened too fast and the fear and adrenaline were still running through their veins. None of them could really move, Harry and Draco pointing their wands at Terry's dead body, Ron staring into distance and Hermione trembling now that the fight was over.

A soft keening sound broke the silence, bringing everyone out of their reverie. It was Blaise Zabini, letting out a wail that was almost inhuman, sounding like a wounded animal instead of a human being.

Walking stiffly towards the young man lying on the ground, Draco didn't even know what was causing his housemate to make such a pained sound. He wished he would stop. At the same time he was glad for the wail, for it was a proof Blaise was still alive.

Ron didn't look at Terry's dead body as he rushed to Hermione who was swaying on her feet, obviously drained. He managed to grab her before she fell.
He still couldn't understand what had just happened. Couldn't believe that Terry was dead. Death Eater! Squeezing Hermione tighter, he stared at Harry who was standing there with his wand still drawn, hoping someone would explain to him what was going on because he had no idea.

This just couldn't happen! People didn't turn on their friends like that!

"Oh no, I killed him! I killed him! Oh god..." Hermione was whispering the words in a low toneless voice.

Funny. The exact words were going through Ron's head. They should be eating lunch now at the Three Broomsticks, laughing at something insignificant and enjoying their meal. Instead, he had just killed Terry Boot. It didn't matter that Harry and Hermione and Malfoy had killed him too. He had killed.

"Where's Blaise?" Suddenly sounding more alert, more panicked, Hermione twisted in his grip.

Looking over his shoulder, Ron didn't let go. He could see Malfoy there next to the other Slytherin, his posture rigid. It was a clear sign that something was wrong. Cradling Hermione against him, he muttered, "He'll be all right." The lie didn't sound at all convincing even to his own ears. "It will be all right."

Draco reached Blaise, his feet slipping on the wet cobblestones. Gazing down at his feet, he froze as he realized that the slippery substance on the ground was blood. He looked up in panic, needing to see how badly Blaise was hurt. A moment later he gagged when he saw Blaise's face, the bloodied mess where two brightly shining eyes had once been.

"I can't see! I can't see!" Whimpering the words over and over again, Blaise flailed with his arms. "Please... I can't see..."

Realizing he couldn't do anything right now, Draco fell to his knees next to his housemate. His wand almost slipped to the ground as he reached out and stilled Blaise's hands. "It's all right. It's going to be all right..." Without even knowing it, he was echoing Weasley's words.

He heard someone call for a mediwitch and prayed they would come as quickly as humanly possible.

"Draco!" Blaise sobbed with relief. He clutched onto his housemate as if he was his only lifeline. "Terry! He's a Death Eater! He tried to kill Hermione. And I can't see. What happened to my eyes, Draco? What happened to my eyes?"

No words came out as Draco gagged again, swallowing down the bile rising in his throat. He was determined not to lose it now; he could always throw up later. "Shh..." Holding Blaise tighter, he let out a sound he hoped would be soothing, trying to ignore the moist warmth spreading all over his cheek, where his friend's face touched his.

He didn't know what to do or say. He simply hugged Blaise, trying not to think about anything. Keeping his own hysteria in check with every ounce of his willpower, knowing he was fighting a losing battle.

Rooted next to Terry's still body, Harry tried to take in the whole situation. Had Terry been alone, or were there others to attack them as well?

He shut out his friends, knowing he couldn't let the panic grab him as well right now.

There were other people here, but they were all huddled behind a few barrels in the farthest corner of the small square and none of them seemed to pose any threat. The glass shards on the ground in front
of Honeydukes' prevented anyone from sneaking up on them from that direction.

They had made a lot of noise, passing many people coming here in a frantic run. Sooner or later the news would get to the Order house and then people would come. Before that, it was his job to make certain no one else died.

Straightening his back, he concentrated on listening beyond the ragged sobs. Was there someone approaching? He wasn't sure.

"Potter!" There was a very distinctive sound of dozens of people running through the alleys.

Harry was turning around even before he could think. Wand ready, he watched as Order members rushed towards them. For a brief shocking moment, he was hit by a wave of suspicion, wondering if these people really were what they seemed to be. Then he saw Dumbledore and Snape among them, and relaxed.

He turned back to the awful scene on the street. With a curious detachment he watched Ron hold Hermione who was now screaming wordlessly and holding out her hand as if trying to reach someone. He glanced at Malfoy, who was kneeling next to Zabini, glad that Ron was not letting her go.

The air was thick with dust. Harry could still see people rushing this way and that, all looking absolutely stunned. Some of the older Order members were standing next to Terry's body with wands drawn. He wondered why. There was nothing more they could do.

Everybody was talking at the same time, the sound of the babble filling the alley. Too many people, too many voices. And there was still rubble and shards of glass everywhere. The young clerk wasn't standing at the empty window of Honeydukes' anymore, he was slumped against the wall, retching.

It was completely surreal. Harry shook his head slightly. His ears were ringing, a headache approaching. The burning smell was making him nauseous, the familiar scent of blood only making it worse.

"Silence!"

It was Dumbledore's voice, sounding over the shocked babble. "Everybody, please calm down and let the mediwizards do their job."

That silenced most of the sounds, and strangely enough, Harry could breathe more easily. He could see a group of witches and wizards surround Malfoy and Zabini and he watched as one of them tried to move Malfoy away from the scene. It wasn't at all surprising that he refused to let go of the other Slytherin.

Harry blinked, wondering what he should do next. Probably go and see Dumbledore. He couldn't go to Hermione, not now. Couldn't risk losing all the control he had on his emotions.

A muttered charm was followed by a bright flash of light. For a moment, Harry was blinded by it, completely unprepared when his world tilted over a moment later. Strong hands grabbed him, pushing him against the nearest building. A moment later he was sheltered by a strong body.

He squirmed and took a deep breath, intending to yell at whomever was holding him. The distinctive smell of Bubotuber pus mixed with mint made the scream die in his throat.

Snape.
Instant relief, complete safety. He should have known Snape would be there to shield him if possible. In the middle of all the chaos and pain, that one thing was unchangeable.

"Stupid wankers..." Sirius' voice was a low growl, the first sign of his presence.

Harry flinched as Snape was yanked away from him and then relaxed in Sirius' hug. He wrapped his arms instinctively around his godfather while staring at the new glass window someone had charmed for Honeydukes'. That had to be the source of the flash. His gaze went to Snape, who was now surveying the destruction, not paying any attention to him.

He wanted to say something. Thank both men for being here and focusing on his safety. But it wasn't the right time for that either.

"You can let go now, Sirius." Not really recognizing his own voice, Harry let his arms go limp and stepped away from Sirius' hug. "There will be Ministry people here sooner or later. I want Snuffles to go and see that Ron and Hermione are all right. Now."

The look Sirius cast him was stunned, but the man didn't object. With a glance at Remus, he took in the ever growing crowd and blurred into his Animagus form before going to see if everything was all right.

Harry turned his back on his friends, the deliberate gesture surprisingly easy.

An emergency team from St. Mungo's came to deal with Blaise. Apparently his wounds allowed him to be transported magically because after a few minutes, the witches and wizards cleared the area around the wounded Slytherin and then they all disapparated.

Without bothering to talk about it, Snape took one look at Draco Malfoy and then the two followed the mediwizards.

Harry didn't like the idea of all the three of them staying without protection at St. Mungo's. Seeing a very familiar face in the crowd, he sent Loreena after them, knowing that she was used to guarding strange people at the hospital by now.

Seeing some of the crowd clear away from Harry, Remus cast a warning glance at Snuffles and then made his way to the young man.

He wasn't surprised to have a wand pointed at him for just a second before Harry recognized him, but it didn't mean he had to like it. His gaze went to Harry's torn robes. "You're bleeding."

"I am?" How strange he hadn't even noticed. Running his hand across his neck, he could feel something sticky on his fingers and also the first twinge of pain. It wasn't much, probably just a scratch. "It's nothing."

"Harry..." There was definitely a warning in Remus' voice.

It didn't matter where the scrape had come from -- probably from all the flying debris -- because it wasn't really bad and Harry couldn't concentrate on something as insignificant as a scratch right now. "I'll see a mediwitch when we're done here."

He'd have to go to St. Mungo's anyway.

Remus was quiet for a moment. Then he asked, "What do you want us to do?"

The question hit Harry harder than a curse would. He looked back at the chaos just to buy himself
some time to compose his voice, even though he was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to hide his shock.

Not that anyone would really understand the cause for it, but he didn't want it to show anyway.

Refusing to really meet Remus' eyes, Harry made a gesture towards his friends. "Take Hermione and Ron back home and stay with them." He wanted to go with them, but he was needed here. "Make sure they're safe."

"I will." Remus simply nodded, knowing this wasn't the time for arguments.

Harry didn't even watch him go. Now that his friends were protected, he would be able to concentrate on the here and now.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Dumbledore withdraw from the crowd and walk slowly into the shadows almost as if he was reluctant to leave. Seeing how hard it was on the old wizard didn't really help and neither did the realization that he would have to deal with this all alone.

Pushing away the brief flash of anger, Harry went to lead his people.

It was past midnight when Harry finally got home.

He walked slowly across the hallway, feeling exhausted. It had been hell to deal with everything; the Ministry people and their questions, Aurors taking control of Terry's body and then disappearing, apparently content with actually leaving the authority of Hogsmeade to the Order. It had been even worse to watch fear spreading through the Order, followed by mistrust.

When things had calmed down a bit, he'd headed to St. Mungo's, unable to stay away, even though all he could really do there was to join the two men in the waiting room, watching Draco Malfoy pace back and forth, while Snape sat there like a statue.

There had been people coming and going. Nurses, security people, even reporters who had been firmly ushered out barely minutes after their appearance. Everyone talking at the same time, asking them questions they couldn't answer. Doctors rushing in and out of Blaise's room, all looking drained.

Harry sighed. He'd hated leaving Snape and Malfoy there, but there was nothing else he could do to help.

Tonight, Snape's place was with his Slytherins; guarding and taking care of them. He was probably the only one those two would allow close by, the only safe person in their world right now.

Climbing the stairs, Harry listened to the soft sounds coming from upstairs. He could recognize Remus' voice, the tone exactly the same he used to calm Sirius down whenever he was about to lose it. Following the sounds to Ron's bedroom, he stood at the doorway, staring at the sad sight.

Ron was sitting with his back against the headboard, holding Hermione tight. He looked utterly drained, but didn't seem to be dozing off; he simply stared down at where she was curled between him and Snuffles. His hand was petting her hair carefully.

"Harry." Remus was the first one to realize he was standing there at the doorway.

Not managing even a feeble attempt of a smile, Harry stepped into the room. He heard a soft whimper coming from Snuffles and walked to sit by the big dog.
There was a long silence, filled with the shock and horror all three teenagers shared. Hermione was still shaking, but there was no more sobbing. She looked like she was too tired to even cry anymore.

"How is he?" Almost choking on the words, Ron looked at Harry, his eyes haunted. "How's Zabini?"

Harry shook his head. "He's blind." His voice was completely calm as he said, "There's nothing they can do, the curse destroyed everything. The doctor said there might be some cosmetic charms applied to his face, so he..." He couldn't repeat the medwitch's words after all.

The curses Terry Boot had flung at Blaise had scarred his face. It was nothing like the scar on Harry's forehead, those markings couldn't be hidden behind messy hair.

Sitting here in silence, Harry couldn't help remembering the look of perfect understanding Snape and Malfoy had shared at the news. The expression had been knowing, excluding things his Gryffindor values held dear and focusing on revenge. Even so, Harry knew that if Terry had somehow survived, he wouldn't have done anything to stop the two.

No matter what they would have done to the Ravenclaw.

The initial icy shock was followed by a pained wail. Hermione curled into a smaller ball, hiding between Ron and Snuffles and as her voice broke, she simply drew in another breath and sent the eerie sound of grief echo in the room again.

Part 24

Walking into the kitchen next morning, Ron almost had a heart attack.

It was the second time since waking up. The first shock had been seeing Hermione's face on the pillow when he'd opened his eyes. He'd almost screamed in panic when he'd inched away and felt someone nuzzling against his back.

For a brief moment he'd thought he'd lost his mind. Then the memory of last night's grief had returned.

No, he hadn't just had a very weird threesome with Harry and Hermione. Sitting up, he revised his thoughts as he saw Remus Lupin curling with the furry form of Snuffles at the bottom of the bed. No, there had definitely not been an orgy in his room.

He'd tried to find the ridiculous thought funny as he'd sneaked out of the room and showered, but he couldn't really smile about anything right now. His chest felt too tight, like things inside had turned into lead.

A friend had betrayed them.

By the time he was finished with the shower, Harry was up as well, and they shared a wan "Morning," as they met in the hallway. Ron grabbed his clothes quietly, not wanting to wake anyone else up and then dressed up in Harry's room. It was nothing they hadn't done a thousand times and for a moment it had almost been as if they were still at Hogwarts, away from all this insanity.

The sound of pots and pans being moved on the stove greeted him downstairs, and he'd hurried to the kitchen before Harry to see if breakfast was ready. He hoped the house elves wouldn't cast glares at him, but the thought of being disapproved once again didn't curb his enthusiasm.
He felt like he hadn't eaten in ages.

Opening the kitchen door, he stumbled on his feet, staring at the achingly familiar form bustling around the oven, ignoring the way Eppy was standing in the corner, muttering to herself.

"Mum?" What was she doing here?

Molly Weasley dropped the spatula she'd been holding and rushed to hug her youngest son. She didn't say anything, simply held him.

Hearing Ron had been involved in a real battle had almost been too much for her. Even though she'd sworn never to do this, never to leave her home to enter this war zone, the news had broken her resolve.

"Mum? Is everything all right?" Worried by the way she simply clung to him, Ron pulled back a little.

"Yes. Yes, everything's all right." Molly nodded vigorously, still not letting go. She had been so worried! The thought of losing another child to this insane war had been more than she could handle.

Harry had frozen at the doorway as Ron had rushed to hug his mother. He didn't know if he was welcome here, the feeling forming a lump in his throat.

Squeezing her son one more time, Molly whispered, "I was so worried!"

Ron patted her back awkwardly. "It's okay, mum. We're all right." He managed to squeeze out the lie easily.

"Oh, Ronald..." Sounding almost chiding, Molly let go and stared into her son's eyes, not liking the look there. Her little one had grown too fast, like all her children had. She opened her mouth to tell him it was all right and then her gaze focused on the boy still standing in the doorway.

There was a brief silence as she stared at Harry Potter.

"Good morning, Mrs. Weasley," Harry muttered when the silence became strained.

Molly stepped away from Ron and then squeezed a wan little smile to her lips. "Harry." Hesitating for a moment, she made an abortive gesture with her hand.

"I..." Harry didn't have the faintest idea what to say. She was here, but it was clear that everything had changed between them. Once, he'd been a welcome guest, almost a member of the family. Now he had no idea what he was.

"Oh, Harry." Sighing, Molly repeated the gesture, this time making it clear that she really did want him to come to her. "I'm so sorry for not coming to see you earlier." There was honesty in her voice, but it still sounded slightly forced.

Harry couldn't do anything but nod, his mind filled with conflicting emotions, mostly pain and guilt, but also doubt and hesitation. He'd been so certain Mrs. Weasley would never want to see him again, and now she was here, holding her arms out.

There was no choice for him, the guilt he'd barely buried forced him to take the first step. The second one was much easier, and then he was hugging her.

He didn't feel like crying like back at Hogwarts when he'd first seen the Weasleys after hearing the
news. He didn't feel happy and relieved either. It was weird.

Everything had changed, not only yesterday when a friend had turned into an enemy, but months ago. Harry knew how he should react to this, but for some reason he couldn't really feel any of those emotions.

It was almost frightening, because no matter how he didn't like experiencing the pain and horror, he definitely didn't want to become an unfeeling monster either.

Carefully, he let go and wasn't surprised to feel Mrs. Weasley step back as well.

Harry flinched when he saw the sadness in her blue eyes. There weren't accusations in her gaze, but he couldn't help wondering if deep inside Mrs. Weasley was thinking, 'You let my son die!'

"I'm sorry." It was not nearly enough, but it was all he could say.

For a moment Molly looked like she didn't know what to say either. Then she blinked, the sadness melting into a sheen of unshed tears. "I know, dear." She cleared her throat. "Tea?"

Harry nodded, glad of having the chance to at least pretend everything was normal again.

Some time later, Remus came downstairs to get breakfast for three. He talked quietly to Mrs. Weasley while brewing coffee, not looking at all surprised to see her here, confirming Harry's suspicions of how she'd got in the house in the first place. Remus didn't linger for long, placing plates and utensils on the tray and then nodded quietly to Harry before disappearing upstairs again.

It was somewhat of a relief to have him look after Hermione. Harry didn't even begin to imagine what it must like to have someone so close betray one's trust so completely; Remus and Sirius would know. They could probably relate to her better than anyone else in the world.

Trying to swallow his tea without choking on it, Harry cringed.

If there was a worst case scenario -- not counting Voldemort winning of course -- this was it. He'd never wanted his friends to face anything like this.

He had no idea what to say or do, a quick glance at Ron confirmed that he wasn't the only one. Maybe there was nothing to say, really. Just to be there for each other and try to survive the war.

Sipping the tea, Harry had to wonder why it had suddenly lost its flavor.

The front door opening and closing sounded quiet, but everyone still flinched at that. Harry wasn't too worried, knowing that their wards should hold, but he still moved his hand slightly towards his wand.

Seeing Draco Malfoy walk slowly into the kitchen made him sigh with relief. "Malfoy. Hi."

"Good morning, Potter." Draco swayed on his feet slightly. "Weasley." He barely glanced at Ron, realizing there was a third person in the room only when he almost walked into Molly Weasley. He blinked, feeling blood drain from his face. "Mrs. Weasley."

"How is Blaise?" Ignoring the way the Weasleys were looking, Harry kept his gaze on Malfoy. The poor guy looked like he hadn't slept all night.

Draco sighed, his eyes clouding over for a moment. "He'll live." He didn't know what else to say. Only time would tell how Blaise would deal with all this.
There was nothing Harry could say to that.

"I'll just..." Looking at the table longingly, Draco couldn't help wondering if he should just go upstairs and sleep. He was more hungry than sleepy, but staying here with the Weasleys wasn't really an option.

Mrs. Weasley made the decision easy for him. She had already tensed, her gaze filling with almost blind fury when she'd seen Malfoy. She didn't say anything, simply walked past Malfoy, careful that her robes didn't brush against him.

As if he was somehow filthy.

Rushing after his mother, Ron missed the look of utter devastation on the Slytherin's face. Harry however saw the expression clearly from where he stood. He couldn't help staring at the raw emotion showing on Malfoy, a far cry from the usual haughty expression.

He still couldn't figure Malfoy out. There had been moments when he'd almost seemed like a decent person but right after that he'd usually said or done something to show that the git he'd known for almost seven years had not disappeared anywhere. Malfoy was a conniving bastard, but he'd done more to help them than the Minister for Magic himself, gaining no praises or rewards in return.

Right now, Harry could only see someone who was in pain. He was amazed that he could see it so clearly in Malfoy's eyes instead of the calmness or the slight mockery shining there.

"Do you want some tea?" Purposefully, he turned to grab the teapot, giving Malfoy some time to regain his composure.

"Sure." The answer was quiet.

Harry grabbed a clean cup and poured Malfoy tea before refilling his own cup. When he placed the pot back on the table and sipped his tea, he could see that the very familiar calm look was firmly back in place.

He wished he knew how to act around Malfoy. With Ron it would be easy; their friendship was solid enough to survive whatever emotional outburst would undoubtedly follow. Malfoy was different. Any kind words would be seen as pity and he was pretty sure it was the one thing Malfoy would never tolerate.

Remembering some of the first moments he'd ever spent down in the dungeons with Snape, he grabbed a sandwich and sat there, eating. The silence would have to do for now.

Finishing with his tea, he finally muttered, "I should go to see how people are doing." He really didn't want to, but with the way Dumbledore had acted the previous day, he figured no one else was out there looking after the troops.

Draco looked up from his cup, his expression exhausted and yet determined. "Okay. I'll get some Pepperup Potion."

He felt slightly better and wished he could climb upstairs and collapse into bed, but knew far too well that he couldn't let Potter leave the house alone.

"You don't have to come," Harry said curtly and then regretted it a moment later. "I mean you should rest, Malfoy. Go to bed. I'll be fine."

The softening of Potter's tone came as a surprise that Draco let show for a moment. Then he shook
his head. "I'm not that tired." He didn't know what made him insist it; it was either the fact that if he let Potter go alone there would be hell to pay, or pure Slytherin pride.

He didn't really care which it was.

Harry stared at the way Malfoy's jaw was set, all traces of the devastation gone. "Okay." If it made Malfoy feel better, he could tag along. "But do take the potion. I'm not gonna carry you when you collapse."

It was clear that was the right thing to say. Harry smiled at the glare Malfoy cast at him and then padded upstairs to tell Remus he would be right back.

The streets of Hogsmeade were half deserted, as if people were unsure it was safe to roam around. Those out there went about their business swiftly, casting furtive looks around until they noticed Harry.

Then they slowed down, looking relieved somehow; as if his mere presence was a safeguard against all evil.

Harry kept his gaze on the road, barely noticing even Malfoy's presence next to him.

He really didn't like the way people were looking at him; the sometimes hungry, sometimes speculative glances thrown at him whenever he came to a meeting were now worse than ever.

It was surreal. He was barely out of school, not even eighteen yet, and people seemed to think he was some kind of an idol – not only a hero of the wizarding world, but someone everyone wanted a piece of. It was even more suffocating than the memory of long years spent alone in the cupboard under the stairs.

Sighing, Harry made his way through the streets, wishing he was still a student in Hogwarts. No matter how the other students had looked at him, there had been places where he had managed to be in peace; the dormitory, the dungeons.

He wondered what the people would do if he announced that he wanted to be left alone, that he didn't want to be their great big hero. It would probably create chaos, so not a good idea. Maybe he could at least say that he was not available all the time; that he had a private life that didn't concern anyone else.

Of course that would make everyone even more interested, trying to get the latest scoop on his personal affairs.

Snape had never said a word about keeping what was between them secret, but Harry was pretty sure he would prefer it that way. He thought it was infuriating at times, but didn't want to turn their growing companionship into a spectacle. Neither did he want people to fixate on Remus and Sirius, especially on Sirius.

Moving faster as he entered the Headquarters, Harry walked to the main conference room without stopping to answer greetings, simply nodding at those calling out his name. He wanted to get this over with. Yesterday's shock was still too real, and it had clearly been just a prelude to something bigger; they needed to be prepared for whatever would come next.

"Harry! Good to see you!" Arabella Figg nodded at him from across the room.

"Yeah." Unable to think of any polite lies to accompany his grunt, Harry simply nodded. At least her words seemed to be a general greeting, echoed in the murmurs coming all over the room.
"We're really sorry!" That came from a group of Ravenclaws, who were huddled together.

More assuring murmurs echoed in the room, none of them changing the way the Ravenclaws looked. Self flagellation didn't seem to be the exclusive right of Gryffindors.

Harry saw a brief flicker of satisfaction in Malfoy's eyes and couldn't even resent him for that. People hated Slytherins and treated them as monsters, but he saw those who betrayed friends as worse than Voldemort's most vocal supporter. Terry Boot and Peter Pettigrew were backstabbing bastards, and even now people were offering the Ravenclaws sympathy. Gryffindors were seen as heroes.

And everyone still hated the Slytherins.

"Don't be. It's not your fault that Boot turned evil." Harry didn't know what had turned him to Voldemort and probably never would, but it wasn't anyone else's fault.

Most of the Ravenclaws didn't look convinced.

There wasn't really anything that Harry could say or do to make anyone feel better. Even with all their logic, the Ravenclaws would probably blame themselves for all things that went bad for quite some time.

If that helped with their efforts in the war, then so be it.

Harry could see there were people gathered around the table, clearly waiting for him. A quick glance around the room told him that there should be no reason; all the Head of the Houses except for Snape were there, as was Dumbledore, sitting to the side with an ever present tea cup held firmly in his hands.

That made him almost growl. He hated this; people waiting for him like vultures and others playing their games. All he wanted was to grieve and be really angry and maybe kick a wall somewhere no one could see and here he had to put on a solemn face and listen. Probably talk about things rationally.

He didn't want to be rational. He was mad as hell! He was scared!

"Filius. Pomona." He nodded quietly at Flitwick and Sprout, barely registering the way his tongue didn't even falter over their names. With a few other greetings he moved to take his place at the table, glad that it was round instead of having a marked spot for their leader.

If there had been such a place, he was sure Dumbledore wouldn't be sitting there.

"Good morning, Harry. Potter." Gesturing ethusiastically, Sprout smiled at him and then slumped down again as she caught a glimpse of her colleague's sad face.

Harry sighed and turned to Flitwick before the small man could gather the courage to stutter anything. "I'm really sorry for what happened yesterday, Filius." His sympathy wasn't faked. Like the Ravenclaws still huddling together near the doorway, the Head of their House looked absolutely devastated. "I don't think anyone could have seen that coming."

"That awful, awful boy!" Flitwick shook his head. Then he looked up again. "How is young Zabini? He's getting better, I hope?"

Seeing Malfoy tense where he was sitting by the wall, Harry had to close his eyes for a moment before he could say, "Unfortunately, I don't think there's anything they can do for his eyes. But he will live."
It made Flitwick flinch as if he'd hit him.

"There now, Filius." Professor Sprout patted his hand. "Severus is there with him. He will be all right."

Harry wished that were true.

"I do apologize," Flitwick muttered thickly. "I never thought..." He shook his head helplessly.

"No we never do. That's why it hits so hard, when it's the member of our House or a friend." Harry didn't want to even imagine what it was like for those who had actually considered Boot a friend, remembering all too well how it had hit Hermione. "But it was one man betraying us, acting for Voldemort, not for the House of Ravenclaw."

His words seemed to lift a mountain of guilt from countless of shoulders, the hesitant smiles across the room making something inside him shrivel up and die.

With quiet voice, he asked, "Is there a reason for a meeting today?"

He didn't want to talk about Terry Boot or House pride anymore.

McGonagall nodded. "We have heard from the Ministry; they will not conduct an inquiry over Mr. Boot's death." Her voice said it all, holding little respect towards their government.

"I see," Harry said. He had known it all along. "He did die in a battle and we are at war. Apparently..." His voice trailed off. Yes, Fudge apparently did see fit to leave all the fighting and dying to them, but he couldn't say it out loud.

After a short silence, McGonagall nodded. "Yes, apparently Mr. Doone from Honeyduke's was able to give a statement that Mr. Boot tried to hex you all with the killing curse before..."

"Before I killed him."

It was fortunate that Ron and Hermione were still at their house for Harry was certain they would have objected to his words if they were present. He could see from the corner of his eye that Malfoy didn't seem to be too happy with his words either. Tough. He'd just have to live with it.

There was excited muttering in the room, people looking both concerned and relieved.

McGonagall pursed her lips tight together but refused to comment on his words. For once, Harry was grateful for her angry silence.

"I wish we'd been able to stop him, but it was either hexing him or risking one of our own and in that situation there was no option." Harry didn't even have to lie. If it ever came to risking one of his friends or throwing an Unforgivable, it wasn't a real decision.

One of the Hufflepuffs raised a hand as if she was still in class even though she looked old enough to be a professor herself. "Mr. Potter... About the fighting... Is that how it will really be? Killing people?"

Harry stared at her, wishing they would stop asking that question. Wishing they would open their eyes and see that this wasn't something simple and nice and over before evening tea. "Yes."

"But... That's wrong." Her eyes were full of confusion. "Just like the Daily Prophet said about teaching people curses! That's wrong too."
Grimacing, Harry cast a look at Dumbledore who seemed to be overly interested in the contents of his cup. It was clearly a calculated evasion, pushing Harry not only to answer the words that were barely on this side of an accusation but to take the position he would never assume otherwise.

What was there to say? "I agree that killing is wrong. No one should ever be forced to take a life. But what else can you do when someone threatens you or your loved ones?"

It was the question he'd thought a lot, and he still couldn't say he had a solid answer to it. But he knew Voldemort, knew his people, and was absolutely certain that sometimes there simply was no other way.

Looking unconvinced, the witch raised her hand again. "But... The Prophet says that forming an army or a fight force is the worst thing that can happen to the wizarding world right now."

"No." Harry shook his head. "The worst thing that can happen to our world would be Voldemort gaining power over it. The Order isn't only about fighting. We must all learn how to use curses to defend ourselves, but also how to heal, to save lives."

The witch nodded hesitantly, but didn't look convinced. "What about afterwards? If we win the war... We'll have people who know how to use all these curses, who have used all these curses. Dark curses."

Harry knew what she was saying, knew she had a point. There would have to be a lot of time for counseling; mediwizards specialized in mind healing and maybe even calming potions on hand both during and after the war. And yes, some people would crack and try to harm themselves or others.

That was also the reality of war. If they weren't willing to face that, they could just as well surrender to the Death Eaters.

"So what do you suggest?" It came out a bit more harshly than Harry had intended. "That we send people to the battles unprepared? Or that we give up, and let Voldemort take over without a fight? For that is the alternative. This isn't about me facing him. It's about us facing them."

A complete silence filled the room. People were looking a bit shocked. They weren't used to hearing such blunt words from Harry Potter.

"No... No, that's not what I meant." Shaking her head, the woman who had started the conversation held up her hands in surrender. "I just... Is it wise to teach people about dark magic? And curses? Those things kill people."

Harry tried not to flinch. It was partly true, once you went too far you couldn't stop. Dark Magic was probably as seductive as Wild Magic, something he'd never try to really find out himself. He resented the idea that the blame could be shoved off so easily, though. It was like saying every bad decision ever made was actually under the imperius. "Dark magic and curses don't kill people. People kill people. Right now it's Death Eaters killing those who oppose them."

Some of the older Order members nodded openly at that, while others muttered quietly.

"So you're saying we should just kill them?"

Harry wished there had been people like this witch in the Ministry, or in the earlier Order meetings. Maybe then there would have been real discussion, real contemplation over ethics and the rights witches and wizards had to using curses that could kill.

He'd read about it all; could argue the issues from so many points of view it made his head spin.
After the war, he might even have the time to reconsider the decisions he'd made. But not now.

"I don't want anyone here to think that our mission is to kill all the Death Eaters or even Voldemort himself," he said. "It's not. We're here simply to stop them."

Not moving her gaze away from his, the witch asked, "By any means necessary?"

"Yes. By any means necessary." The wizarding world had faced this enemy before. Harry was determined to make sure no one would ever have to fear Voldemort again.

There was a brief silence as everyone seemed to digest that.

"Like we stopped Terry Boot." Really glad that Ron and Hermione were not here, Harry said quietly, "No one wanted to kill him, but if I hadn't, he would have killed our people. There is a difference between killing because you have to and killing because you like to kill."

The witch nodded. "I guess there is." With that, she looked down at the floor and didn't turn her gaze back to Harry again.

There was some enthusiastic babble after that, people muttering opinions quietly to each other. Harry listened to it but didn't say anything. He had nothing to add.

Hearing some of the older Order members grumble about the Ministry, he hid his slight sneer. He had to agree. They wouldn't be here if the Aurors did their job, if Fudge only stopped thinking about the world in the terms of politics and acted.

Maybe he should never have started to think about this war as what it really was. If he'd kept the part everyone wanted him to play he could now do this with the determination and simple mindedness that was so obviously needed from him.

He wondered what it would be like to face this pressure as a puppet of those who held the power. It would probably be easier in a way, if he believed in all the things he said and did.

How funny that in the middle of all this violence, the only thing he really believed in was peace.

A flicker of movement at the door drew his gaze and then the restless noise faded away. Staring at Snape, Harry sat there frozen in place, not able to move a muscle.

Snape was standing there like a harbinger of doom, looking forbidding and as distant as the stars.

Muttering some incoherent excuses, Harry got up and walked to the door. Some people looked on curiously when he went to Snape and then motioned for him to follow him into an empty room; after a moment Blaise's name echoed in the large meeting hall again.

It was the first thing Harry could think of as well. "How is Zabini."

Snape's gaze didn't soften at all, his face looking like it was chiseled in sickly pale marble. "Zabini is alive."

Harry smiled. Then the smile slowly disappeared from his face as Snape simply stood there, staring at him. "What?" What on earth would make Snape look like that?

"I heard your declaration." There was still no change in Snape's expression. "I found it... how would you say it? Oh yes. Utter crap."

Stunned by the way Snape had said it, Harry could only stare. Then he managed to squeeze out
another, "What?"

"You do not wish to kill anyone? Is that right?" A hint of malice oozing with Snape's words.

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was Snape really asking him that right now, after everything? How could there be any doubt how he felt about killing and dying?

Only silence met him as Snape stood there, patiently waiting for an answer.

"No, I do not wish to kill anyone," Harry said quietly.

"Really?" More malice in Snape's voice. "Not even the Dark Lord himself? I find that hard to believe."

"No!" The denial was too quick, too loud, and even Harry couldn't believe it completely.

Snape's knowing gaze was too much, seeing right through his excuses and practiced explanations to the small dark place inside him; the secret he didn't want anyone to know, the one thing he didn't even want to exist.

Before he could really think, the words were pouring out. "He killed my father and he killed my mother, Snape! I want him dead, hell yes I want him dead!" Taking in heavy breaths, Harry stood there, hands squeezed into fists.

The only sounds in the room were his breathing.

Then he added quietly, "But you shouldn't always get what you want. It's enough if he's stopped. If he can never hurt another living being again or kill anyone, it's enough."

He didn't understand what people wanted of him; they praised their great hero who would free their world of Voldemort, yet they tried to uphold some insane moral codes that were impossible to follow. It was harrowing, especially when a part of him did agree with them.

"You really don't want to kill him." This time it wasn't a question.

Harry looked up at Snape, surprised not to see any anger in his gaze, simply puzzlement. "No, but I want him dead anyway. Isn't that just as bad? Wanting him dead."

"No." Shaking his head slightly, Snape seemed to finally relax, the strange tension leaving his body. "It's what makes you different from them."

He didn't have to clarify whom he meant by 'them'.

Harry had wondered. For the tiny moment right after he had seen Terry fall, there had been relief coursing through him with the awful rush of using the killing curse and that moment he had wondered. He couldn't blame Snape for needing to ask.

But even with his assuring words, Snape was wrong about something. "No, that's what makes us different from them."

He ignored the snort and simply held out a hand, breathing more easily as Snape grabbed it and pulled him close.

Snape touched the back of Harry's head as the sentimental fool rested it on his shoulder. He didn't want to concentrate on Harry's rather stupid words, refusing to acknowledge that maybe Harry was getting a lot better at hitting the right target.
But certainly Harry wouldn't think so well of him if he knew the rage still burning inside him; the disgust he'd felt standing at Blaise Zabini's bedside while the mediwizard had told him that his former student would never see again had been only the beginning of a myriad of emotions.

Had Boot survived... But he hadn't, thanks to Harry and his friends. And now instead of facing the traitor, using the old ways to make him pay, Snape was forced to face the simple desire for that act.

Leaning back for a moment, he looked into Harry's eyes. The irrational anger had vanished, and he couldn't understand where it had come from in the first place. "About my earlier words, I..." He saw Harry open his mouth and glared. "Please do not interrupt me while I try to apologize."

"You don't need to apologize. At least you have the guts to say it and make me be honest. Unlike everyone else," Harry muttered. No one else would ever push him like that, and even though it had hurt like hell, he was glad Snape had forced him to say it.

Snape understood what he meant, but for once his brash words hadn't been made with any kind of purpose whatsoever. No matter how Harry might see them as anchoring him to reality, he could only see them as cruelty beyond any reason. "I questioned something that doesn't need questioning, you idiot. So it's only proper that I apologize."

As a response, Harry wrapped his arms around him again, shaking almost violently against him. Rolling his eyes, Snape patted Harry's shoulder as he laughed almost hysterically. It wasn't a bad sound, the genuine mirth he was showing had been absent for too long.

He didn't make any comments about the laughter, nor did he say a word about the kiss that followed.

"Are you all right?" Muttering it quietly, Harry refused to let go of Snape.

For a long while, the only answer he got was a sigh. "Yes," Snape said curtly when he realized that Harry actually expected him to say something.

Nodding, Harry added, "And Zabini? Malfoy said he really is blind." Even with the mediwizards saying that last night hadn't made Harry believe there wasn't something that could be done.

"Yes." Now there was definitely a hint of regret in Snape's voice. "But he will survive." He knew the boy was strong enough to deal with the loss of his eyesight.

Harry knew it was something they'd all have to deal; Zabini's injuries weren't the first loss in this war and would not be the last one. "Yeah."

There was really nothing more to say.

Since the meeting hall was still full of annoying people who would undoubtedly have nothing important to say to him, Snape slipped away from the crowd when Harry grudgingly returned to the Order. After a night spent watching Draco Malfoy's silent anger and cursing his own blindness, Snape wasn't keen on being polite to anyone.

The slightly overcast sky mirrored his weariness perfectly. People were staying inside, and there was no one to ogle at him as he walked to Hogwarts.

Down in the dungeons, he shut the door behind him, enjoying the total silence of his rooms.

Merlin, it was good to be home! Away from the mediwizards and the responsibility and insanely even the anger. This had always been his refuge, the only place in the whole world where nothing could touch him.
A small part of him thought fondly of Harry's intrusion here. At least back then, there had been a sense of meaning to all of this, unlike now with the meetings and the idiots all around him.

Days that were filled with students failing Potions miserably were a distant past, replaced by endless meetings and classes with these almost-adults who had no grasp on the reality waiting for them outside Hogsmeade.

Now that they'd had a taste of war here in their nearly safe haven with one of their own turning against them, at least some members of the Order would have to start taking their training more seriously. Those who could see what was really happening, those who would dread the fighting and the hard decisions but chose to deal with them anyway.

And yet there would still be those who simply showed up and grumbled about the things he, Figg, Fletcher and Lupin were trying to teach them, as if they existed simply to torment them and not to aid them in surviving.

Snape had to wonder if it had something to do with natural selection; those too stupid to see the training classes as something more than an addendum to Hogwarts' curriculum were simply too stupid to live.

He really didn't like the idea, but it didn't seem far fetched. These few days of training were already proof enough.

Today, there would be no classes. He knew Filius and his Ravenclaws, they would be devastated and spend the whole day trying to figure out how Boot could have turned bad right in front of their eyes. Snape knew they would probably never find an answer, but they would try to find one anyway.

It gave him a perfect opportunity to stay here and brew something. Maybe work on something of a more personal nature, maybe concentrate on the antidotes for Poppy. Anything he chose would be acceptable; it would be a blessed peace, just him and his potions.

Used to all the hard work, he still wished he could fully concentrate on the brewing. Spying had been hard, but there had been times when even that had been better than trying to train young people who only gawked when he tried to make them listen.

It was almost like he was tearing open old wounds with nothing to heal them with.

Of course that was the whole point; his expertise was invaluable. Lupin and Figg and the others knew what they were talking about, but Snape couldn't deny that he was the one who knew. Even more importantly, he remembered. There was nothing to change the fact that the curses and poisons they needed to shield from were ones he was intimately familiar with. His only consolation was that thus far, no one had made open remarks about it.

He was a full member of the Order, needed because of all his knowledge about the Dark Arts as well as potions, and even though he didn't need to be constantly reminded of the fact, he was a former Death Eater.

Snape was definitely going to do his best to make sure no one fell under the Dark Lord's rule again.

The thought froze him.

"No." He needed to whisper his defiance out loud here in his rooms. Even his own thoughts betrayed him, so why not his words? It was no wonder those youngsters looked at him so strangely. He was the only one who still could not say that one simple word out loud. Couldn't even think
about it most of the time.


Master.

All names he and his fellow Death Eaters had used about the man; sometimes out of reverence, sometimes out of pure adulterated fear. There had been a time when Snape had been able to blurt out his name, when he'd tried so hard to convince others of his return. Before he'd been forced to go back to that nightmare of a world, where survival depended on how well one crawled.

It was over now. No more crawling, for him or for those few who had chosen not to become slaves. Blaise Zabini might not be able to see, but at least he would be free. Young Malfoy would save his loyalty for those who actually deserved it.

Snape would never have to hide or crawl again. Never again.

"Vol...demort." His tongue stumbled on the middle of the name, bringing a scowl full of self disgust to his face. "Voldemort!" Now it sounded better. Cold, clipped tones with no cringing to be detected.

Adjusting his robes, he walked to the cupboard. This determination would be futile if he simply gave into the exhaustion and did nothing the whole day. It didn't matter he'd spent last night standing guard over his Slytherins.

His work was never done.

Part 25

Harry slumped on the couch, looking around as if he hadn't seen this place for ages. Everything looked the same, the shelves full of books, the portraits of old headmasters on the walls. The only change was the slightly rumpled looking Phoenix chick sitting on his perch, singing softly.

It was definitely strange to be back at Hogwarts like this.

"Care for some tea?" Raising the pot, Dumbledore didn't wait for an answer, he simply poured Harry a cup. "Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"There wasn't anything important to do at Hogsmeade." Shrugging, Harry took the offered cup. He inhaled the familiar scent, enjoying the simplicity of it before taking a sip.

Things had finally calmed down enough for the training to continue, and both the training and the teaching could be dealt without his constant presence. At least that's what he hoped.

Dumbledore poured himself tea as well and then sat across the table. He picked up the cup, but didn't drink from it, holding it between his palms and staring into the depths as if he was trying to read all the secrets of the world in the dark liquid. "How is everyone?"

Wondering if he really knew himself, Harry said, "They're fine. Remus and Sirius are getting ready for another trip." Which would hopefully take place in a few weeks so that Remus could recover from full moon. "Hermione is... doing better. She's studying war and she's pestering Ron to do the same. I think Malfoy's contemplating teaching some of the defense courses."

They hadn't talked about it yet, but he could see the annoyance in the Slytherin every time they visited the practice hall and saw the incompetence in some of the younger wizards.
"Ah, yes. I do believe you might be right about that." Dumbledore's eyes twinkled as if he knew exactly what Harry was thinking. "And how are you doing?"

Harry looked at him, trying to see if it was simply a platitude or if he really wanted to know. In the end it didn't really matter. He had never shown his inner turmoil to Dumbledore, not really, and wasn't about to start now. "As well as can be expected."

The grim look they shared spoke volumes. Both knew exactly what he meant.

"I do think the Order's in good hands." Smiling as if he didn't notice the grimace his words caused, Dumbledore went on. "Things are going better than I'd expected. Our people are well organized and Hogsmeade seems to be the perfect place for them, don't you think?"

Harry nodded. The small village had expanded seemingly overnight, but no one seemed to mind. Having everyone close together made the training so much easier. "Yes."

"I have received an owl from Minister Fudge. He regrets he hasn't been able to visit yet, and wants us to know that even though he is awfully busy right now, he would like to attend to a meeting sometime soon."

Raising an eyebrow at that, Harry suppressed an annoyed sigh. "You mean he is willing to look the other way even though our work is sort of undermining his and he will not engage himself in any activity until it's absolutely necessary."

"I believe that's exactly what I mean." The twinkle was still in Dumbledore's eyes, but it wasn't completely benevolent.

That made Harry smile despite himself. If Fudge wasn't going to help, at least he was not messing the whole thing up by trying to order them around. "All right. What else?" There had to be a reason for him being here.

Dumbledore took a sip from his cup, looking pensive. "We may have a problem." Realizing Harry wasn't going to say anything, he added, "The Ministry will not intervene with us, but I'm afraid we may have problems with something even more important."

What could be more important than the Ministry? Harry thought for a moment before it dawned to him. Only two things mattered to people who ran their world; money and power. Of course. "Gringotts."

"Yes." Without waiting for a question, Dumbledore launched into a short explanation, telling Harry about the wizarding bank's policy of not interfering in various squabbles in their world and how very powerful families could well change that.

Harry didn't have to be told the names of such families. He was certain he would find most of them on the list they had of known Death Eaters, the Malfoys standing at the top of that list.

"We need to make certain that it will never happen." Being a realist, Dumbledore knew it would be a disaster to have Gringotts back Voldemort. Their war would be over even before it truly began. "The Death Eaters are already controlling too much. If they control the money..."

"We might as well surrender. Yeah. I know." Harry nodded. Money apparently made even the wizarding world go around. He also knew why Dumbledore was talking about this with him. "You want me to go to Gringotts?"

He grimaced slightly as he saw the nod and then finished his tea, glad that Dumbledore didn't
surrender to the urge to fill the silence with trivial small talk.

Thinking about the dangers of the mission was easy compared to the things he was going to have to face before actually going to Gringotts.

Harry was feeling the familiar headache approach as he closed the front door behind him, breathing in the scent of something cooking in the kitchen. It was strange how this house still didn't smell like home.

Home was the place he'd just left after having something that had been very close to a real argument with Snape about his mission, the full moon and his tendency to ignore advice given by those wiser than he.

It had been long winded, filled with sarcasm and ire, but none of the undercurrent of real anger. Such a relief really that even with all the growling and glaring it was easy to see that Snape wasn't mad, he was simply worried.

Harry didn't really want to think about that right now. As hard as the discussion with Snape had been, the one still waiting would be worse.

Toeing off his shoes, he fought against the urge to just drop his robes on the floor. Even if Bob would undoubtedly scurry to pick them up in a moment, he found such arrogance unacceptable.

"Harry!"

Startled by the worry in Sirius' voice, Harry looked up just in time to see his godfather rush to him. He barely managed to grasp a better hold on the bottle he was carrying before he was enveloped in a hug. He blinked at the way Sirius held him tight. "Sirius. Good to see you too. It's been a while." He was pretty sure it hadn't been more than four hours since they'd finished lunch together.

"Thank Merlin you're safe!" Sirius sounded relieved. "I was so worried about you!"

Harry realized that something was very wrong. Even though Sirius was sometimes more than just slightly overprotective, this went beyond his usual neurotic behavior. "What's going on?"

Not saying anything, Sirius held him tighter.

Now Harry was really worried. "Sirius? What happened?" He tried to squirm away from the hug, bumping against the doorframe. "Sirius!"

Remus' voice came from down the hallway. "The Dementors have left Azkaban."

Simply mentioning the soul-destroyers made Sirius convulse so hard Harry was afraid he'd rupture something.

Harry was assaulted by memories so filled with dread and hope that he couldn't think of anything for a moment. A year of terror had been culminated in almost losing Sirius and then finding something incredible inside of him, the happy memory that had been the only thing strong enough to bring forth his Patronus.

But underneath the memory of his father's Animagus form was still the icy fear and the sound of his mother screaming.

Allowing Sirius to pull him into the living room where the others were quietly sitting and waiting for him, Harry tried to shake the hazy memories away.
"Hi Harry!" Ron nodded at him, looking relieved now that they were all here. The tension in the house had been palpable ever since the special edition of the Prophet had arrived and he could already see everyone relax.

Well, not everyone. Hermione was clearly more at ease, but Malfoy was as alert as ever, and Sirius... He didn't really want to even imagine what was going through his mind.

"Hi Ron," Harry sighed. "The Dementors, eh? Bloody hell..."

Both Ron and Hermione nodded at that. It was either that or to join Harry in cursing the situation. "Yeah." Ron was proud of how he managed to leave it at that.

Draco Malfoy didn't say anything.

Sirius' gaze was moving from window to window and then to the door, only to return to the windows again. He was sitting still, but somehow he projected the nervous energy of a caged animal.

The news had sent him into a wide eyed shock. He'd lived under the Dementors' freezing presence for twelve years of his life, and the only reason for his survival were the bitter memories and the need for revenge; it had turned him into something he never wanted to be again, and with Remus' help he never would have to face such coldness inside.

Facing the possibility of Dementors coming for him was almost too much. He didn't just fear for his own life and soul, he was terrified for those he loved.

"Nothing will enter Hogsmeade," Remus muttered quietly, his voice calm and controlled. "We have taken care of it."

"Good." Harry didn't have to ask who had toiled on the wards. He could probably guess most of them.

Sirius didn't take his gaze off the windows as he said, "Yeah. Good. Nobody leaves Hogsmeade until this is dealt with." It was clear he meant he wasn't going to let anyone out of the house even if he had to sit in front of the door and guard it.

Any other time, Harry might have welcomed the day off.

Taking a deep breath, he counted to ten before releasing it. "Sirius... I can't."

Sirius turned to stare at him, his eyes wide with shock. Then the meaning of Harry's words dawned and he growled out, "No."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, adding before Sirius could growl again, "There's something I need to do."

"No!"

"Dumbledore asked me to go to Diagon Alley to..."

"No!"

"Sirius!" It was the first time ever Harry used that tone of voice with his godfather, and he hated seeing the resulting flinch. "Listen to me. I need to go to Diagon Alley tomorrow. Nothing can change that."

Not even the sad look in Sirius' eyes.
"No." This time it wasn't a yell or a growl but a plea.

Harry shook his head. "Yes." This would have been difficult even without the news about the Dementors. "I need to go to Diagon Alley. I need to go there tomorrow."

Waving the newspaper in the air, Sirius pleaded, "It says in here that the Dementors have left Azkaban!" Why was it so hard for Harry to see what it meant? Even mentioning the prison or its guards made Sirius' eyes gleam with both hatred and terror. "They are joining Voldemort's fight!"

"I heard you." Harry knew this was the worst thing that could happen. "And I know where they're going." He paused for a moment, simply looking into Sirius' eyes. "And I know where I must go."

If Voldemort had the awful power of the Dementors on his side, gaining the goblins' help would probably be easier. It was the advantage they couldn't afford; the money and the power united would ruin them all.

Remus watched Sirius' eyes cloud over. He didn't move, but stood there, ready to help if the memories that haunted his best friend started to overwhelm him.

"You don't understand. I thought I could stand them when they took me to Azkaban, but I was young. Arrogant. Proud." Sirius' voice was hollow. "You can't fight them with a Patronus. Not if there is a whole army of them. You think the ones we encountered in the woods were bad? Try facing them all. They keep coming and coming until they drown your soul with their presence."

Hearing the pain, Harry fought to keep his compassion from showing too clearly. Sirius never wanted anything that could be interpreted as pity. "I know. But I have to do this."

"No! You don't! Send someone else. For Merlin's sake, Harry! You can't do this on your own! They will kill you."

Still not saying anything, Remus walked to stand right behind Sirius. He recognized the desperation in his voice, just as he could see the stubborn glint in Harry's gaze.

Harry was quiet for a moment. Then he asked quietly, "And what kind of a man am I if I send someone else to die in my place?"

Sirius opened his mouth and then closed it.

Before anyone else could say a thing, Harry raised up a hand. "The goblins have asked for my presence. You all know how proud they are and they will only talk to me." He couldn't suppress shivers at that, and the memory of Dumbledore's satisfied expression when he'd said that. "So I'm going."

"Then I'm coming with you!" Sirius sounded like he'd got a good grasp on a bone and was not going to give it up without a fight.

Harry shook his head. "You can't go to Diagon Alley, you know that. Not even as Snuffles. It's too dangerous." He could see that his words had made no difference from the stubborn look on Sirius' face and realized he had to use the one weapon he didn't want to. "Besides, it's full moon tomorrow."

Reaching out with his hand, he planted the small earthenware bottle he was still holding on the table.

"You must thank Severus for the Wolfsbane for me," Remus muttered.

Mentioning the hated name didn't register in Sirius' mind as he stared at the bottle full of the familiar
potion. He looked up at Harry, flinching at the very serious expression on his face. Even James had never managed to look so determined, and he could well remember how trying to change his friend's mind had been completely futile.

"You have a job to do here, Sirius, and tomorrow it's your place to stay with Remus, not me."

"I..." Startling at the soft touch on his back, Sirius glanced over his shoulder at Remus. He already knew he wasn't going to win this argument. "All right. I won't go with you. But someone should."

"I'll go." There was about as much hesitation in Ron's voice as there had been in Sirius' offer.

Smiling, Harry shook his head. "No, Ron. Not this time. It's Weasley night, remember?" Thinking about the family dinner didn't hurt; he was simply happy to hear Charlie was on his way to recovery, finally allowed out of St. Mungo's.

Ron shook his head. "They don't need me there." Not as much as Harry might need him.

"Yes, they do," Harry said, his tone harsh. "They do."

Maybe in time he would have to watch Ron go into battle, but he was not going to risk another Weasley if he could help it. Before Ron could protest, he turned to Hermione. "Don't even say it." He wasn't going to pull her into another fight either.

Hermione rolled her eyes at the familiar stubborn tone. "Harry..."

"No," Harry kept his voice level. "I'll just worry about you and no, I'm not saying this because you're a girl, so stop glaring. You look like professor McGonagall when you do that."

His words didn't really change her expression.

Even the thought of taking one of his friends with him felt preposterous. He'd spent years trying to shelter these people from the horrors he'd had to face, and maybe it had been silly, but this was the reality and reality was war.

He knew people worried because they cared. It had been clear in Snape's eyes when he'd handed him the Wolfsbane with curt words about wards. It was right there in Sirius' frantic gaze, in the quiet presence of Remus, Ron and Hermione.

Caring wouldn't be enough, not in a situation like this.

"I think you should reconsider."

Harry smiled at Remus, but his smile wasn't exactly happy. "I'm not going to take anyone I love into danger and quite frankly, I don't trust anyone else." Terry Boot's betrayal was still too close. "No. I'm going and I'm going alone."

Growling, Sirius jumped up and for a moment it looked like he was going to scream. Then he shuddered, his form a blur as he transformed into the black dog and ran out of the room with his nails clicking angrily against the floor.

"Sirius!" Harry yelled as he heard the back door slam open and then sway in the evening breeze.

"Let him go." Sounding weary, Remus stopped him from following. "Let him run."

Sighing, Harry sat back on the couch.
Snuffles ran, his paws sending dirt all around until he could control his anger enough to move with any resemblance of grace. It was a familiar track, across the small hamlet, up the street to Honeydukes, around the Three Broomsticks and then back again.

He was usually calm in this form, but now terror and worry were driving him insane.

If only Harry would listen to him! But no. Damn the stubborn Potters! James had been just like that, never listening to anyone when he'd made up his mind.

The thought made the dog falter, the nearly forgotten sense memory of red hair and a flowery scent contradicting his thoughts. There had been one person.

In his real form, Sirius would never have let himself even consider leaving Hogsmeade. Not only for fear of the Dementors, but also because there were things he was not going to acknowledge for the sake of sanity.

Harry was going to walk into danger, possibly a trap, and was not going to listen to him.

So he was going to find someone he would listen to.

The run to Hogwarts wasn't long for someone like Snuffles who was used to traveling, but the constant fear of seeing a dark form fly across the sky made it feel like eternity before he stepped onto school grounds. He couldn't concentrate on anything, not on his run and not on his plan, and it was throwing him off balance.

Finally the black dog slipped through the doorway, his ears flat against his skull as he sneaked across the hallway. He wanted to walk through the doorway as a human being, but knew he couldn't. Only when he was out of sight of people who might still be milling outside, he transformed back into a man.

Sirius took a deep breath, wondering if he should have stayed in his Animagus form a while longer. It was easier to deal with all this anger when he was Snuffles.

Shrugging away the thought, he padded towards the stairway, ignoring the ghosts flying around him and calling out his name. Not even sir Nick's joyous greeting could make him smile.

He was on a mission here.

The stairway to the dungeons was familiar to him. Years ago when he and his friends had roamed the hallways trying to find trouble with mischief in mind, they had often sneaked down here to see if they could pull a prank on the Slytherins.

It had never been like this, though, walking here to meet the Head of that despicable house.

The stone walls surrounding him made a small part of his mind whimper with panic. It was all too similar to Azkaban, the hallway looking like the one of a prison. He ignored the shivers of fear and went on, determined to see Snape right now.

Sirius had done his best to stay clear of Snape, never talking to him or even growling at him when he was close enough to touch people he loved. It was Harry's wish, and he tried his best to obey; he wasn't going to do anything rash, no matter how he wished he could just kill the bastard.

He was going to deal with this in a calm manner, like adults did.

Finding the right door wasn't exactly difficult. After the time James had challenged him to sneak a
stink bomb down here, he could have found his way with his eyes tied. Some things were never forgotten, and Sirius was glad this was one of them. The door looked the same as always, only the stupid snake shaped ornament on it seemed to be different, this one not as garishly tacky as the one he had stared at decades ago.

Sirius closed his eyes before knocking. He didn't want to be here, but he was desperate. Harry wasn't going to listen to him or Remus and would ignore the pleas from Hermione and the less pleading and angrier words from Ron. This was his last hope, and no matter how much he loathed even the thought of this place and this man, he had to try.

Grimacing with disgust, he banged the door with his fist.

Nothing happened. He banged on it again; certain that Snape knew exactly who was here and just ignored his presence. He'd show how well that worked! If Snape didn't open the door in five minutes, he would simply go through it.

Banging on the door so hard his hand hurt was actually quite satisfying. Not as satisfying as hitting Snape of course, but this would do. For now.

"I should have known you would find your way down here sooner or later."

The very audible sneer in the familiar voice made Sirius spin around. He saw Snape standing a few steps away from him with a wand in hand. "Snape."

Snape nodded, raising an eyebrow. "Yes. How clever of you to recognize me. After all, it must be surprising to see me standing outside my own home."

"Oh shut up!" Sirius had to keep in mind why he couldn't strangle Snape. He'd promised Harry he wasn't going to do anything stupid, but would it really be stupid to kill this bastard? He didn't think so. "I need to talk to you." The damn sneer was still there. "About Harry."

The change was small, but very clear. Snape's expression hardened, the malice dropping from his gaze. "What happened?" His voice was devoid of the biting sarcasm.

Sirius stared at him for a moment, unable to say anything. It almost looked like it mattered to Snape what was going on with Harry. Then he managed to say, "Nothing happened. Yet. But you know he's going to go to Gringotts tomorrow?"

"Yes. He may have mentioned it." The dark gaze was completely unreadable.

After a moment of silence, Sirius glared at Snape. Was he really not going to say anything else? He simply couldn't believe this man! Didn't he know what was at stake here? "He's being a total moron! I can't believe you're letting him do this!" To let Harry go to London at this point was insanity.

Saying the words like Snape really had any kind of power over Harry registered only a moment later, making him nauseous.

"What do you want me to do, Black? Tie him up?" There was a flicker of malicious glee in Snape's eyes as he saw the way Sirius bristled at that. "Tell him he can't go? And then what? Keep him locked away until the dawn comes and Voldemort disappears into a pile of dust? Harry is not a child anymore. I don't believe he has been for quite some time."

He could still remember the way Harry had looked when he'd first said that to him, tired and somehow old. No matter how ridiculous it had sounded, Snape knew he had been absolutely right.
Sirius took a step forward, stopping when he saw the wand rise to point at his chest immediately. "Yes, he is!" More importantly, James' child, and Snape was going to have to remember that and the debt he still owed to James.

"No, he really is not." How disappointing that they were back to this. Snape didn't want to fight with Black no matter how satisfying it might be. "Now move out of my way!" He was not at all surprised to see that the Gryffindor didn't budge.

"You're his..." Any of the proper terms simply refused to come out. Sirius grimaced. Better not linger there. The whole thing was making him see red. "Surely you can do something!"

It pained him to admit Snape might have a bigger influence on his godson than he did, but to make sure Harry was safe, he was willing to say anything, or do anything. If the git wanted him to, he would beg.

The reality of the war was terrifying. Even Diagon Alley wasn't a safe place anymore. Voldemort's people were everywhere; not only the wizards and witches, but also dark creatures. Those that were not sentient used as weapons, and then those, who would be able to suck out one's soul with one touch.

Snape saw the real worry in Black's eyes. Since it mirrored the emotion inside of him, he couldn't even sneer at the man, no matter how he might want to. "I have done all I could do." There was a questioning look on Black. "I asked him to consider other options." 'Asked' was probably a bit bland word to be used of the shouting match but that was none of the mutt's business.

"How the hell can you tell me that's all?" Hating the calm way Snape just stood there, Sirius lost most of the control he'd had over his anger. "Don't you see he's going to risk his life for something stupid someone else can do?"

There was no spark in Snape's eyes. His gaze looked completely lifeless, devoid of any emotion. He did not say a thing, because he knew this man would never understand it. Black was fighting because to him, it was personal. It was more than that to Harry.

Because of the role he was forced to play, he could not ask anyone else to do this.

Sirius growled. Inside, he was howling with anger and pain, not understanding how this was happening. "Don't you get it? He'll die, Snape!"

"Yes. That is a possibility." Cold tones delivered the words. Did Black really think Snape didn't know that? If anyone knew about the methods the Dark Lord used to get rid of his enemies, it was he, the former Death Eater. The one who had seen it all and been a part of things most people couldn't see even in their worst nightmares.

"A possibility? How the hell can you talk about a possibility?" Ignoring the fact that his voice could probably be heard in the Great Hall, Sirius finally let out the howl. "You let him die, and I'll break your cowardly neck, Snape!"

There was a long silence, as Snape stared at the angered man, wondering if there was anything he could say to him. He didn't have to justify his actions to Black. In fact, he should throw him out of his dungeons without a second thought. The problem was that for the first time in his life, he understood this idiotic Gryffindor. He knew exactly how he felt and even though it was making him slightly nauseous, he couldn't find the usual rage inside.

"What makes you think I'll be alive at that time?" The quietly spoken words surprised even Snape.
himself. He'd had no intention of explaining anything to Black.

It was too late to withdraw his words, the echo of them reverberating against the stone walls as if the cold dungeons would forever whisper his folly.

Sirius stared. His eyes huge, he could only stare at Snape. Feeling his mouth open, he stood there, not even able to form a sound much less words. Had the disgusting creepy Slytherin bastard really said that? Did he mean it the way it came out? He couldn't! It went against everything he was.

The dumbfounded expression was such a classic example of Black's wit, Snape wanted to laugh. He didn't, though. With his own words, the rage had finally woken up, slowly filling him, and right now, rage was better than the fear still lurking right beneath it. Raising his eyebrow, he cast a look at the end of the hallway. "If you are quite through with your childish display, I'd suggest you leave. Now."

"But..." Finally able to regain some control over his voice, Sirius protested. He couldn't leave. Not until the greasy git explained himself.

"Get out of my dungeons." It was accented by a glare that usually made students start to babble incoherently. "Now."

Something in the quiet voice made Sirius turn around and walk away. He had a distinct feeling that if he was still hiding his face here, Snuffles would be crawling down the hall on his belly, his tail firmly tucked between his legs.

From behind him, he could hear a door open, and then something shattered on the floor. He didn't turn back to see what it was, too stunned by what had just happened.

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Part 26

The day was warmer than any before this summer, and Harry already regretted wearing the outer robes as he walked towards Hogwarts.

For a moment he wondered if he should go back and change, but everything he'd ever read about the goblins suggested he wouldn't want to be late for his meeting. So he would have to suffer.

He was glad they had agreed on an early meeting. This way there hadn't been much time for Sirius to rant to him about safety issues this morning. Of course, there had been lots of yelling and ranting last evening after Sirius had come back from his run.

Harry shuddered at the memory. Sometimes Sirius really sounded like someone's mother and while usually it wasn't such a bad thing, right now when he was feeling rather nervous about the whole thing, being told about all the things that could go wrong was the last thing he needed.

Shrugging the nagging worries out of his mind -- or at least trying to -- Harry entered the school grounds. The short walk from Hogsmeade was always a bit nerve wracking.

There was no one to greet him, as he'd expected. He simply wanted to get this done as smoothly as possible. Therefore he'd pretended not to see the black dog trailing him earlier, and would not say anything about the surly looking knight --usually occupying the huge battle scene near the entrance to the Slytherin common room -- staring at him from a painting on his right.

Such a show of caring was nice, even though it was bloody annoying at times.
Harry walked to the fireplace. He was glad his everyday life didn't require him to floo anywhere, but it would still be more convenient if they had at least one of the fireplaces in Hogsmeade connected to the floo network. Maybe that way he'd get more practice and wouldn't have to worry that he'd fall on his face when he reached Diagon Alley.

He had to wipe his clammy palms on his robes before reaching out for the small jar on the mantle.

"I see you're early."

Dropping the jar on the floor, Harry spun around. He was reaching out for his wand even before he could see the person through the blinding cloud of floo powder swirling in the air around him. "Damn it!"

How had Malfoy got here before him?

Harry glared at the grinning Slytherin who was casually leaning against the wall. "What are you doing here?" He was already annoyed by the tight feeling in his belly, hating the way the fear was gnawing him. The last thing he needed right now was Malfoy and his games.

"I'm actually waiting for you." Not paying any attention to the glare, Draco stood there, relaxed. "You didn't really think they'd let you go to Diagon Alley all by yourself?"

His first real mission as a member of the Order. It was almost ridiculous how casual Dumbledore had sounded when he'd asked him to accompany Potter. Almost as ridiculous as the obvious command in Snape's gaze. Draco was certain that if the thought had occurred to Black, he would have given him strict instructions never to let Potter out of his sight.

From being the heir of Malfoy House and leader of the Slytherins to being Harry Potter's bodyguard. Sometimes fate really laughed straight in your face.

Harry shook his head slowly, cleaning the floor with an almost negligent wave of his wand. "You don't have to do this." He didn't want anyone else to risk his life, but deep inside, he couldn't help appreciating the gesture. Malfoy wasn't an idealist like his friends, he was a realist, and as such he might even survive following him to Gringotts.

Still, this was definitely the worst secret mission in the history of the Order.

"Yes, I do." No one was exactly forcing Draco to accompany Potter, but he certainly didn't want to explain Snape how he'd let him go alone. "Are you ready?"

"For crying out loud..." Muttering something dark from under his breath, Harry surrendered. "Fine. Just try not to get killed out there."

It was one thing he could count on; Malfoy's survival instinct.

Ignoring whatever else Malfoy would want to say, Harry grabbed the floo powder and stepped into the fireplace. He saw a brief look of panic on Malfoy's face as he flooed out of Hogwarts, knowing well that he'd intended to go first just in case. Tough. Harry wasn't going to allow it right now.

Harry stepped out of the fireplace at the Leaky Cauldron; coughing so hard he was certain he was about to lose a lung. It was good that there weren't many people around here at this hour, only the bald landlord grinning at him from behind the counter and a drowsy looking wizard nursing a drink at the corner table.

A moment later, Malfoy appeared next to him, looking as calm as ever. "Don't do that again!" There
was a clear warning in his voice.

It was almost hilarious how things had turned out to be. Nodding, Harry said, "All right." He wasn't going to change the way he acted, but it was easier to lie than to get into a fight.

From the annoyed glare Malfoy threw at him, he knew he hadn't really been convincing.

There was no need to linger at the inn, and Harry led the way to Diagon Alley. He didn't say anything when Malfoy appeared on his right side, matching his stride as they walked towards Gringotts.

Draco kept his gaze on their surroundings, ignoring the glares Potter threw back at him. He was glad there weren't many people around here at this hour. Most had probably gone to work already, so the streets were relatively quiet.

Seeing the awed looks from the wizards who passed them by didn't help him to relax. How on earth could he recognize someone attacking when everyone seemed to be more than slightly interested in Potter? He wasn't going to wait until he heard an Unforgivable yelled at them. It would be too late then.

Every muscle tense, he followed Potter to the wizarding bank, shivering slightly as he entered the huge building.

The last time he'd been here, he had still been the heir of Malfoy. Now he was nothing but another member of the Order. The goblins wouldn't rush to serve him, like they had whenever he came here with his father; they would concentrate on Potter.

Like they sort of should.

Harry didn't feel any of the tension leave him as he stepped up to the huge reception desk where three goblins sat waiting for him. They might be safe in here, where no magic other than the goblins' own was allowed, but his ordeal was just beginning. "Er..." He looked up at the familiar looking goblin. "Good morning."

"Mr. Potter. We have been expecting you." The goblin nodded at him before turning to the other young man. His already beady eyes seemed to squint into slits as he took in the platinum blond hair. "And Mr. Malfoy, I assume."

His voice was definitely different from the way he'd addressed Harry.

For once, the special treatment didn't annoy Harry. The goblins had treated him with respect ever since he'd been there to save Bill's life. It was weird, considering how aloof the small creatures usually were. Their world was apart from the wizarding world, a realm of their own existing parallel to this one.

They took care of their people, though, and they viewed their workers as a part of their world.

Harry smiled at the goblin -- Griphook, he thought he was called -- remembering the first time he'd been escorted here into the bowels of the earth to see his fortune. No matter how many times he'd visited the small vault, he was still amazed every time he saw the mounds of gold there.

Of course the goblin just stared at him for a moment before gesturing them to follow him.

Instead of going underground, they climbed up the stairs. Harry had always wondered why the building was so tall if all the vaults were deep inside the earth. Now he understood.
"This way." Griphook gestured at an ornate door that was slowly creaking open by itself. Harry's world got a little fuzzy around the edges and he walked in without really thinking, aware only of Malfoy's presence at his shoulder.

The board of directors were clearly expecting them. Looking grim and forbidding, the small goblins sat around a huge table, not showing any emotion as Griphook went through introductions.

Harry was grateful for their silence. He was nervous enough as it was.

Later on, he could never remember just what he had said. His thoughts had been a complete jumble ever since he'd got this mission from Dumbledore, but now he didn't even have to think about the words. He wasn't going to give an eloquent speech; words weren't exactly his forte.

So he gave the plain facts as clearly as he could. It was probably for the best, trying to say anything else would simply make him stutter and fail.

He was certain the goblins already knew what they were about to propose. The small bankers didn't show it, they simply sat there and listened as he talked about how important it was to have the bank be impartial in the following battles. Then they dismissed him and Malfoy, telling them to come back in three hours to hear their response.

Stepping out of the vast chamber, Harry felt a little stunned by the no nonsense way the goblins treated him.

Ignoring Malfoy's grin, he turned back to Griphook, who was still guiding them. "Could you take me to my vault, please?" He needed some money. Three hours was a long time; he'd better do some shopping. If he stayed here waiting, he would go insane.

"Of course, sir." The goblin's expression didn't change.

"All right. And I think I should check my vault as well," Draco said, his voice subdued. He knew his father had disowned him at his betrayal, but he felt like he had to see it himself. Somehow it wasn't real until he stood in front of the vault that had been given to him the day he was born, and was denied the access.

He wished he could go alone, so that no one would witness his loss, but the idea of asking Potter to stay behind was almost as horrendous as imagining his expression when they saw the empty vault. Keeping his mouth shut, he followed Potter and the goblin back downstairs.

Harry didn't say anything. He knew money was not something Malfoy wanted to discuss.

The trip down to the vaults was as exhilarating as always, but Harry didn't pay any attention to his surroundings. He felt strangely as if he was here with Ron, awkward and almost embarrassed. He didn't like going to his vault with someone who couldn't dare to even dream about the amount of money he still had there.

"Vault 687." Hopping out of the cart, Griphook motioned Harry to follow.

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Harry blinked. He hadn't realized they'd arrived already. Not looking at Malfoy, he grabbed his key and then went to collect some money.

Keeping his purse hidden in the folds of his robes, he came back to the cart, wincing as the heavy purse hit the bench with a loud jingle. Malfoy jumped a little, his expression both angry and brittle.
Thinking hard to find something to say, Harry sat next to the man he'd used to hate so damn much at school. Felt like that had been a lifetime ago, the simpler life just a figment of his imagination and the reality far more complex than anything he could have imagined back then. He didn't find anything that would make this any easier, so he kept his mouth shut. Malfoy wouldn't want to hear pointless and polite words and he didn't want to pity Malfoy anyway.

Griphook released the brake and they were on their way again.

They went further down. It smelled different here, the moldy tang accompanied by a strange scent of scorched earth. Harry wondered if the old tales about the goblins keeping dragons here were true after all. He didn't really want to think about it now. One encounter with an angry dragon was more than enough to last a lifetime.

He couldn't look at Malfoy as the cart stopped. If Griphook hadn't made very determined gestures again, he would have stayed in the cart. He felt like he was invading something really private.

Keeping his eyes downcast, he tried to sink into the shadows.

"Hold this, please." The goblin handed Harry the lantern, turning to Malfoy. "Key, please."

The key Malfoy pulled from a chain around his neck looked as if it had been made for a child. It was certainly smaller than any other key Harry had ever seen. Griphook didn't show any reaction to the unusual key, he simply inserted it into the lock and then stood back.

Making no sound, the thick door swung open. Harry cast a brief look inside and then turned to see how Malfoy would react to the sight. The lantern he held cast its light on his face, not leaving any shadows in which to hide.

There was shock on Draco's face, and even some dismay as he stared into his vault. The vault his father had opened the day the heir of Malfoy had been born.

"Would you like to withdraw some funds?" Griphook's nasal voice was polite. He was probably used to seeing his customers gawk at their money.

Draco took a deep breath and then nodded. He pulled a small bag from under his robes and then leaned forward to scoop coins into it. Flashes of gold could be seen between his fingers. There was no silver inside the vault, only piles and piles of Galleons.

As he turned away from his vault, he saw the questioning look on Potter's face. Even though no questions were asked, he said, "I thought my father had emptied this. I had no idea it was all still there."

"We would never allow that." This time Griphook sounded definitely offended. "No one may remove items from a vault without a key and a signed approval from the vault's owner."

"Oh. Of course." Still shocked by the almost full vault, Draco nodded at the goblin. It was always a bad idea to offend them.

With a small huffing sound, the goblin closed the vault and then handed the key back.

Then they were on their way back to the ground level.

Harry watched the way Malfoy's eyes glazed over. He was quite probably contemplating this new situation. Not that Harry could blame him. This was unexpected.
They had all believed Malfoy didn't have a Knut left, even Malfoy himself had thought so. It had
obviously been a very big incentive in his fight against Voldemort and his people. Malfoy had never
in his life done anything that wasn't about his own survival. Why would he continue to work for
them now, when he didn't need them anymore?

Turning to Malfoy, Harry asked quietly, "Are you still coming back to Hogsmeade with me?" With
that kind of a fortune, he could do anything. Move to the other side of the world, where tales about
Voldemort were simply fairytales to frighten children.

He was sure Malfoy would say no, for there was no real reason for him to return to their house at
Hogsmeade.

Lost in thought, Draco heard the question but took his time forming an answer to it. There were too
many things he needed to consider, and they were all tearing him apart; going to the Order
meetings, belonging to something far greater than the House system, Blaise's hand squeezing his at
the hospital, the impotent fury in Snape's eyes, various Gryffindors staring at him with trust or hate or
no emotion at all in their eyes.

His father bowing down to Voldemort, the Muggleborn Dark Lord and heir of Slytherin.

"Yes." Draco's voice was firm. He was not about to start running now. These past weeks had shown
him another side of the wizarding world, something he didn't mind being a part of.

His pride wouldn't let him run. Not now that he'd heard the name Malfoy said without it being the
usual curse. His father had made it a vile epithet; it was his job to change that. He may have turned
his back to the Death Eaters and the destiny his father had chosen for him, but even as Snape's ward
he had never even thought of changing his name. He was a Malfoy.

He would show that Malfoys wouldn't cower or run, that a Malfoy could have principles; that not
every Malfoy would stab you in the back or sell his soul to the highest bidder, especially when that
was just a lousy Mudblood.

Harry stared with his mouth open. Had Malfoy just said yes? Why? "Why?"

Only when the word was out, he realized that it wasn't exactly the most polite thing to ask. He wasn't
going to take it back, though. Brutal honesty was probably the best way to deal with Malfoy
anyway.

"Because..." There was no finality in the word. It was as if Draco didn't know himself. After a
moment, he added, "It's the right thing to do."

Staying with the Order was insane, but he still couldn't deny it was right. It was the right thing to do,
the only thing he could, and he owed it to himself to grow a backbone and continue on this road he'd
chosen. He also owed it to the next generations of Malfoys. If there were to be any, they wouldn't be
forced to be ashamed of every single hypocritical ancestor.

He knew that some might say he owed it to Snape as well, to his former House. He acknowledged
the debt without qualms, knowing it did matter, but it wouldn't be enough for him to risk his life by
staying.

His own bloodline was screaming at him to stop the idiocy that was the Dark Lord and his followers.
So he would try.

Even more stunned by the answer than of the decision, Harry just sat there for the rest of the ride. He
had really underestimated Malfoy.
He didn't think for a moment that this was because of his newly found altruism. It was probably more due to his revelation of Tom Riddle's ancestry, but he had to admit to himself he didn't really care.

In this war, right now, choosing sides was enough. They would deal with the reasons later.

Walking back towards the inn was easier, even with more people milling around the streets now. Harry felt lighter somehow, and not only because he had managed to convey their message to the goblins.

There were so many things he didn't have to worry about now, most of them becoming apparent only when they weren't an issue anymore. He loved Ron and Hermione like they were the siblings he'd never had, but he knew that of their generation, Draco Malfoy would be the most useful in a fight. He would never hesitate on moral grounds and his knowledge on the kind of skills they would need was vast.

Having Malfoy as an ally and not a reluctant accomplice changed things.

The Leaky Cauldron was always busy at this time of the day. Nevertheless, Harry felt safer here than back at the Alley, knowing that its presence so close to Muggle London would probably keep the most pureblood wizards -- mainly those following Voldemort -- away.

Offering them a toothless grin, Tom the landlord showed them to a quiet table at the corner and then left them to browse through the day's menu.

"I think I'll have a Muggle style tuna sandwich and a portion of chips." Knowing that the 'Muggle style' would probably not mean that everything was dyed pink, like it tended to be back at the Three Broomsticks, Harry put the menu down. He wasn't really hungry, the visit to Gringotts chasing all appetite away.

Draco was still staring at the menu, feeling unbelievably happy. He'd dreaded this, wondering if he could actually live through having Harry Potter pay for his meal again. Pushing aside the wild thought of having the most expensive item on the list just because he could afford it, he muttered, "I'll have the Cauldron salad." Noticing that Tom was back with a small pad in his hand, he added, "And a Hinkypunk's Delight for dessert."

The landlord offered them another toothless grin before rushing away.

Leaning back in his chair, Harry let out a deep sigh. This was a good idea, even though he wasn't too happy about the furtive glances thrown in their way.

At least no one had come to shake his hand yet. Nor was anyone trying to catch his attention by waving or yelling. He hoped it would stay that way; he really didn't need to deal with the whole hero worship thing today.

"So what do you want to do after lunch?" Forcing his voice to be casual, Draco added, "We still have time for some shopping. I for one could use some new robes."

He couldn't help feeling thrilled by the prospect of getting new clothes. There were other things he wanted as well, a new broomstick servicing kit, a few books. Maybe even some sweets, even though it would be kind of silly, considering they lived just a few blocks away from Honeydukes. Still, he wanted desperately to buy something, to go back home with arms full of parcels.

Hiding a smile at the comment, Harry was reminded of Ron for some reason. The obvious need to spend some money when he had it. "Sure. I think I could use some new robes as well."
Draco didn't say anything at that, but the vigorous nod was kind of telling.

The food arrived. Seeing the huge sandwich and the chips made Harry's stomach growl, and looking a bit sheepish, he grabbed the sandwich and took a bite. He watched Malfoy poke at his salad for a moment before attacking it.

He was still not sure what to think about the Slytherin. They didn't really have anything in common, except for a fairly jaded view of the world. Malfoy was an arrogant bastard, and would probably always be.

But he was also sarcastic and fairly honest and willing to fight against Voldemort. Against his own people. That still boggled Harry. How could he be such a contradiction anyway? A pureblood wizard who had turned against his own family, a sophisticated young man who was gazing happily at the steaming drink decorated by a plastic Hinkypunk carrying a magically glowing light.

Like most of the things in the wizarding world, it made absolutely no sense.

Harry grinned openly as he took another bite. Maybe he did tend to think too much. His instincts told him that Malfoy wasn't his enemy anymore and more than that, he was reliable. That was more than enough for now.

They finished their meal in companionable silence, not bothering to discuss anything. People around them were loud enough to drown out any conversation anyway, and it was good to just eat and not have to think of something intelligent to say.

"I'll pay for these!" Unable to hide the overjoyed grin, Draco grabbed the bill as soon as it arrived. He put down three Galleons without any intention of waiting for the few Sickles that he would get back.

The very unusual expression of total contentment on him made Harry blink, but Malfoy's smile was infectious. "Sure." He wasn't going to deny him this small pleasure.

Since it was still lunch hour, there were even more people on the streets, most carrying parcels, staring into display windows with curiosity plainly written on their faces. It saved both Harry and Draco from a lot of unnecessary ogling as they walked slowly down the main street.

Harry couldn't help smiling at the smells coming from Slug & Jiggers Apothecary. The familiar smells making most people gag made him feel awfully good these days.

He noticed Malfoy grin slyly at his sappy expression, but didn't say a thing. He suspected that Malfoy might be the only person besides Remus with whom he could actually talk about Snape, but he didn't want to do that now. Wasn't going to trust him with that. Yet.

He stopped by Eeylops' to get some treats for Hedwig. During the past weeks, he'd felt like he was neglecting her, and was determined to pay more attention to her from now on.

Deciding against going to the Quality Quidditch Supplies, even though both Malfoy and he did slow down as they strolled past it, Harry headed to Malkin's. He wasn't really looking forward to spending time being poked and prodded at, but knew that Malfoy was right. He needed new clothes, and since they had time, he'd better get them now.

Madam Malkin seemed to be delighted to see them. "If it isn't Harry Potter!" She smiled brightly at him. "Oh, and Mr. Malfoy as well! Come on in, dears."

Harry was relieved there was no innuendo in her voice. He'd seen some of the looks thrown at them
at the Leaky Cauldron. Sly glances that reminded him of the most outrageous articles in the Daily Prophet.

"How can I help you?" There was already a knowing look in Malkin's eyes as she surveyed them, taking in the slightly rumpled robes and the way Harry's sleeves were definitely several inches too short.

"Um..." Harry faltered, realizing he had no idea what they might need. "We need some new robes." That didn't come out the way he wanted. He sounded stupid in his own ears.

Draco smirked at the hesitant sound and then stepped in smoothly, "Yes, we need simple everyday robes as well as outer robes, at least two sets of dress robes each and some flying robes." He paused for a moment, eyeing Potter critically. "I think we should try some frock coats as well."

The glare Potter threw at him was definitely reminding him of Snape.

Trying on new robes was wonderful. Draco stood in front of a huge mirror, allowing Madam Malkin to show him different cuts and styles, some of which he rejected immediately, others he tried on. He didn't mind Potter watching, the amusement shining in his eyes somehow inviting and not insulting.

He chose simple attires, not needing to draw anyone's attention. The only exception was the luxurious velvet cloak that would go with his new dress robes. He thought he deserved something like that.

Hopping down from the footstool as soon as Malkin was done, he gestured at Potter. "Your turn."

There was definitely an amused glint in Potter's eyes as he stepped up on the footstool and then allowed the seamstress to start fussing over him.

Since Potter didn't seem to care much about his outer appearance --if the hair was any indication-- Draco kept his gaze on him and made suggestions. A definite no to anything striped, checkered or with polka dots. A curt nod at the long frock coat that looked fabulous on Potter. A few moments of hesitation over the hooded cloak before giving a thumbs up.

Swallowing down any comments about the cliched gay man's fashion sense, Harry simply stood there and allowed the fussing without a word.

He let Malfoy negotiate with Madam Malkin, only glancing at the fabrics and colors. He could really care less about clothes. There had been moments when he'd thought about buying new things to wear, but somehow it had felt like too big a thing. He'd had his school robes, Gryffindor Quidditch team flying robes and dress robes and that had been enough.

He had to agree that he couldn't wear the school uniform anymore, and not only because the robes he'd acquired a year ago were almost too small for him. Being a student at Hogwarts was a thing of the past.

Bustling around him, Madam Malkin smiled happily. She had always liked Harry Potter, like most people she knew. "Do you want anything else? Maybe some hats or accessories?"

"No, thank you." Harry barely looked at the direction she was pointing at, ignoring the rows of headwear and other unnecessary things.

Draco had turned to gaze at the back of the shop. After a moment, he returned his attention to Harry, trying not to show his pain to anyone. This brought back so many memories, most of them about his father. He remembered how he'd once loved browsing through the canes at the back of the shop,
dreaming of the time when he would also be able to carry one, preferably with a silvery snake decorating it.

"Shall I send these to your house then, or will you be here to pick them up in a few hours?" Madam Malkin didn't seem to notice there was anything wrong with the young men.

Pulling his old robes on, Harry sighed, "I don't think we can stay and wait." He was feeling nervous enough already. As soon as they'd finished with the goblins, they'd floo back to Hogwarts. "Please send them to Hogwarts." He could wait for the package there, the thought making him smile as he pulled his shoes back on.

He watched the seamstress hurry away with armful of clothes, feeling a bit strange seeing such myriad of colors. He'd definitely got used to wearing black with occasional deep red flying gear.

There would be no such things in his new wardrobe. Such Gryffindor clothes would needlessly attract attention. He was already easily recognizable because of his scar and the fact that his face was frequently on the cover of most of the wizarding magazines. It was fortunate that Malfoy had picked dark, earthy colors for him.

Remembering the different shades of green he'd seen, he smiled at Malfoy. "You intend to have me wear the Slytherin colors from now on, right?" There was only gentle laughter in his voice, no sign of old rivalry.

"That would be appropriate. Don't you think?" How strange to see that sneer without any real malice.

Harry looked at Malfoy, remembering how he'd first met him right here, in this very shop. He'd had a bad feeling about him then and he'd been right. Now he could see things had changed, maybe even more than he wanted to admit. "Yes. Appropriate." He wasn't just talking about his new clothes and his association with Snape.

Slowly, he lifted his right hand, offering it to Malfoy. He didn't say anything, simply holding out his hand and waiting. A smile was curling his lips up, almost a challenge.

Draco looked at the offered hand, and then looked into Potter's eyes, not wanting any pity or charity. He felt a bit dizzy as he realized that this was indeed none of those but simple friendship.

Simple? There had never been such a thing in his life as simple friendship.

Before the silence could stretch too long and become completely uncomfortable, he grabbed Harry's hand. It felt a bit clammy, but he didn't really notice; his own palm was probably just as sweaty. He shook the offered hand, making sure he wasn't squeezing too hard. This wasn't a battle, but a sign of one won by both of them.

Draco was the first to let go. "Ready to go, Potter?" He was sure the goblins would be done by now. If they'd needed time to actually think about the Order's suggestion, they would have requested for more than three hours, he was sure.

"Ready." Harry straightened his robes, grimacing a little. It really would be good to have clothes that actually fit. As an afterthought, he added, "And by the way, it's Harry."

That would take some getting used to. "Draco." It felt almost comical, introducing himself like this. After all, they'd known each other for seven years and lived together for almost four months.

"All right then." With a smile, Harry walked to the front of the shop to pay for his purchases, trying
not to think about how much they'd cost. When Malfoy -- Draco -- was finished as well, they walked out of the shop.

There were even more people walking about at this time, witches and wizards hurrying here and there, most lost in thought. Those who paid attention to their surroundings invariably stopped and stared at Harry and Draco, some even pointing a finger at them and whispering loudly to their companions.

Harry didn't pay attention to the ogling, but his expression hardened. It didn't help to see the offices of the Daily Prophet on the left. He was certain there would be even more articles about him and Draco Malfoy in tomorrow's paper.

"I guess we'll be talk of the week again." Draco was thinking about the hilarious newspaper articles as well. Leaning a bit closer so that his words wouldn't carry too far, he muttered, "Just think about people's expression if they actually printed the truth. 'Malfoy maverick romping with the ravishing redhead'. I wonder if they'd call Snape your saucy Slytherin sweetheart."

It was so ridiculous, Harry laughed out loud. He could well imagine it.

He was also glad for the very offhand way it was said, with no disgust or hesitation in Draco's voice. No outrage over the fact that he was who he was and Snape was a former Death Eater. It probably didn't matter to the Slytherin. Of that, Harry was grateful. "I think people aren't really ready to hear that." He smirked. "Or about romps with redheads either. Especially on other people's kitchen tables."

It was absolutely worth the quip to see Draco actually fluster at that.

Feeling a lot better, he headed towards Gringotts with Draco in tow. He was glad he'd accompanied him, not only as a distraction from his worries but also as a companion.

Griphook was waiting for them in the main lobby. He nodded at them and then turned to lead the way up the stairs again. Glad that they didn't have to carry all their purchases, Harry followed him, hearing his own footsteps on the stairs sounding awfully loud in his ears.

This was the first time for ages when everything did actually depend on him. There were no older Order members here to guard or guide him, no Dumbledore to watch over him. Just him and his own words, and he wasn't sure they were enough.

His ears were ringing as they finally reached the top floor. Mind completely blank, he walked into the chamber to meet the goblins, already certain he had somehow failed this mission and they were doomed. His heart seemed to be on its way to pounding out of his chest, the beat almost agonizingly frantic.

He didn't hear most of the things the head of the board of directors said. It was all polite nonsense to him; words about the long history of the bank and its association with every part of the wizarding world, about the importance of the older wizarding families -- clearly about the purebloods -- and the traditions passed on by Hogwarts and its great Headmaster.

Then there was a short silence.

Trying not to panic, Harry stood there, waiting for the inevitable. Shocked when it never came.

The small goblin sitting at the head of the big table looked straight at him and told him with plain words that they had no intention of interfering with the humans and their wars. Stating that their rules had not been changed since the Goblin Rebellion, he explained that they would remain neutral. Not
barring anyone from their establishment, but not joining sides either.

Harry had trouble trying to keep the grin off his face. In the end, he didn't even bother. Instead, he looked at the goblins, smiling so hard his jaws hurt.

Most of the goblins smiled right back at him.

It was a real victory, confirming the everyday life of their world even as they fought battles against Voldemort. They wouldn't have to worry about economy on this level. The goblins would be more than able to take care of themselves and their business would go on as usual even if their world was plunged into a war.

Walking out of the room again, Harry wanted to rush back and give the bank manager a hug. Or maybe give Griphook one. Hell, he would even hug Draco!

He had done this! Negotiated patiently and expressed their suggestion and paid attention to the details. It had been difficult, but he'd managed to do this all by himself, using his brains and not relying on pure luck.

Snape would be so stunned.

Unable to really do anything but grin, Harry followed Griphook and Draco down the stairs. The day that had seemed so bleak was suddenly bright. Things had gone better than he could have ever dreamed of.

They said goodbye to the small goblin who nodded politely to both of them.

Harry took a deep breath as they left Gringotts. It was over now, and he had nothing more to worry about today. All he and Draco had to do was to walk back to the Leaky Cauldron and then floo back to Hogwarts.

"Are we ready to go back home?" Draco looked around, relieved to see that most of the witches and wizards had apparently returned to their workplaces.

Nodding, Harry started to walk towards the inn. "Yeah. I think we should go." No need to tempt fate by staying here for a moment longer. Within ten minutes, they would be back at the school and then he could decide whether to go back to Hogsmeade or simply send a word with Draco and enjoy a quiet evening in the dungeons.

He was about to add something about his plans when a flicker of color moving at the edge of his vision attracted his attention. He turned around slowly.

There was a very familiar witch walking straight towards them, her acid green robes clashing with everything around her.

Harry almost snarled at the sight. For a moment he wanted nothing more but to draw his wand and try some of the hexes Bill Weasley had taught him on Rita Skeeter. She would look excellent as a hag. Or maybe he would revert her into her Animagus form and then step on her.

Common sense won. He turned to Draco to mutter, "Let's get out of here."

There was no answer. Draco was staring towards Knockturn Alley, his face completely white.

Feeling his mouth go dry, Harry looked into the same direction. He let out a quiet expletive as he saw the tall young woman followed by two hulking figures.
"We need to get away from here." He grabbed Draco's arm tight, knowing that he was probably frozen by the sight of his old friends. "Now!"

The loud yell snapped Draco out of his haze. Casting one last look at Pansy who was followed by Vince and Greg, he followed Harry towards the Leaky Cauldron. He expected there to be at least frantic shouting and probably a curse or two hurling towards them any moment now.

"Harry Potter!"

"Traitor!"

Both Rita Skeeter's and Pansy Parkinson's shouts were almost drowned under the enraged roar escaping Gregory Goyle. It contained no words, only the inhuman fury of a creature that had lost its mind. The loud yells were followed by green sparks that were flung at Harry and Draco.

Without a look back, Harry pulled Draco with him to the closest alley. "Run!"
Part 27

People were all talking at the same time.

"We need Poppy here! Someone call Poppy! She needs to come here immediately!" Eyes a bit wild, Sprout fussed with the torn edges of Harry's robe, careful not to touch the scraped skin on his arm.

McGonagall sounded icy as she said, "I want to know who did this, Mr. Potter!"

"It will be all right!" The way Flitwick's hands shook contradicted his words. "Everything will be all right. There now. It will be all right."

Harry stood up slowly. "Everybody, please stop talking." His words came out quietly and they were ignored. Taking in a deep breath, he yelled, "Shut up, people!"

All sound stopped immediately.

Gazing around the room, Harry said softly, "Sorry about that. But I need everyone to be quiet now." He turned his attention to Dumbledore who was offering Draco a sherbet lemon. "Albus. I think we should take Draco to see Madam Pomfrey." He hadn't missed the way the Slytherin had held his side after colliding against the wall just outside the Leaky Cauldron.

"Of course." Grabbing a firm hold on Draco's arm, Dumbledore started to guide him out the door. "Come on then, Mr. Malfoy. Poppy will make you feel better in a minute." He sounded as cheery as ever.

Harry ignored the pleading glance Draco was throwing at him, knowing that he would definitely hear about this later.

"You should go to see Poppy as well." Gaze full of worry, McGonagall stepped closer to Harry, her hand hovering close to his shoulder before lowering again.

"I..." Wondering how to explain it wasn't necessary, Harry looked at her, amazed at how close she was standing. He couldn't really snap at her, even though all the fussing was just making his head spin.

The way the door slammed open at the other end of the room made all the former headmasters jolt awake. They babbled in confusion, staring from their paintings as Snape walked into Dumbledore's offices. It was a familiar sight to most of them, but usually when the Potions master appeared here looking like that, there weren't this many people around.

"Potter." Eyes burning, Snape stared at Harry. "I see you managed to get in trouble again."

Harry couldn't stop the relieved smile from spreading to his lips. "Business as usual." He was still feeling the adrenaline rush through his veins, almost light headed.

"Where is Mr. Malfoy?" It was quite obvious that the boy wasn't here. Snape hoped he wasn't dead. It would be such a terrible waste.

"Albus took him to see Poppy." Replying before Harry could say anything, McGonagall took a step closer to Snape. "I believe Mr. Potter should join them as soon as possible."
"No." Harry was not going to spend the night in the infirmary! He'd had enough injuries while chasing after the Snitch to know when his wounds would need the mediwitch's care. He was battered and bruised and could feel blood oozing down his left leg, but he didn't need real medical attention. A good night's sleep and a potion or two and he'd be as good as new.

He hated the infirmary. After spending weeks there almost every term, he'd sworn he would never go there again unless he was dying. This wasn't serious enough.

Snape stared at him, his expression unreadable. "What happened to you, Potter?" He had only heard that the two young men had returned all disheveled.

"We met with some old friends." Harry sighed. "Pansy Parkinson, Greg Goyle and..." He never could remember Crabbe's first name. "Crabbe. They didn't seem to like the fact that I was with Draco, so they tried to kill us. We would have been all right if they hadn't tripped us down a few stairs near the Cauldron."

What a calm way to describe the frantic run across Diagon Alley. Harry's mind was still reeling too much from the fight to really concentrate on any of the details. They would come later, when he gave an official report to the Order, and even later still, when he was lying in bed, battling insomnia.

Now he just wanted to forget all about what had happened and sleep for hours.

"I see," Snape said. He didn't need more explanations, knowing perfectly well that all three Slytherins were capable of casting deadly curses at anyone, Parkinson even having the wits to actually aim before shrieking out the words. He didn't care what had happened to his former students. All he needed to know was that Harry and young Malfoy were all right.

"Good." Harry was starting to feel the adrenaline wear off. Sighing, he looked at McGonagall. "Please send an owl to my house. I would suggest you just say that both Malfoy and I are going to stay here for the night. You know how Sirius will worry."

McGonagall opened her mouth as if to protest, but then she simply nodded. She knew Sirius Black all too well and had to agree with Harry on how to treat him. However, she didn't agree on whatever plan Harry had for the night. He needed medical treatment.

Turning his gaze to Snape, Harry hesitated for a moment.

All the professors had to know that he'd spent days in Snape's rooms before moving to the house in Hogsmeade. They had done nothing to really hide the fact. This was different. "Snape..."

"I do believe you could use some relaxing potions." Cataloguing the visible injuries, Snape was already confident he had everything he would need to treat the idiot. "You'd better come with me."

A relieved smile spread to Harry's lips. "Yes. Thank you."

The professors stared as Harry hobbled towards the door. McGonagall pursed her lips together as she saw him stumble a little, ignoring the shocked murmurs as Snape grabbed Harry's arm to steady him.

She couldn't really show her amusement, knowing how prickly Severus could get. Her colleagues would definitely be shocked if they knew she was certain Severus would indeed take good care of Harry.

Once again, the journey down from Dumbledore's offices to the dungeons was made in a haze. Harry let Snape guide him, suddenly feeling too tired to make it on his own. He would have probably stumbled down the stairs without Snape's firm grip on his arm.
The silence in the dungeons was a bliss after the very loud cacophony of voices. Walking slowly down the hallway Harry could only hear their footsteps. At least this way his pounding headache couldn't get any worse.

It seemed that Snape understood the importance of peace and quiet as well. He didn't say anything as he reached out and opened the door, allowing Harry to step in first.

Harry didn't waste any time, groaning as he pulled off his outer robes before he was even inside Snape's rooms. His entire body ached, but the pain was really bad in his back. Wobbling towards the couch, he hoped Snape wouldn't take one look at him and decide to send him to Madam Pomfrey's after all. He really didn't need all the fuss now.

All he needed was a long hot shower. Then a couple of days of sleep. Yes. That sounded perfect. Divine.

Somehow he doubted he'd ever get farther than the couch.

Slamming the door shut behind him, Snape walked to Harry. "So... No plans on ripping my clothes off again and acting like a horny teenager?" The sarcasm in his voice was mild, almost gentle.

There was a confused silence.

"It's been a while since you were here," Snape said. "I would like to have at least a few words of greeting with you before engaging in frantic sexual activity in the living room." He cast a knowing look at Harry and then at the couch.

Harry threw a poisonous look at him, wincing a moment later as his back felt like it was on fire. "Very funny. Just help me to the couch." He couldn't keep the grimace off his face. "To rest there."

He was in no condition to shag anyone right now. Maybe after a few days of rest. Not sooner than that.

Ignoring his plea, Snape grabbed his arm. "You're not going to sit on my couch wearing such filthy robes, Potter." With that, he started guiding him slowly towards the bathroom.

The whole world narrowed down to staying conscious. Biting his lip, Harry tried not to cry out as Snape helped him out of his robes and then into the small shower. He stood under the almost scalding spray, breathing in and out slowly. Not thinking about anything.

The small abrasions he seemed to have everywhere stung at first, but soon the stinging went away and the world turned into a hazy bliss.

All too soon, Snape turned off the water and then forced him to get out of the stall. Harry groaned in protest, but followed Snape to the bedroom, moving as carefully as possible, so that the soft bathrobe wouldn't scrape against his bruised skin too much. The covers were pulled aside, and Harry swayed with relief. He didn't care about anything but lying down and resting.

He felt a bit cold as the robe was removed from him. There was no chance for him to wear anything right now. The covers would have to stay off too.

Snape was moving around the small room, but Harry hardly paid any attention to him.

Weariness was beginning to override the dull ache, even though the jolts of agony that went through him every time he moved kept him from falling asleep. It was enough to simply lie here. Maybe when he was tired enough, he'd pass out.
The hand that landed on his shoulder made him twitch. "Ow! Damn it!" His yelp was of pain and surprise. A moment later, the pain was gone, replaced by a warm feeling.

"Such language!" Placing his other hand on Harry's skin, Snape shook his head disapprovingly. "Lie still."

He moved his hands slowly, spreading the potion over Harry's back. It had taken a few moments for him to decide on which brew to use and he didn't want to make things worse. Poppy would kill him if she knew he was doing this, but he saw no other option; the infirmary was too noisy and loud. Harry wouldn't be able to rest there.

Besides, what could Poppy do to Harry anyway? Use the very potions he'd brewed for her, that's what. Snape was perfectly capable of measuring the necessary ointments himself.

Pouring more of the dark liquid on his palms, Snape could already see that Harry was relaxing. Good. That meant there was nothing really wrong with his back. Snape was careful not to use too much strength as he massaged the potion to Harry's back and then down his thighs, already seeing dark bruises forming on his skin.

This was probably enough, even though he was pretty certain he could use another ointment tomorrow morning just to make sure Harry would be able to get to his feet without cringing. Letting his hands move on their own volition, Snape catalogued the potions he had in mind, wondering what to use. He was certain he had all he needed, but he'd have to check that later on. At least his ingredient storage was well stocked, so whatever he didn't have, he could brew.

How on earth had Harry managed to get into such a bad shape? Tumbling down a short flight of stairs? Snape could bet it had been an understatement; Harry did have the unfortunate habit of downplaying things when he thought people might worry about him.

"Idiot!" Muttering the word out with half annoyance, half exasperation, he finished with Harry's legs and then moved to rub some of the potion on his arms.

"Mm hmm..." Harry sighed happily. He was feeling wonderfully warm. The pain was somewhere far away, disappearing behind the tingling feeling that was spreading over his whole body.

Snape kept his hands moving slowly even when he heard the soft snuffling sound that told him Harry had fallen asleep.

Part 28

"I see you're awake."

Burying his nose into Snape's hair, Harry mumbled his affirmation. He didn't want to fall asleep again, but was definitely not ready to get up yet either. It was just perfect to lie here, spooned against Snape's back.

Snape shifted his position a bit, stretching his leg and then said, "Yes, I can feel that. Apparently my potions worked, considering such indisputable evidence of your virility."

"Yeah. Thanks." Remembering how miserable he'd felt last night, Harry wrapped his arm tighter around Snape. "Don't even feel stiff."

Realizing just how stupid that sounded, considering that there was indeed evidence of his virility poking Snape, Harry snorted with laughter.
"Please spare me!" Aiming at disapproval, Snape scoffed, "It's too early for such bad puns, Potter." Not that Harry's puns would get any better later on the day, he was certain of that.

Agreeing completely, Harry lifted his head to plant a kiss on Snape's neck. "Okay. No joking." He had other things in mind.

Snape turned his head obligingly, probably to glare at him in the darkness, but it was very convenient for a kiss too. Harry could feel a twinge here and there, but it wasn't painful enough to distract him from the fact that he was almost naked and holding Snape in his arms.

He'd have to be half dead to ignore that.

Harry tried to get rid of his boxers and keep kissing Snape at the same time, the very awkward angle making him groan with frustration. Then Snape was squirming around, already pulling his night robes off, and things got a lot better.

It was the best way to wake up; long languorous kisses and soft simple touches. There was some fumbling as Harry reached out for the ever present lubricant potion, then his slick palm gliding against Snape's hardness followed by a moment of uncoordinated bliss as Snape copied his actions.

Snape didn't even waste time wondering about the easy touches, they were pleasant enough, as was the feeling of Harry's ragged breath against his neck as he slowly thrust into his grip.

He liked the muffled gasps and incoherent words escaping Harry as he came; once again showing how fully he immersed himself in physical pleasures. Not ashamed of his release. It pushed Snape closer to the edge as well, the knowledge of Harry's orgasm as exciting as the tightening grip on his prick.

Taking Harry's mouth with a kiss, he let that motion carry him to his completion.

He lay boneless for a moment, trying not to notice the way Harry wiped his hand clean on his sheets or the way he planted a peck of a kiss on his nose. The sticky feeling didn't seem to matter to Harry, considering the way he plastered himself against Snape.

Not that Snape really minded.

"This is so much better than masturbating in your shower," Harry sighed happily.

It made Snape smile in the darkness. A hint of the smile could be heard in his voice as he replied, "I would imagine so. Messier, but at least there's no danger of anyone slipping and hitting their head on the wall."

Harry laughed at that, the comment way too hilarious considering the odd twinge and ache manifesting now that he wasn't busy rubbing against Snape's naked body anymore. "So true."

After a moment of shared mellow silence, Snape reached out for his wand. It was a reluctant move, for once he was completely content to just stay in bed. Such frivolity. With a mutter, he turned on the light and looked down at Harry who blinked owlishly at him. "Did you sleep well?"

Harry nodded, reaching for his glasses. "Yeah." Even with the slightly hazy feeling -- had to be from the potion fumes -- it had been good to sleep through the night and not toss and turn until he finally dozed off completely exhausted. He hated the bouts of insomnia so much he'd rather have the nightmares back. "Thank you."

Pushing the very chilling thoughts of nightmares and the lack of them away, he stretched, careful not
to overdo the movement and bring the faint echo of pain back to life.

As usual, Snape brushed off the thanks. "Go and wash yourself." He was already getting up, pulling his nightrobe back on. "I'll get more ointments for your back."

Harry muttered to himself, not even bothering to wrap a sheet around his waist as he padded into the bathroom. Moving kind of hurt, and the mirror in the bathroom revealed a very weird coloration on his skin. Sex really didn't heal all aches, but even as Harry groaned as the hot water hit his battered skin, he couldn't regret it.

The knock on the door didn't really surprise him, and he called out for Snape to come in. He was finished with the shower anyway, having washed the remains of yesterday's potions and other sticky stuff off his skin already.

"Turn around." With a no nonsense tone, Snape waited for Harry to finish drying himself off before opening the bottle he'd carried with him.

Harry practically leered over his shoulder as he turned to face the wall, bracing himself against the tiles. The warm touches of Snape's strong hands took the leer away, and the moan he let out had very little to do with sexual innuendo. "Oh that feels good..."

Nodding, Snape continued rubbing the potion into Harry's skin, knowing that no matter how his hormones had pushed him to early morning gymnastics, he had to be sore all over. "Better?"

"Oh yeah..." Harry practically purred. He shifted his weight from one leg to another, turning according to Snape's instructions, and very soon he was feeling almost as good as new.

Capping the bottle, Snape went to wash his hands. "Good. Now go and get dressed. And get us some breakfast while you're at it."

"Sure." Right now, Harry would agree to anything Snape wanted.

Smiling goofily, he walked back to the living room with just a towel wrapped around him, listening to the shower being turned on.

It took him a moment to spot his clothes; they were a sorry looking pile next to the couch. Poking at the torn cloth, he grimaced, not wondering why they weren't neatly folded; they weren't even fit for a house elf.

Staring sadly at his clothes, he wondered if he would have to borrow something from Snape again. He didn't really mind, but was certain Snape wouldn't want him walking around the school wearing his clothes.

Not to mention the fact that Sirius would take one sniff at him and throw a tantrum.

The large parcels near the doorway caught his attention. Those hadn't been there last night, or he would have stumbled onto them. Walking closer to inspect them, he realized they were from Malkin's.

For a moment he was boggled by their presence. Someone had sent them down here, and he was certain it wasn't Snape. The man had been right here with him all night. It had to be either Dumbledore or McGonagall, and the thought of them being so casual about him staying with Snape was definitely... not strange, really. More warming than anything.

He tore into the parcels, grabbing socks and underwear happily. All Malkin's products were ready to
wear, the print at the side of the package declared, and Harry didn't waste any time selecting something decent to wear.

It had been weird to select his skivvies and other stuff with Draco Malfoy standing by, but right now he was glad he had bought everything he might need.

He didn't really think it was his color, but he put the green shirt on anyway, leaving his robes unbuttoned on top of it. Malfoy had been right about one thing; he would have to look his part as their great hero. It didn't matter he didn't really believe in this whole thing; there were lots of people who did.

At least the robes made him look kind of forbidding, which was actually a good thing. People were always touching him, and he resented the notion that everyone could just walk to him and wrap their arms around him. It was an invasion that always took a part of him away, most importantly all the calm he could muster and his privacy.

He ran his fingers through his hair, not even needing to see his reflection to know it was a total mess again. Maybe he should practice an angry expression as well. After all, due to the company he kept, he was already an expert in scowls and glares.

Smiling, he walked to call the house elves about breakfast.

The scent of tea made his stomach growl, but instead of attacking the food, he waited until Snape joined him. He knew he should probably get moving and fetch Draco from the infirmary, but there was no way he was going to skip the chance of sitting down and having a leisurly breakfast with Snape.

"I see you have some self control after all," Snape commented as he stepped out of the bathroom fully clothed, and then simply stood and stared at Harry.

The intensity of his gaze made Harry squirm with something very close to embarrassment. Finally he couldn't stand it anymore and asked, "So, what do you think?" Spreading his arms a little, he managed to actually grin. "Am I... Aesthetically pleasing?" As if that really mattered.

"Yes." Snape nodded. He looked at the attire for a moment longer before adding, "I assume you allowed Mr. Malfoy to help you choose your new clothes."

Harry's grin turned evil. "Yeah, I did." He was definitely going to comment Draco's fashion sense sooner rather than later.

"I believe that was one of the best decisions you've ever made." There was a slight frown of disapproval on Snape's face. "Unlike some I could mention."

Harry didn't know if he was referring to the mission or some other decision, but wisely kept his mouth shut. There were probably lots of things Snape would mention, all of them easily interpreted as 'I told you so'.

He simply poured them both tea and then sat down to eat.

Surrounded by the familiar scent of tea and potions, Harry munched his way through an enormous amount of food, feeling better than in ages. He swallowed the last of his sandwich and then just sat back, breathing deeply.

Snape cast a questioning look at him.
"I've missed the smells." He knew it was silly, but he even missed the stench of Bubotuber pus at times. "Somehow they always calm me down and make me sleep better." Or actually made him sleep, not that he'd say anything about his frequent insomnia to Snape now.

"Are you having trouble sleeping again?"

Harry wondered why he even deluded himself that Snape wouldn't catch the true meaning behind things he said. "Yeah. Sometimes. Especially when I've been reading stuff late." He was pretty sure he didn't have to say what kinds of things he was reading these days.

"Mission reports?" The raised eyebrow made the flatly stated words even seem like a real question.

"No. I mean, yeah, those too, but mostly books." Old mission reports from the first Voldemort war were a nightmare on their own, but Harry didn't really find the reports about training and small operations taxing. It was the history that bothered him.

"So you're still studying war?" Not surprising, really. In the wizarding world, people usually went with the one with the most power, and that was what destroyed them. Power was nothing without knowledge.

Harry nodded. "Yes. It's easy to get the big picture, but all these damn details..." He had hoped it would be easier now that he didn't have to study for the N.E.W.T.s. It was actually worse now that he'd actually have to use the things he'd studied in reality.

"Of course. You need to think about the Order, the other people in Hogsmeade, the Ministry, the teachers. The Dark Lord and his people. Training our forces, feeding them, collecting information and how to use it..."

"And it's just as annoying as planning the potion, preparing the ingredients and then doing the actual brewing." Grinning suddenly at the amusement he could see in the dark eyes, Harry added, "Or like planning a strategy for a Quidditch game and then training your people so that they're ready for the game."

It did make more sense thinking about it that way. After all, he'd been the Captain of their Quidditch team for two years, and Gryffindor had managed to win all their games except for that one against Slytherin. This wasn't much different from that.

Snape let his hand brush over the teapot before pouring more tea, refusing to acknowledge the baiting. "Indeed."

"Maybe when this is all over, I might want to write a book myself. 'Warfare for idiots'. You could probably help me." Harry felt somehow light headed when he said that. As if the mere thought of actually surviving and having some kind of a future of which Snape was a part was making him dizzy.

Ignoring Harry's words, Snape said, "You do realize that you don't have to do everything alone. Choose people you trust and then delegate. No one has to try to deal with everything, not even you."

"Yeah." Harry knew it was true, even though some people might think he was omniscient. He already had the inner circle of the Order he could trust, and now there were others he could rely on. "I know."

Snape took a sip from his cup. "But it's not the details that keep you awake at night."

"No, it's not." There was no need for Harry to embellish. They both knew what he was talking
He was glad Snape didn't push the issue but simply sat there drinking his tea while Harry kept breathing slowly. There was the scent of tea in the air, the ointment on his skin and behind it even a hint of the soap he'd used. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on this moment only, not lingering on nightmares.

"What are your plans for the day? Are you in a hurry?" Snape's question came out as if they hadn't just touched the worst topic ever and were simply enjoying their breakfast.

For that, Harry was grateful. "Not really. I mean, I have to get Draco out of the infirmary and go home before Sirius comes looking for me, but otherwise..."

Snape's expression turned questioning at the use of Malfoy's first name, but he didn't comment on it otherwise. "Yes, I believe he might be ready to leave Poppy's tender care already." Not everyone had the patience to just lie there and be coddled. "But before you go..."

Placing his cup back on the saucer, Snape stood up and walked to the potions cabinet. Grabbing a jar or two, he went to fill a small pouch with a few different herbs, sliced roots and crushed two dried flowers on top of everything before tying it shut with a bit of string.

"Here." He handed it to Harry.

Poking at the scented bundle, Harry frowned. "What is it?" He could clearly recognize some things in the pouch just from the smell, but had no idea what it was for.

"It's something to help you sleep better. Keep it near your bed." Not turning from the cupboard where he was busy putting everything back in their places, Snape added, "I know you don't like to drink the sleeping potion, so I thought you might prefer that. Not every potion is in a liquid form."

Harry knew that, the details from his Potions books hadn't all fled his mind yet. He could probably name a few powdery concoctions like the Floo powder and various poultices, but he'd never heard of a potpourri used to help people sleep.

Shrugging, he pushed the pouch under his robes. If nothing else, the thing would make his room smell more like home.

When he was done, Snape turned back to Harry. "We should get going."

His abrupt way of slamming the cupboard shut was a clear indication that he wasn't going to return to the previous subject any time soon.

"Yeah, we should go. I want to see if everything's all right at home." Knowing all too well how the day's Prophet would have made Sirius froth at the mouth, Harry shuffled his feet. He really wasn't looking forward to the yelling. "You know, the full moon and all..."

"Everything should be perfectly well." Of course Snape's Wolfsbane was excellent, but it only worked when ingested, and he still didn't trust Lupin to actually take it every single full moon. If he'd slipped once, he could slip twice, and at least this way Harry had been safe in his bed while the werewolf had been turned into his monstrous self.

"Huh?" Harry had no idea what Snape was talking about. Then it hit him. "Oh. Yeah. The transformation. Sure, I gave Remus the potion."

The all too Gryffindor trust never ceased to amaze Snape. "Not that I have any right to tell you what
to do..."
"Yes, you do."

Snape glared, already letting go of the sermon about werewolf curses and dreading why would Harry say anything as stupid as that. "What?"

"Not that I'll actually do what you tell me to do if I don't like it, but you do have the right to worry and stuff." Offering a genuine smile, Harry touched Snape's arm. "That goes together with the things."

The soft words were so predictably foolish that Snape decided against conjuring up a response. The truth was, he couldn't fathom anything to say. These nuances of shared 'things' amongst people were incomprehensible like all the rest of the things in the teenage world. He'd expected anger and accusations of being controlling, and now Harry was grinning like an idiot again.

He snorted at Harry's expression and gestured to the door.

Snape escorted Harry to the infirmary but chose not to enter there himself. He didn't want to risk Poppy's undoubtedly tedious sermoning and didn't want to say goodbye to Harry with others watching. With a glare and a nod, he turned and walked away, not glancing over his shoulder even though he could feel Harry's gaze on his back until he rounded a corner.

"Okay," Harry muttered to himself before pushing open the door to the infirmary.

He could spot Draco immediately, watching quietly as the Slytherin argued with Madam Pomfrey about getting up and dressed. He really didn't want to interfere -- didn't want to draw the mediwitch's attention to him -- but it was too late to back away now.

Stepping fully into the room, he said cheerily, "Hello, Draco. Madam Pomfrey."

"Good morning, Mr. Potter." Looking suspiciously at the very relaxed Harry, Madam Pomfrey was for a moment distracted from her patient. Then she turned her attention back to Malfoy.

Draco smoothed down his hair. "Harry." It still felt weird to say that, but he was getting better at making it sound normal.

"How do you feel?" Harry didn't think Draco looked all that well.

"Like..." Casting a brief glance at Madam Pomfrey who was glaring at him, Draco sighed, "I feel lousy, thanks for asking."

"As you should! You're black and blue and should really stay here for at least another day, Mr. Malfoy!"

Both men cringed at Pomfrey's comment.

"Er... Thank you, madam, but I feel perfectly fine," Draco contradicted himself. Moving slowly, he got to his feet. "I can rest at home."

With that, he slowly stepped away from the bed and made his way to the doorway. Harry could see he managed to cross the room mostly on pure will power, but a look at Madam Pomfrey revealed
only irritation and not real worry.

That meant Draco would be just fine.

Scoffing, Madam Pomfrey went to grab a few vials and then after a short glance at her patient, she handed the medicine to Harry. Considering the shape Draco was in, Harry thought it was probably for the best that he took care of the important stuff.

"Thank you." Harry smiled at the mediwitch and then rushed after Draco. They'd both be in trouble if the Slytherin fell down yet another flight of steps and ended up all broken at the bottom.

He didn't wait to hear any answer.

Since it was obvious Draco was using all his strength to keep going, Harry didn't bother with small talk. He simply kept his pace slow, careful not to seem like he was hovering but ready to grab a hold of Draco's arm if it looked like he was about to fall.

The silence was very comfortable, even when they stepped off Hogwarts grounds and were surrounded by the ever present reporters who were constantly circling at the edge of Hogsmeade proper like vultures.

Almost feeling the exhaustion radiate from Draco, Harry stepped closer to him, ignoring the flashes going off and people yelling questions at him. If they wanted to take pictures of them and then spin a web of lies, they were welcome to do so.

He didn't really care, he just wanted to get away from here as fast as possible.

Feeling the familiar wards tingle on his skin as an announcement that they were now entering Hogsmeade, Harry sighed with relief. The reporters stayed behind as if blocked by an invisible barrier and the illusion of privacy was almost enough.

Draco however kept his head up until at least one house blocked the reporters' view. Then he slumped suddenly, almost falling down.

Only Harry's firm grip on him kept him standing.

"Come on, Draco, it's only a few blocks." Waiting for Draco to gather his strength, Harry added, "Or I could always carry you."

The glare he earned with that comment was definitely poisonous.

"I do not need that much help, Harry," Draco ground out. He swallowed until the nausea passed and then waited until the black spots cleared from his vision. He was fine!

Harry chose not to say anything about stubborn Slytherins and how he'd seen this before and still didn't buy it as they went on, keeping his hold on Draco as firm as before.

They got some curious looks as they crawled their way to their house as well as some offerings to help. Even though Harry knew they'd get to their destination a lot quicker if he actually accepted assistance, he simply thanked everyone and told them they were fine.

His status as the great leader would survive accepting help. He wasn't sure Draco's ego would.

Sirius and Ron rushed to greet them as soon as Harry opened the door, Sirius freezing as soon as he saw the crowd that had followed Harry at a distance and sneaking into the shadows until the door
was closed between them and the rest of the world.

"Harry! Are you alright?" Ron asked even before they were fully inside.

Managing with a small grin, Harry nodded. "Yeah, we're fine."

Draco chose that moment to finally lose his grip on his stubborn determination and started to sway.

"Ron!" Glad to see that his friend was already moving to help him, Harry struggled to keep the Slytherin standing while he kicked the door shut behind him. Then Sirius was there too, and the three of them had no problem getting Draco to his room.

"I'm fine," Draco insisted, not at all comfortable with all the fussing, especially since it was Black who was tugging the covers off his bed and staring at him with those scary eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You dragged me to safety yesterday; now it's my turn. Okay? Now stuff your silly pride and lie down." He could see that Draco was actually relieved to be lying down, he was just too stubborn to show it.

Like another Slytherin he might mention.

Ron and Sirius withdrew to the door while Harry forced Draco to take his medicine. After threatening him with Madam Pomfrey and the indignity of being carried unconscious through the streets of Hogsmeade, Harry finally got him to settle down.

Draco was fast asleep before the Gryffindors even got out of his room.

"Damn it was so much easier when he was just a whining idiot..." Harry grumbled to himself, remembering how Draco had squealed after Buckbeak had taught him a lesson in manners.

He cast a wistful look at his own room, wondering if he could just excuse himself and rest for the day, but after Snape's potions he really felt good and it was best to get through all the yelling and ranting as soon as possible.

The upcoming storm was already gathering in Sirius' demeanor.

Sighing, Harry motioned at the stairs. "Let's go downstairs and give Draco some peace and quiet." He didn't miss the way Ron stared at him when he said the Slytherin's name.

The living room couch was as soft as he'd remembered, and he sank down with a sigh. Ron took his time fussing with tea while Sirius sat on the chair opposite to Harry and stared.

It was definitely easy to see why so many people dreaded the famed Sirius Black.

"So... where's Remus and Hermione?" Somehow their absence was alarming, even though Harry knew all too well that Remus was probably too weak to leave his bed yet.

Sirius growled and then managed to say, "They were summoned to St. Mungo's. Apparently they want to do more tests on Remus and Zabini has been asking for Hermione." His voice calmed a bit towards the end, but then he was back to the growling. "And you have been hurt!"

No need to deny it; Sirius could probably smell it on him, and even if he couldn't, it was not hard to see from the exhaustion clear on Harry's face.

"Yeah. There were... complications and some of our old schoolmates tried to kill Draco and me." Harry could see Ron flinch again. "But I'm fine. Draco's the one who's actually..."
"You were hurt!" Barely able to sit still, Sirius stared at Harry, the intensity of his gaze alarming. "And I found out about that in the Daily Prophet."

Harry groaned. For some reason he hadn't thought about the fact that Sirius would be hurt by this. He'd just concentrated on the anger. "Fuck." That was a very appropriate word to describe the situation.

"I get an owl from McGonagall saying you're staying at Hogwarts overnight and then this morning there are headlines screaming you almost died." Sirius leaned forward. "I had to read it in a bloody newspaper, Harry!"

No matter what his motives were last night, Harry knew there was only one thing he could say. "I'm sorry, Sirius." He said it calmly. Showing panic he didn't really feel would be playing with his godfather's emotions and he never wanted to do that.

Sirius bristled, but when Harry didn't say anything more, he leaned back again. "I don't like being lied to." Realizing that Harry was about to argue, he held up a hand. "I know, you didn't actually lie. But I don't like being kept in the dark either!"

He'd spent the night feeling slightly disgusted about Harry's whereabouts whenever any thought could pierce through Snuffles' worry for Remus the wolf.

"You're right, you should have heard it from me." For that, Harry really was sorry. "But I'm all right now."

"Did Madam Pomfrey take care of your injuries?" Desperate to distract the conversation from the track it seemed to be going, Ron grasped for straws, hoping he could avert a disaster.

Harry shook his head, smiling a little. "Er... My injuries were taken care of. Yeah."

He could have just as easily said Snape's name out loud. Everybody knew about his stay in the dungeons; even Ron wasn't foolish enough to believe otherwise.

Sirius rubbed a hand over his face, unable to really keep a hold of his anger. He'd been busy last night, doing his part, but somehow he wished he could have been taking care of Harry. It was his duty to take care of him, not Snape's! And he was not going to be grateful to that man for looking after his godson!

"What about Malfoy? Did he really..." Ron didn't know what words to ask. He also didn't really care, not about Malfoy.

This was definitely a better subject than Snape. Harry nodded. "Yeah. If he hadn't been there, I wouldn't have made it." Not even an exaggeration. "Draco definitely saved my arse."

Sirius looked annoyed and relieved at the same time, with a hint of 'I told you so' lurking behind everything else.

This would definitely change a few things.

Ron on the other hand had a sinking feeling at the pit of his stomach. "Draco?" Just when exactly had that happened?

"Yeah, he got me to the Leaky Cauldron and caught one of Pansy's curses doing so." Harry nodded. He was just glad he'd offered Draco his friendship before it had happened, so that whatever came next wouldn't be forever overshadowed with gratitude. "He spent the night at the infirmary and he
really should be fine.”

"I... Merlin, I need a drink!" Ron shook his head. Malfoy was upstairs sleeping under the influence of whatever potion he'd taken, and Harry was here telling him he was actually worried about the git. It really was too much.

Sirius perked up. He didn't want to argue and rant and hurt Harry and the mood in here was already getting weird.

So Harry had kept a secret from him. Stubborn as all Potters, so it shouldn't really surprise him. He could live with it -- no choice here -- and Ron's idea was definitely better than moping around. "You do? How about some Firewhiskey? I know where Eppy hid most of the liquor." He also knew where Remus had stashed his bottles -- just for medicinal purposes of course -- and was pretty sure they could all get sloshed.

"Really?" Staring, Ron couldn't help but to wonder if it was a joke. No adult had ever offered him liquor before; except for George and... He swallowed at the thought. Yes. Getting really drunk sounded like a very good idea right now.

It was clear to Harry that Sirius was serious. He didn't have to think for long before nodding. "I think that's an excellent idea!"

He didn't want to be the reliable and responsible one now.

Not a heavy party animal, he could deal with staying with his family and getting sloshed. They needed to relax and he wanted to celebrate being alive.

Of course he'd already done some celebrating today, but he was sure as hell not going to tell that to either Sirius or Ron. But he was definitely up for some bubbly right now. And maybe chocolate! Not that they went too well together, but he could deal with that.

As it turned out, Eppy was rather obsessive about stocking the kitchen and the cupboards properly. They stumbled across bottles of Firewhiskey, real beer and some unlabeled liquor that tasted like crap but burned like dragon fire going down.

It was probably a coincidence that there were parcels from Honeydukes in the same cupboard. Harry didn't care, he simply carried most of them to the living room with the bottles, and then all three of them settled into killing time and brain cells.

Sometime after they'd finished the first bottle of Firewhiskey, Harry was sitting on the floor, not really remembering how he'd ended up there and not caring one bit.

He was laughing at the joke Sirius was telling, his chuckling drowning under Ron's hysterical snorts.

They were staying on lighter topics, not discussing anything related to things Slytherin, including snakes, potions and the color green. It had made the mood tense during the first sips of whisky, but sometime along the way the tension had evaporated.

Of course the tension wasn't the only thing that had evaporated. With it, both good sense and reason had also disappeared, leaving behind three very drunk and extremely brainless Gryffindors.

Harry was trying not to snort anything out of his nose, listening as Sirius told some of his more outrageous tales that made even Ron's ears turn red, feeling his body go completely liquid. This was so much better than an evening at the Three Broomsticks or reading reports. He couldn't feel any twinges of pain from his back anymore, and nothing could kill the mellow feeling.
Not even the door opening somewhere.

Years of training made it impossible for him to just sprawl there on the floor. After a few fumbles, he managed to grab his wand, pointing it at the door as he heard footsteps approaching. What was left of his brain suggested that maybe this hadn't been such a good idea after all, but every other part of his body was still too drunk and mellow and happy to really care.

He relaxed when he saw Hermione standing at the doorway, trying to push his wand back into its place under his robe and missing, sticking it under the waistband of his trousers instead. "Hermione!"

His crooning alerted the others as well, both Sirius and Ron turning to look at the door, Ron waving a little at her.

Blinking, Hermione looked at the empty bottles and the chocolate wrappings that were all around the living room floor. "This is new."

It was quite impossible to tell by the charming smile that Sirius was absolutely drunk. "My dear Hermione. How nice to see you this evening!"

Hermione laughed out loud, the sound a bit rusty and weird, but a genuine laughter anyway. "Hello, Sirius." She glanced at Ron and Harry who were both grinning at her as well. "Are you boys drunk?" Sounded like her 'boys' was aimed at all three of them.

"Yes, we are!" Ron declared. "We're sloshed!" He looked around, as if trying to find something and then grabbed a half empty box of chocolates. "Choccies?"

Rolling her eyes, Hermione declined. "No thank you, Ron."

She sounded awfully like professor McGonagall with the slight exasperation so clear in her tone.

There was a slow sound of dragging footsteps coming from the hallway, and then Remus stepped into the room, freezing next to Hermione as he took in the sight in front of him.

Sirius' whole face lit up with the smile. "Remus!" He scrambled up to his feet and staggered closer to the other man. "How'ya been?"

"I've been just fine." Exasperated, Remus held onto his friend, who was swaying on his feet. "I don't think I have to ask you how you've been." His gaze swept over the room, pausing for a moment at the empty bottles and the two very drunk teenagers.

"We've been drinking!"

Now there was a slight smile on Remus' face. "I can see that." He didn't mention that he could also smell it. Even someone without extra abilities would have smelled the overpowering scent of alcohol in the room.

"You're so smart, my Remus!" Beaming at him, Sirius swayed a few times more before throwing his arms around Remus. "Mr. Brainiac!" It was accented by a very sloppy kiss.

Ron didn't even try to fight the very unmanly giggling fit as Harry let out a very heartfelt "Aww, that's just so sweet!"

Planting yet another sloppy kiss on Remus' lips, Sirius turned back to Harry. "You did know that I so totally love this man, right? He's the bestest friend I've ever had and I love him! He's like a brother to me!"
All along his left hand was kneading Remus' bum.

"Sirius... We kind of figured that out a long ago!" Harry whispered so loud it could have even woken Draco up upstairs.

Ron blurted out between giggles, "Like an old married couple!" He raised the bottle to his lips, looking forlorn as it proved to be empty.

The words froze Sirius and even through the drunken haze he cast a shocked look around the room. He seemed to realize that his actions weren't exactly brotherly, and he let go of Remus' bum as if it burned him. "I..."

"You love Remus! Yeah, that's so cool!" Harry nodded empathically. "You know, if you ever really wanna get married... Is that even legal in the wizarding world? Anyway, I would be honored to be your best man or something." His thoughts were kind of fuzzy, but he knew what he was saying.

He didn't know why it was so damn difficult to Sirius to talk about his obvious relationship with Remus, and right now he didn't care. He was gloriously drunk, and he was going to say what he thought.

It was Ron's turn to say, "Awww! That's just so sweet!"

Sirius blinked. He looked at Harry and then at Remus. Turning his attention back to Harry he muttered, "Damn, my head is spinning." Maybe he wasn't as used to the hard liquor as he'd thought. But this couldn't just be a booze induced hallucination. He prayed it wasn't. "You mean that?"

Seeing the way Harry nodded made him smile. Without a conscious thought, he raised his hand back to where it belonged, ignoring the way Remus yelped.

"I do believe this may have been the worst kept secret in the wizarding world." Remus looked at the two young men who were once again repeating the very soppy sentiment of approval. He hoped Sirius wouldn't panic tomorrow morning when he was suffering from a hangover and remembered all this. "And yes, we do love each other."

Hermione sniffed. "It's not as if we didn't already know that." Her eyes were twinkling merrily. "I have no problem living with five gay men. But I do hope I'm not forced to live with drunken people every night."

"I am not gay!" Drawing himself up straight, Ron looked insulted. His declaration was greeted by disbelieving stares. "I just liked fucking Malfoy."

That made Sirius curl on the floor, laughing so hard tears were running down his face. Both Remus and Harry cast a very fond glance at him, enjoying the sight.

Ron blinked owlishly a few times before adding, "Not that I'm going to fuck him again. He's... No good. Yeah. A no good Slytherin." He didn't sound very convincing.

Howling, Sirius slammed his palm against the floor.

A dreamy look appeared on Ron's face. "But he's not bad looking, you know. Blond all over." That was accompanied by a leer. "And he has muscles! Like... Have you ever seen his thighs? Quidditch player's thighs!"

Hermione cleared her throat. "I'd say that's way too much information for me."
Next to her, Harry was suddenly reminded by his night in Hogwarts not long ago. It brought a silly grin on his face. Whatever could be said about Quidditch player's thighs could also be said about Potions masters' arms.

"I mean it! Strong and hard and he has a good arse too!" Ron was warming up to his topic, gaze turning distant. "Has to be because he's a top Seeker, I say. Those thighs can squeeze like..."

"Ron!" Hermione squealed, covering her ears with her hands. She didn't want to hear this.

Harry was having trouble keeping the grin from turning into laughter. He looked around the room, taking in the smiles on Sirius and Remus and wondered what they'd say if he made a comment about him being a Seeker as well. Snape would never say things like Ron just had, but he might think about it.

That thought made the laughter bubble out.

"You're insane!" Ron declared. "Quite barmy! All you Quidditch players are the same! Total lunatics. But I still say that Malfoy's thighs... Oh fuck!" The indignant expression turned into disgust. "Ew! Oh ew! Too much information! I have to wash my brains. That's disgusting, Harry!"

Harry just laughed harder.

Casting an amused look of perfect understanding at each other, Hermione and Remus sprang into action. She grabbed Ron's arm and started to lead him upstairs even as Remus stepped closer to Sirius and turned him towards their room.

It was best to act before the comment got through the haze currently surrounding Sirius' brains and this turned into a shouting match.

That left Harry alone in the living room, chuckling to himself until a yawn chased the laughter away.

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**Part 29**

Harry hated Draco Malfoy's smirk with burning passion.

Trying to ignore it and concentrate on one of the endless reports, he kept his gaze away from Draco. It had been bad enough to deal with a pounding head this morning, not to mention the very unpleasant taste in his mouth. He really didn't want to hear anything Draco might want to say. Considering the way he'd actually howled with laughter while reading the Daily Prophet, Harry could guess where his words might lead.

He had the feeling that he'd have to hear whispers about his looks for a while now. Damn the journalists!

Writing about him and Draco having an affair had been bad enough, and the disaster with the Dursleys had made his blood boil. Headlines screaming about 'Harry Potter, the Most Beautiful Bachelor in our World' were enough to push him toward homicidal rage.

It didn't exactly help that everyone in the house seemed to find it amusing. Harry could have sworn that even Eppy had smirked at him while passing by carrying the tray.

Too bad the Ministry had finally started to make noise about the future, forcing the Order to meet tonight. Otherwise Harry would have stayed home all day, enjoying the peace and quiet as long as it
lasted.

Of course when everyone came back from wherever they'd gone -- Sirius and Remus off somewhere, Hermione happily back at St.Mungos' with Zabini and Ron off to see his brothers -- there would be even more comments on his looks. Facing the public wouldn't really be that much worse.

Grumbling, he tried to pay no attention to Draco smirking at him across the room, and concentrated on the report.

Maybe he should just go and read in the kitchen.

Ron was still grinning as he guided his brothers to the house through the back door. There was a small crowd forming on the street and he didn't want to pass it by, but it was clear why they were there; he'd heard about the Prophet calling Harry the most beautiful young Wizard alive. Ron was definitely not going to waste any opportunity to tease his friend about that.

From the smirk on George's face, it was safe to say he wouldn't be the only Weasley bringing that up today.

He was glad his brothers were here with him, finally able to come and see his new place and then join the Order as a group. All of them. It didn't matter that Charlie was still limping and Percy looked like he was sleepwalking; they were all together and that was enough.

"This way. Yeah. Through that door over there." Ron gestured at the kitchen door. There was a lot he wanted to show his brothers, who were already looking around in awe, but with the good Weasley tradition, it was best to start with the kitchen.

Even if that meant glares from Eppy.

Bill rushed to grab a chair and then held it for Charlie who lowered himself into it with a sigh. He made certain his brother was comfortable with his leg elevated on another chair.

"Stop fussing, Bill." It was a familiar sentence from Charlie, said without any real heat.

"I wouldn't have to fuss if you took better care of yourself!" The admonition came immediately, accompanied by more fussing.

Sighing, Charlie allowed Bill to tuck the pillow he'd transfigured under his hurt leg. His expression said more than words, though.

"Besides, you need to stop over exerting yourself. It'll be a while until you can safely use a Portkey or Apparate." It sounded like Bill had said that more than once these past few days. "You know what the mediwizard said."

The smile on Charlie's face was slightly self-mocking. "I'm not planning on going back any time soon."

He wasn't going to allow the remaining curses to keep him away from the fights. Like all the Weasley brothers, he wouldn't rest until they'd rid their world of both Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy.

Harry froze at the kitchen door as he heard the words, unable to control his expression for a moment.

He could understand well why Charlie wanted to stay, but a part of him wished he'd return to Romania. It would be far less dangerous to work with the dragons than it was to face the Death
"Harry!" Ron was the first one to see Harry stand at the doorway. "Hope you don't mind us all coming here for lunch."

Shaking his head and stepping full into the kitchen, Harry said, "Of course not." He turned to look at Charlie. "Good to see you up and about. How's the leg?"

His innocent words caused Charlie to roll his eyes as the other Weasley brothers didn't even bother to hide their smirks. "It's still stiff and striped."

Even Harry got the reference. "I've heard that happens sometimes."

"Well, at least it doesn't change shape," George said with his eternal optimism. "Would be bloody awkward if it did."

Ignoring the muffled laughter his brother's words produced, Bill nodded. "The rest of the curses were fairly easy to break, but those two are nearly impossible."

Harry remembered the days Bill had fought to keep his brother alive. 'Fairly easy'? He didn't really want to know just how hard it would be to break a difficult curse then.

Realizing that the mood was swinging back to morose, Bill added, "Won't be easy for you to find a girlfriend any time soon." He poked Charlie in the ribs while saying that, making it sure it really was taken as a joke.

Charlie laughed with the others, knowing that he wouldn't be able to escape bad jokes about various magical venereal diseases if his leg stayed like that. "Shut up."

For a moment, the room was filled with the sound of mirth.

"Seriously, though, we should be able to do something about the stiffness later on." Pulling a chair out for himself, Bill sat down. "And maybe in time the color will fade and you..."

His sentence was cut off as he saw a blond man walk into the kitchen carrying an empty teacup and keeping his attention on the Daily Prophet he was holding.

Percy let out a faint snarl, the sound reverberating in the room louder than any yell. Then he blinked and seemed to sink back into the numbness.

The other Weasley brothers didn't seem to have his control.

"Malfoy!" Bill hissed between his teeth, his hand going to his wand so quickly the motion was almost impossible to see. One moment he was staring at the Slytherin, the next he was pointing at him with his wand.

"No!" Harry stepped between the wand and Draco.

"Bill, don't!" Grabbing his brother's arm, Ron had to wonder if he had completely lost his mind. "Don't."

"That... Is a Malfoy." It sounded like Bill was using the word to describe everything vile in the world. "What the hell is he doing here?"

Folding the Prophet awkwardly while still holding the cup in his other hand, Draco stared at the angry redheads. "I live here."
The very calm words made Harry glance over his shoulder. He didn't know if the flippant words were genuine, or a way to hide something, but the overly calm way Draco put his teacup down on the table was telling.

"Ronald..." Bill's tone reminded them all of Molly Weasley. "There'd better be a very good explanation for this."

Ron looked from Bill to George, wincing at the lack of rage in his eyes and then turned his pleading gaze to Harry.

There would be a full argument in seconds. Harry wasn't going to wait for that. "This is my house, and I decided to give Draco a home here."

All the Weasley brothers turned to stare at him, Ron with gratitude in his eyes, Bill, Charlie and George looking stunned. There was no change in Percy's expression; he looked as distant as usual, only his gaze revealing the fire burning inside of him.

"Why?"

That was a very good question indeed. Harry wasn't sure if any of the reasons he could give would make any sense. He decided to go with the most painless one. "Because he's a member of the Order and he needed a place to stay."

The Weasleys stared.

Ron coughed a little. "Well... You want some coffee or something before lunch?" Anything to break the icy silence and distract his brothers.

"Sure." Even though he didn't really want to change the subject -- how on earth could Ron live with a Malfoy in the house? -- Bill nodded. This was not the time for an argument. But he did lean closer to his little brother and muttered, "Does mum know?"

"Yeah. She knows." Muttering it quietly, Ron refused to look at Harry. They both knew why Molly Weasley had visited here just once, and was not likely to visit again.

Ron went to putter with the kettle, hoping that Malfoy had enough sense to get out and stay somewhere else. The gradual lessening of tension told him that the Slytherin had indeed left, leaving just the Weasleys and Harry there to enjoy their cup of tea before lunch.

Maybe now they could just sit in peace.

Even as Ron poured the steaming water into the pot, smiling at the idea of just relaxing with his brothers and his best friend, the sounds coming from the front hall destroyed his hope for peace.

"It actually said beautiful in the article?" Remus Lupin sounded incredulous. "Unbelievable."

A sound of raspy laughter followed his comment.

Harry had only a moment to realize that things would probably go from very bad to a total disaster in only a matter of seconds before the door was pushed open.

"It actually said beautiful in the article?" Remus Lupin sounded incredulous. "Unbelievable."

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Harry had only a moment to realize that things would probably go from very bad to a total disaster in only a matter of seconds before the door was pushed open.

Sirius was laughing out loud as he stepped into the kitchen. Seeing the small crowd of redheaded men, he froze, making Remus stumble into him.

There was a slightly stunned silence in the room broken surprisingly by Percy. He stood up, hand
moving to reach for his wand and said, "Sirius Black." He sounded like he hadn't spoken in weeks, his voice dry.

"No!" Both Harry and Remus stepped forward, shielding Sirius with their bodies.

Harry had to wonder just how many times he could stand in front of a drawn wand today before he got hexed. He wasn't really interested in finding out by experience.

"It's all right, Percy." Ron looked at his brother. "He's one of us." He could barely curb all the other words that were trying to claw their way out.

It was as if the lights were turned out again. Percy didn't say anything; he simply sat back down, staring straight ahead like he had been previously with his face blank, as if he didn't really care about anything going on around him.

Bill winced with pain as he saw his brother turn back into the almost lifeless automaton, but most of his attention was still focused on the bearded man on the other side of the room. "Sirius Black?" What was a known criminal doing here? He could remember how people had been looking for this man, both five years ago and back when he had betrayed... "Harry? Are you insane?"

He was certain now that something was indeed wrong in this house. Harry chose to spend time with the man who had essentially murdered his family? It wasn't simply strange like Malfoy's presence here, but sick and twisted.

"No." Harry didn't move. He didn't want anyone to start a new war in his kitchen. "Sirius is a member of the Order. Has been one since even before I was born. He never killed or betrayed anyone, especially not my family."

Reaching out with his hand, Ron patted Bill's arm in a familiar gesture of seeking attention. "He's right, you know. Sirius is a good guy. Harry's godfather and all."

"Really?" Bill's tone didn't sound at all convinced.

"Yeah." Harry nodded. Fortunately there was enough time before the evening's meeting to actually explain this. Most of the Order already knew about Sirius, especially those who had been in Hogwarts after McGonagall's return from the Malfoy Mansion, but apparently no one had told the Weasleys. He didn't blame Ron for not telling his brothers. They'd all had too much on their mind. He should have known this would happen. People coming to Hogsmeade from all around the country -- or from Egypt and Romania -- would need to hear all the facts before he brought Sirius into their meetings.

Near the doorway, Sirius was cringing a little, hating the moments like this. He didn't relish in being the center of attention, especially when it was suspicion and barely concealed anger that was aimed at him.

"It will be all right, Padfoot."

A familiar touch on his shoulder made him relax slightly. "If you say so." He would probably believe most things Remus told him, even if he said the sky had just turned green.

He didn't move away from the doorway, needing to have that escape route nearby if things went bad. It looked like everything would be all right, with Harry explaining the situation to the older Weasleys, but you never knew.
Especially with that one young man staring at him with his eyes round. He shivered a little. Would there ever be a time when he wasn't feared or hated? Merlin, he hoped so. Maybe when the war was finally over, he would be able to walk in their world a free man, not forced to assume Snuffles' form every time there were outsiders around.

Harry could see that both Bill and Charlie had a hard time believing in what he was telling them, but when he finished his story, they seemed less tense.

"So you're saying that it was Peter Pettigrew who betrayed your parents?" It actually made sense to Bill. He'd only been a first year when Harry's father had been in Hogwarts, but he could still remember how the Quidditch captain had always been trailed by admirers, including Pettigrew. It wasn't as far fetched as he'd first thought.

"Yes." As always when he thought about the rat, a shiver of rage went through Harry. "It was."

Seeing Ron's pleading look, he left it at that. Maybe it was best if the Weasleys never found out they'd lived with the traitor for twelve years.

After a moment of hesitation, Bill nodded and then took a step towards the door, his hand held out.

"Bill Weasley."

Harry beamed as Sirius grabbed the offered hand and then moved away from the doorway to let Remus properly in as well. It was good to see that his friends and his family could get along. With his bad leg, Charlie remained sitting, but he did offer a smile and warm greetings to both Sirius and Remus.

"George." Smiling a bit sadly at the lone twin, Remus touched his shoulder gently. He knew he didn't have to remind the young man of who he was, he'd issued him and his brother enough detention during his year as a teacher at Hogwarts to be truly a memorable figure in his life. Most of the times he'd had difficulty in not laughing at the duo's insane pranks, but somehow he'd managed to be a perfect adult.

Ignoring the touch, George kept staring at Sirius with his mouth hanging slightly open. His eyes were wide, as if he was in shock.

The expression made Bill's stomach clench. It reminded him of the first hours after the attack, when George had sat in the corner, rocking himself back and forth, muttering to himself. "George? What is it?"

Very slowly, George got to his feet. He didn't take his gaze off Sirius. "You..."

Harry didn't think George sounded angry, but he still hastened to say, "It's all right, he really is a good guy."

It was as if his words didn't even register. George simply stared at Sirius. Then he asked, "Padfoot?"

Looking completely baffled, Sirius nodded. "It's a nickname my friends gave me when I was still young." Why was that affecting George Weasley like that? As if it really meant something to him.

A wide grin spread to George's lips, making him look completely ridiculous. "You're Padfoot? As in Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail and Prongs?" Seeing the utter shock of recognition on Sirius Black's face, he let out a whoop of joy. "I can't believe this! I'm standing here with Padfoot!"

Harry finally realized what this was all about. "Yeah, and I think I should tell you that he's not the
only Marauder here."

"What? Really? Who?" Looking around frantically, George finally settled into staring at Lupin. "You? You were... Really?"

"Yes, really." Remus knew that George would make the connection sooner or later. "My friends called me Moony." He didn't think he needed to tell anyone why. His lycanthropy was a widely known fact inside the Order by now.

George repeated that as if it was a prayer. "Moony. Moony and Padfoot." He shook his head in amazement. "To think I'm finally meeting you. My biggest idols."

No wonder professor Lupin had known exactly where to look for them when they'd done their perfectly executed pranks. The man had been a master of mischief in his own time in Hogwarts.

For a moment he looked like he was going to fall on his face and declare that he was not worthy. Then he got a grip over his awe and simply stood there with a goofy smile on his face.

The astonished look didn't disappear as Eppy appeared to prepare lunch or when they all gathered around the dining room table to eat. George barely even glared at Malfoy who had joined them for lunch; he was too busy staring at his idols.

It was the one thing that could carry them all through the tension and barely veiled anger. Harry was glad they all had the good sense not to talk about their living arrangements again, knowing the fragile truce could end the very moment someone voiced Draco's name again.

Walking to their Headquarters as a part of a larger group was a relief, people yelling greetings and staring at them all meant that no one was targeting just him. Being the one everyone stared at was familiar already, but it was just too much today.

Fortunately the walk wasn't a long one, but even as they entered the Headquarters, Harry could feel people staring. It almost made him wish he was still wearing his old school robes even though they were too small and kind of shabby.

There were a few comments said by people who could obviously not read the face of their big hero, but the comments died very quickly after Harry's first real angry glare. After that, there were simply more staring and whispers, people all seeming to think that the Daily Prophet had been right indeed.

Marching to the smaller meeting room, Harry just wanted everyone to get over it as soon as possible. His looks couldn't be that big a thing, not with more important issues waiting for everyone's attention.

He nodded at the professors, managing a small smile and a few words as he spotted McGonagall and then turned to face the dark figure standing next to her.

There was an evil glint in Snape's eyes as he looked up and down Harry's body. His lips twitched slightly.

"Don't!" Harry warned, holding his hand up. "Just... don't."

"Wouldn't even dream of saying anything," muttered Snape, amusement now clear in his voice.

The way he said it did sort of make it funny, not that Harry would admit that to anyone. "Good." He turned around before Snape could see his faint smile and headed towards the head of the table where Dumbledore was once again gesturing for him.
It was time for business.

People were already gathering around the table, taking seats next to those they were most familiar with and talking with hushed tones. The fact that it was a smaller, more selected crowd today seemed to be enough to raise the excitement level high, and everyone was waiting for the room to fill so that the meeting could begin.

Remus and Snuffles were the last ones to enter, Remus turning to close the door firmly behind him before walking to the two empty seats left by Harry's side.

Seeing that almost everyone in the room already knew about Sirius, Harry gestured at the dog, who then promptly shifted his shape back into a human. The resulting panic in some of the young people was fairly predictable.

It took both Harry and Dumbledore a few minutes to convince everyone of Sirius' innocence, then people calmed down again, sitting there and waiting eagerly to see what would happen next.

As much of a relief as that was, Harry couldn't help feeling slightly alarmed. The so-called evidence against Sirius had once convinced everyone of his guilt, and now all it took was a few words from him to make everyone relax. He didn't want to even imagine what else he could make people do, how some would obey him without questions even if he suggested something pointless and dangerous.

The mere thought was more than just frightening, it was terrifying.

People already knew about the smuggling operation, but after Remus finished with his latest report, the mood seemed to plunge. It was clear that the Death Eaters were getting ready to start whatever they had planned, and no one had a clear view on what it would be.

"Even though we do have a pretty good idea what it's going to be like," Arabella Figg said without bothering to moderate her voice.

That brought nods from all across the room, but most of the younger people still looked unsure.

"Their method is simple. They attack the houses and leave no survivors. It doesn't matter if they are Wizards or Muggles." Figg's brief glance at the Weasleys who were all sitting together near Harry was enough to emphasize her words.

No one said anything to that.

"It seems the history will be repeating itself." Muttering the words quietly to Charlie, Bill wasn't prepared to see Dumbledore's gaze focus on him.

"You're right." The Headmaster nodded, not at all surprised that those who had been mere children during the previous war could still remember it so vividly. All the deaths had probably played in their nightmares for years.

The younger members of the Order sat in silence as the older people started to reminisc out loud.

Harry had heard this all before, but it was clear to him that these tales came as a surprise to most of his yearmates. Especially those with Muggle ancestry were stunned, but even the pureblooded wizards and witches seemed shocked by what they heard.

It made sense. The people who had survived the attacks had probably done their best to forget all about the whole thing. Still, they had not been able to bury the events forever; the hesitant recounts
of things that had happened almost two decades ago were as detailed as if they had all happened yesterday.

He was glad he wasn't the one having to spell this out again. Sometimes he felt like he'd repeated telling about the horrors so many times he couldn't really squeeze another word out of his throat.

This wasn't warning or speculation, these stories were true.

Voldemort's strategy seemed to be based on fear. Terrorizing people was always very effective, and with his followers, he was able to control most of the wizarding world. It had been like that during his first reign, and from the reports it was clear it would be like that again.

"There was never any clear proof of who actually orchestrated all the killings." Gaze out of focus, Arabella Figg stared into the distance, as if she was seeing into the past. "Everything was always marked by the Morsmordre and the blame went to Voldemort."

Most of the others nodded, Fletcher adding, "Him and the Death Eaters. Back then, no one dared to name anyone. It was simply not done."

The outcome of such an action or even too many loud musings would have been ridicule or a very suspicious freak accident that got you and your whole family killed. There had been plenty of those, culminating in what happened in Godric's Hollow.

"Even though no one said it out loud, that doesn't mean we don't all know who was to blame." Sirius had never wanted to keep quiet about this, not even back when he'd swallowed the words to protect his friend and his family. Now that he was finally allowed to say it out loud, he hesitated. Not because of being afraid, but because he knew that he was about to hurt someone who had quite recently saved Harry's life.

People looked at him, expecting him to continue.

Bill Weasley looked from Sirius to Draco Malfoy. "Voldemort's right hand. Lucius Malfoy." He remembered how the Death Eater who had killed Fred had laughed and then pushed down his hood to reveal a very recognizable mane of hair as if scoring a point.

There was an uncomfortable silence as everyone tried very hard not to look at the blond young man at the end of the table.

Draco was staring at Harry, his eyes clouded over. He knew they all knew the truth already. "Yes." Why would he even try to hide that awful fact? Just because it was his father?

Most of the older members of the Order flinched at the softly spoken word. McGonagall lowered her gaze, not wanting the children to see how much that hurt her. A moment later when she raised her gaze again, she looked as calm as always.

It was almost as if everyone was holding their breath.

"My father has always believed in his cause. Not only in Voldemort, but in power. That is his real cause, and because of that, he will not be swayed." Memories of long lectures at dinner table echoed in Draco's mind. Not only of the glory of the Dark Lord, but of power and how nothing else in the world meant a thing. He kept his gaze focused on Harry as if he was speaking to him and no one else really existed here. "If you encounter him..."

Seeing Fletcher open his mouth as to interrupt Draco, Harry grabbed the older man's arm and shook his head. They had to let him finish what he was about to say.
This was no game and Draco didn't sound like he was trying his best to either impress or shock everyone. Harry wondered if he'd ever seen the Slytherin so real before, aside from the glimpses he'd got when Griphook's lantern had illuminated the absolute astonishment on Draco's face.

Draco swallowed, hating the way his voice was almost cracking. "Don't think he'll hesitate for a moment. He will hex you. If he's in a hurry, he will kill you immediately. If not, you'll come to wish he had. He will show no mercy."

He was glad he managed to say that out loud, shutting his mouth and keeping the nausea down with all his control. Not looking at anyone because there were so many people here who already knew exactly what his father would do to those he saw as enemies.

Harry nodded. "Yes, I know."

There were other muttering agreements, people letting out the words for the first time.

Snape sat back and watched people as they talked about the Death Eaters, surprised by the strange detachment he could summon even as they talked about things he knew all too well from his own past.

He didn't know why no one had asked him about his former Master and the group he once belonged to. Sometimes it seemed like people almost forgot all about his presence in this crowd. It made no sense, for he had more knowledge about his former brothers than most people in the world. Yes, young Malfoy did know his father, but his view was narrower and more limited than his.

Maybe it was fortunate that no one had asked for his knowledge. Some of the sideway looks people threw at him made him wonder if it was intentional; as if the reality of what he'd once done was too hard to bear. The intentional silence was probably a good thing, keeping everyone from hexing him.

The meeting was paused after an hour or so, and the windows and doors to the balcony were opened to let some fresh air inside. Most of the people escaped the intense mood to the vast hallways, needing some time alone and claiming their own space by rushing to the loo or simply just walking away.

Snape kept his eyes on Draco Malfoy as the boy walked out through the open glass doors to the balcony, squinting his eyes as he saw Ron Weasley and Harry trail after him.

Knowing it was probably futile; he still hoped that the Gryffindors had enough sense not to push young Malfoy right now.

"Er..." Ron let out a questioning sound as he stepped onto the balcony.

He hadn't really expected Malfoy to acknowledge his presence, so it wasn't a big surprise when he just stood there and stared into the distance.

This was stupid, but he'd followed Harry here and then when some witch had grabbed his friend's sleeve right at the door, he'd just walked on and now found himself alone with Malfoy. He hadn't meant to come here; in fact this was the last place he should be right now, with his brothers and Hermione somewhere in the big meeting hall.

And yet he couldn't just leave.

He knew it had to be hell for Malfoy to be here, and although he refused to feel sorry for the bastard, he couldn't help being drawn to him. There should be no confusion, only a happy buzz after spending a day with his brothers, but Malfoy was always bugging him, his presence somehow too
irritating at the edge of his awareness even when he did nothing.

"Are you..." Funny how the words almost refused to come out after all. Ron didn't want to care. But he couldn't help himself. "Are you okay?"

Draco didn't look up. "I'm fine, Weasley." The cold tone of his voice hid all real emotions.

As always, it made Ron bristle. Why the hell was the git like this? Why couldn't he just say what he meant instead of playing stupid games that would end up hurting everyone? Maybe if Malfoy didn't play these games, just once, he might actually be able to deal with not loathing him anymore. "Of course you are."

It seemed to be the absolutely wrong thing to say.

Turning around slowly, Draco stared at Weasley. He hadn't felt like this for a long time. All the anger and the pain they'd once released in frantic shagging was now burning bright inside him. "You damned..."

He couldn't think of anything to say. The rage flaring through his mind was already diminishing, leaving him hollow.

"Go ahead, Malfoy. Tell me what a loser I am again." Almost horrified by his own words, Ron tried to stop them and couldn't. "I'm not stopping you."

Draco shook his head. "This isn't about you. Don't you see? Not everything's about you." A hint of the anger still showed in his voice. "You think you have the monopoly on pain and loss? I know what you lost and I'm sorry for that, but do you have any idea of what I lost? My family, my friends, my world. Everything I ever had."

The money in Gringotts didn't really matter. What he'd lost was so much more than what he'd managed to hold onto.

"Your world was crap!" Ron had never really known how much it hurt to hate himself like this. He'd thought he knew all about self-loathing when he'd pushed Malfoy on the floor and ripped his robes off. This was worse, especially when seeing the pain his words induced in Malfoy just made him snarl, "And your father is a monster."

"I know." Draco nodded. He didn't want to fight about this anymore. "But he's still my father."

Ron couldn't think of anything to say to that. If only Malfoy had said something angry and stupid! Then he could have fought back.

He hated Malfoy, always had. So why did he feel like he had just kicked a baby crup?

Without saying anything, he turned around and walked back inside. He walked straight into Harry and muttered an apology before rushing back to the conference table. Staying to talk with his friend felt like too much right now, and he didn't want to look into Harry's eyes and see how he didn't need his apologies.

Unlike someone else did.

Seeing that at least two redheads were already following Ron, Harry sighed. He was torn by watching his friends suffer, unable to decide what to do. Ron had been there for him from the beginning, but right now, he wasn't the one all alone.
He made enough noise walking to the balcony so that Draco knew he wasn't alone anymore.

Harry didn't say anything, just leaned against the doorway. He could hear the hushed talking coming from the war room, but ignored it. McGonagall and Dumbledore would have to deal with whatever was going on there. This was important.

"You know..." Draco didn't even look up to acknowledge Harry's presence, but he knew he was there. "When I was six, my father bought me a broom. I'd dreamed of getting one for ages, but he'd told me I was too young. But then one day, he came home with a brand new Twigger. Custom made for me. It even had my name on it."

That was how his whole life had been; custom made things, only the best for the heir of Malfoy. He'd never had to wait or want for anything. Except for that first broom.

"I wanted to learn how to fly immediately, but my father said my lessons would start the next day. There'd be a former Quidditch coach coming to teach me. I was so disappointed. Didn't say anything of course. You didn't really talk back to him. But he could see I really wanted to try it immediately. Somehow he could see that, and he went to grab his own broom and gave me a lesson right there and then. Nothing great. Just how to kick off and fly around the yard. I don't think my feet got two feet off the ground, but I was flying."

At the moment, Harry couldn't say anything even if he wanted to. He had no such memories of his father. Or of anyone. The only lessons he'd ever been taught back at Privet Drive had been lessons in humiliation and hard work.

Draco sighed, looking up. "He's a cold blooded killer. Doesn't care anything, about anyone. I know. He would have let me die back at school, before we went into hiding." A crooked smile made him look older than he was. "I just wish I couldn't remember... Other things as well."

No platitudes would work here; Harry knew he could never relate to Draco's feelings. His own memories of his parents came from the nightmarish vision he got every time he encountered a Dementor and from the stories Sirius and Remus told him. They were colored by decades and deep inside he knew that they couldn't all be real.

He chose to believe in them simply because this way he wouldn't have to ruin yet another thing in his life. His mother had been a wise and loving woman and his father had been corageous and strong and that would be enough.

Having to face the reality of a parent who was less than perfect would be worse than anything. Most children saw their parents as people when they grew up themselves, but they usually didn't have to face a monster. Harry could deal with a father who had been a part of silly and even somewhat cruel pranks in his youth, but how could anyone deal with having a father like Lucius Malfoy?

"Merlin..." Draco sighed, shuddering as if he was shaking off some invisible burden. "I guess I can be pretty melodramatic when the occasion calls for it."

Harry smiled a little, recognizing the way Draco brushed off the awkwardness as a joke. "I know."

They exchanged a knowing look.

"Come on then." Harry's voice was quiet. "Let's go back inside." It wasn't even cold out here, but the sun was setting and suddenly the atmosphere was feeling too morose even with the half hearted joking.

Draco nodded. He was grateful Harry wasn't wasting his breath for useless words of consolation or
trying to talk about this seriously. "Sure."

They didn't talk as they walked back into the room, Harry casting a warning glare at Ron as the Weasleys reappeared a few moments later. To his surprise, Ron seemed slightly apologetic.

It was better than nothing.

"Mr. Malfoy."

Hearing the familiar voice made Harry freeze, and he could almost feel the tension in Draco as they both turned to face professor McGonagall who had somehow managed to sneak right next to them. Walking quietly like a cat.

"Professor," Draco muttered uncomfortably. Of all the people in this room, she was the last he wanted to face right now. He'd take Harry's gruff and almost painful friendliness or Weasley's slurs over the open reservation and a hint of fear any time. "Excuse me, I..."

He moved slowly, as if not to startle anyone, careful not to touch her even accidentally. He had to get out of here, right now, and collect his thoughts somewhere in private.

A very soft touch on his arm stopped his exit, making him stand still. Glancing down at the hand resting lightly on his sleeve, all he could think of was the impossibility of such a gesture, for the hand was steady.

Maybe it was he who was trembling.

Looking up, he could see Minerva McGonagall look him straight in the eyes, her gaze clear and unveiled. He could only blink, unable to move as if her touch was grounding him, freezing him in place.

"You are not your father, Mr. Malfoy. Nor are you responsible for his actions." McGonagall's gaze flickered to Ron and Harry who were standing right behind the Slytherin boy, both practically gawking.

Draco swallowed. He knew that, and definitely didn't hold himself responsible for the deaths and...

other things his father might have done. So why did the professor's soft words hit him even worse than Weasley's childish tantrum?

"I believe that anyone relating a man of your fortitude and character with those following Voldemort would be sorely mistaken." With that, McGonagall withdrew her hand, but didn't move away.

A genuine smile spread to Draco's lips and he did nothing to suppress it. He could read the professor all too well, and although there was nothing but honesty in her words, she was obviously using them not only to assure him but also to send a very clear message to her Gryffindors.

Nodding his head in a strange half bow that held nothing but the deepest respect he could show another pureblood who knew the power of a careful phrasing, Draco muttered, "Thank you, Madam."

"Mr. Malfoy." Smiling faintly at the boy, McGonagall cast an amused glance at both Ron and Harry who were still gawking, and walked away.

Managing to actually close his mouth before Draco turned to look at him, Harry said quietly, "You do know she's right. Don't you?" His question was clearly said to Draco, but the way he nudged at Ron spoke volumes.
"Of course." The very familiar symbolism behind McGonagall's words still clear in Draco's mind made him simply raise his eyebrow.

Harry smiled at him; glad to see there was no trace of cringing left in his new friend. There were lots of things he could use to describe Draco Malfoy, but first and foremost he was a realist. He wished he could somehow say that to Ron as well, to step above whatever baggage they both carried and just focus on the reality of their life, say that yes, Snape was a greasy git and Draco wasn't a monster.

Looking at Ron, who was staring at his shoes with a strange expression on his face, Harry decided that he couldn't really say anything.

There were things you had to figure out for yourself.

"We should probably continue now," Dumbledore's voice came from the other side of the room.

For the first time in weeks, Harry's smile at the Headmaster wasn't strained. He knew that this meeting was mostly for show, a way to make people feel more in charge and to bring the Weasley brothers and Sirius in the middle of this, but they had said big things out loud today and for once, Dumbledore wasn't pushing him to take the lead.

Taking his seat again, he gestured for Draco to come and sit next to him. Again, there was an amused knowing look in Draco's eyes, telling him he knew exactly what he was doing and why.

As the meeting continued, Harry had to wonder if Draco was finally finding his own place, finished with the cringing and overwhelming despair as well as the haughty show of being a total bastard. It would be actually intriguing to find out just who Draco Malfoy really was.

He had to wonder if his new friend even knew it himself.

Harry listened to the conversation that sprouted from Flitwick's hesitant comment about the Ministry absent-mindedly, trying to look like he was actually paying attention. He was tired and wanted to go to bed, but knew the day wasn't over yet. There were lots of things to do before he could crawl into his bed and huggle the covers close pretending they were Snape.

They discussed long into the evening, not only being brutally honest about the past but revealing more plans about the future as well. Harry didn't know just exactly which of their plans would be needed; if Voldemort would indeed not try attacking them first, they would have to discard lots of their old strategies and start thinking of new ones, fast.

He did know defense training would go on as planned. Madam Pomfrey would continue stocking healing potions while Snape brewed them. Sirius and Remus would leave tomorrow for a short spying trip.

Harry refused to think about the danger that put people in. There were so many things that could go wrong, and not only with those who went away. Who knew where the Dementors stayed and they had no idea what Voldemort was going to do with them. Harry had to admit that he wasn't even sure if the wards they had around Hogwarts and Hogsmeade would keep them away.

Maybe there really was no place they were safe.

A grim smile flickered on his lips as he said goodbye to everyone and then walked home with the small crowd of friends and family. Of course there was no place they were safe! It was the one thing he'd accepted a long time ago, because there really was no alternative.

He'd either face the reality or he could just as well walk into the cupboard under the stairs and hide.
there like a frightened child.

Seeing that Ron and Sirius were heading towards the kitchen for a late snack, he shook his head and muttered his excuses. He wasn't exactly tired, but there was such weariness inside he didn't think his words of needing a rest were exactly a lie.

The day had been too long with too many things and emotions to go through.

Harry walked up the stairs, heading straight to the bathroom. Taking care of the business, he stood at the sink for a while and then washed his face, not looking at his reflection.

Evening routines; washing his face, brushing his teeth and then the short walk to his room where he should probably change the routine a bit and hang his new robes properly instead of just tossing them on a chair. A smile touched his face, genuine mirth bubbling inside as he wondered what people would say if he appeared in public in crumpled robes.

That would probably just add rakishness to his new sexy look.

Harry shut the door behind him and stopped as he felt something wrong. The very familiar crawling feeling on his skin made him pull out his wand without a thought, and he scanned his room to find out what had alerted him.

Everything was as he'd left it earlier today. The quilt on his bed was lopsided and there was a familiar sock on the floor by the window. A pile of books on the nightstand.

The wardrobe door was slightly ajar.

Tensing even more, Harry pointed his wand at the wardrobe and muttered a charm. When he could feel that there was no one hiding in the wardrobe, he frowned and then went to check it for himself.

He shook his head. Nothing felt wrong about the wardrobe; it was just the way it always was, with the addition of new spiffy clothes.

It was a bit odd. No one ever came to his room without asking first, but he could have sworn he'd closed the wardrobe door this morning before going downstairs for breakfast.

Shrugging, he pushed the door closed. So maybe he was a bigger slob than he wanted to think, or maybe Ron had needed something to borrow from him. Wouldn't be the first time.

He'd have to ask tomorrow.

Right now, he was just going to go into bed and try to fall asleep as quickly as possible. Already forgetting his plans about hanging his robes, he stripped down to his boxers, shoving all his clothes on the chair and crawled between sheets.

Downstairs, Ron was trying to decide whether or not he wanted some tea. It would be nice to drink something hot, even though his bladder would probably wake him up before dawn if he did.

He wasn't really thirsty, nor was he tired. He didn't want to give a name to what he was feeling right now, knowing very well where that would lead.

Damn the waiting and the endless meetings! He wasn't keen on squabbling with any of the people he lived with either. It made him feel jittery and out of place.

Slamming the kitchen door shut, he stormed to the stairs, deciding against tea after all. Too bad they
had finished with that Firewhiskey. Becoming a heavy drinker like Uncle Bilius had a few years before the whole thing with the Grim was beginning to look better and better.

At least then he could blame his insanity on the drink and not on the fact that he was definitely losing his marbles.

Ron felt his feet become heavier as he climbed the stairs. He didn't want to pay attention to the flutters in his stomach. It wasn't important.

Reaching the hallway upstairs, he stood there for a moment, hoping that something would happen; that Hermione would call for him downstairs, that Harry would stumble into him. Anything to distract him.

When there was only the silence, Ron sighed and then raised his gaze from the hardwood floor. Seeing Malfoy stand at his open doorway didn't surprise him.

He didn't say anything, simply stared at the Slytherin. Malfoy's expression was bland, as if he was determined not to show any thoughts or emotions. Then with a slow curl of his lips, Malfoy smiled a little and stepped away from the doorway into his room.

Leaving the door open.

Ron knew that if he followed Malfoy, they would end up in bed together. It was as inevitable as the sunrise tomorrow. He didn't want to make this decision, knowing he'd be damned if he shagged the git now, for this would not be the last time. Thinking with his prick? Merlin, he wasn't thinking at all!

Stupid, addictive bastard! He shouldn't be so damn good in bed. The thought made Ron almost groan. Of course he had no idea how good Malfoy was in bed, but he did know he was brilliant on both the floor and the kitchen table.

He couldn't resist finding out.

Without a word, he walked into Malfoy's bedroom, locking the door firmly behind him.

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Part 30

Going everywhere with an escort was kind of weird, but at least Harry's friends made it seem more like they were just there for him like always and not acting on bodyguard duty.

The short walk to Hogwarts didn't necessitate a huge crowd of followers and others eager to protect him. With Hermione by his side, he could almost imagine they'd stepped back a few years, just two students back on their way to school.

Almost.

Smiling, Harry stepped back to the Great Hall, leaning against the wall and waiting for Hermione come from her meeting with McGonagall. His own talks with Dumbledore had been brief, just a few minutes of planning and then he'd been free to go to the dungeons for a moment.

Of course such a short visit was agonizing as well as a relief from the hectic routine.

He knew he couldn't stay, there were too many things to do and people see back at Hogsmeade, but it would have been a perfect day for a bit of relaxation. With Sirius and Remus away, it would have been so easy to just walk home tomorrow morning and not face barely hidden anger and confusion.
With lunchtime nearly approaching, staying wasn't an option. The problem with Dementors and the aftermath of Terry Boot's betrayal were still making everyone paranoid with worry, not to mention the near hysterics Harry's own bruises and the slight limping had brought forth after everyone had got over the fact that yes, he really was good looking in his new robes. He was needed in Hogsmeade and returning here in the evening just to be with Snape would be selfish and inconvenient to those who were so dedicated to keeping him safe.

Nevertheless, for a brief moment he almost considered it worth the fuss.

Watching Hermione walk down the stairs, he resigned himself to spending the night alone once again; hoping Ron and Draco wouldn't keep him awake half the night with their fighting or shagging. Or that strange mixture of both.

"Are you ready?" Hermione walked towards Harry with a slightly amused expression on her face. "We should be going back to Hogsmeade."

Harry grinned at that. "We've been away for two hours, Hermione. Do you honestly think they can't manage for such a short time on their own?" With all the training going on everyone should be busy and not causing trouble.

The way Hermione looked at him indicated that she wasn't so sure. "We are talking about the same people who sneaked Canary Custard in the mess hall last week."

"Good point."

"Yeah." Not to mention Ron and Malfoy who would undoubtedly bicker about something pointless if they were left alone in public. Harry muttered, "Let's go then."

Smoothing her hair away from her face, Hermione didn't seem any more enthusiastic about going back to Hogsmeade. "Duty calls! People who should never have passed DADA classes and Hufflepuffs who want to ask me out to dinner."

Harry blinked, looking at her sideways. "Huh? What dinner?"

"Oh, I never did tell you... A few weeks before the N.E.W.T.s, people started asking me for tutoring sessions, exchanging knowledge for chocolate. Some of them are still doing that, except it's dinner invitations instead of chocolates now." Hermione chose to interpret the invitations as her still having Head Girl stamped on her forehead and not as some silly prank or a bet.

"Dinner invitations?" Harry mused out loud as if the thought had never occurred to him before. "Really?"

Hermione nodded.

Noticing that Harry wasn't making a move to actually leave, she asked, "What is it?" The strange look on his face was making her feel uncomfortable.

Harry shook his head slowly, uncertain of his idea. "I was just wondering if I should ask someone over for dinner myself."

He didn't have to say who; they both knew he was talking about Snape.

It was still strange for Hermione to think about Harry really seeing Snape since she'd never seen those two behave like they were close to each other. Whenever they interacted in their headquarters, both barely acted like friends, Snape rarely initiating any contact himself. Everything she knew about
their relationship came from the short and disgusted stories Ron had told her and the somewhat
dreamy looks on Harry's face when Snape was mentioned in a conversation.

That was probably why she flashed a toothy grin. "I think that's an excellent idea!"

Harry was definitely surprised by the enthusiasm. "You do?" For some reason he'd been expecting a
very Ron-like grimace. "I mean I was thinking about asking him over to our place." He doubted
Snape would want to go and have a quiet dinner with him at the Broomsticks.

"Yes, Harry, I did get that." Hermione rolled her eyes. "Now go. You should ask him right now,
before he can make any other plans for tonight."

The look on Harry's face was absolutely priceless.

"Go on. I'll wait for you here." She made a shooing motion towards the staircase leading to the
dungeons.

Harry wrapped his arm around Hermione's shoulders for a moment, the half-hug instinctive. "Thank
you!" Without other words, he hurried to the stairs.

Leaving Hermione standing there with an amused and yet wistful smile on her lips.

Down in the dungeons, Harry tried not to start worrying about the whole thing. He was going to ask,
and if Snape said no, it wouldn't be a big thing. He understood Snape's need for privacy and
everything. He wasn't really nervous.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his robe before touching the small snake.

"Back so soon?" Snape looked a little surprised to see Harry standing there. "Let me guess, you
decided to waste the whole day here after all." To his annoyance, he didn't sound half as irate as he'd
tried.

"No, actually I came to ask you if you'd like to come over to my place for dinner." The words
came out in a jumble, but Harry couldn't even be embarrassed by them.

He was too busy gawking at the openly astonished look on Snape's face.

Walking back to Hogsmeade had never felt as nice as it did today. Harry kept grinning at everyone
who passed him by, not minding the way Hermione seemed to find his exuberance amusing. It was
good to see her smiling again. He didn't even mind the work today, going through the meetings and
discussions with unprecedented fervor. He ignored the attention his relaxed demeanor gained and
focused on thinking about tonight.

He needed to check the pantry as soon as he got home to see what they could have for dinner. It
would have to be something special, or maybe not, Snape hated all the fuss. Better to just make
something simple.

He was definitely going to give Eppy a night off.

The day almost seemed to fly by, and sooner than he'd thought, he was padding through the living
room, his mind still occupied by happy thoughts.

"You seem happy." There was a grin on Ron's face. "What's the occasion?"

Harry stopped, shocked, and turned to look at Ron who was sprawling on the couch with a
Quidditch magazine held loosely on his hand. He had completely forgotten about little things like Ron living here too. "I... I'm just thinking about making us some dinner."

"You're cooking?" Ron sounded delighted as he jumped to his feet. "So this really is a special occasion!"

Harry nodded slowly. "Yeah it is... Snape's coming over for dinner."

The Quidditch magazine fell on the floor from Ron's nerveless hand. "And there goes my appetite," he muttered, ignoring the pained look on Harry's face. "Snape's coming for dinner?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" It came out without a thought. "No, wait, scratch that. You asked him for dinner? Here? Now?"

Harry just nodded. Right here and now, yes, because he was feeling lonely and this was the perfect opportunity and he missed Snape. He didn't think Ron wanted to hear him say those things, and wasn't even sure he wanted to say them. But he did want Snape over for dinner.

"Damn, Harry, I don't get it." Ron shivered and muttered a few words about the revolting greasy git. He didn't even try to mutter them quiet enough for Harry not to hear.

Staring at Ron, Harry swallowed all the heated words that threatened to escape. Finally he said quietly, "I don't want to talk about this with you."

"Yeah, I can live without that. Don't want to have nightmares." There was a smile on Ron's lips, but he sounded genuinely disgusted.

That made Harry snap. "Then shut up!" He saw the way his friend rolled his eyes. It made him feel another surge of hot rage. "I can deal with you being an utter moron with Draco, barely tolerating him one moment and then shagging him the next. That's your business. But you're not going to insult Snape again. Not while I'm close enough to hear it."

Ron's mouth fell open. He'd never seen Harry like this.

"You're my best friend. But I..." Harry closed his eyes, taking deep breaths. He was not about to explain about his feelings towards Snape. When he went on, his voice resonated deep and soft. "I know I'm needed here and Snape is needed in Hogwarts and I can live with that. But I really miss him and if I choose to invite him over for dinner, you'll just have to live with it. Or you can eat somewhere else."

With that, he walked to the kitchen, feeling sick to his stomach. He didn't want to drive Ron away, but the disgust his friend didn't even try to hide was too much.

He knew that all the people who knew about him and Snape were probably just waiting for him to come to his senses. Remus and Hermione never said anything about it, but he was sure they at least thought about it.

Being with Snape wasn't easy. Their schedules clashed and the short moments they could share in public were never enough to satisfy his need to be close to Snape, and with all the work and the attention turned on him, Hogwarts could have been continents away.

This was a unique opportunity and he wasn't going to waste it. He missed Snape more than he wanted to admit, refusing to dwell on it when there was nothing to do about the whole thing. Now
here was a chance to spend time with him, to introduce him to the place he lived in.

Ron would just have to deal with this. Hopefully he wouldn't leave completely, but to his horror Harry realized that right now, he couldn't find any strength to really worry about it.

He had dinner to make.

Eppy only huffed when he explained to her why he was busying himself in the kitchen, but her ears didn't look as droopy as usual. Harry didn't comment on that, but he had to wonder if the grumpy house elf had actually missed Snape as well.

It was a good thought. Maybe not everyone in his world hated Snape.

He concentrated on the cupboards, thinking about what he should make and wondering if Ron would go and eat out instead of staying here and eating with them. It would be better than open sulking or angry words and yet it would be so much worse than anything.

This was Ron's home as well and Harry didn't want to force anyone to leave. Not over something like this.

Sighing, he stared at the well-stocked cupboards, not sure he was up to making anything with the nausea building inside.

A moment later the door opened quietly and Ron sneaked in, looking sheepish. "Um... Can I help you with something? Like set the table or cut bread."

He wasn't going to try anything more adventurous than that, especially if there would be a dinner guest coming in. Not that the idea of accidentally poisoning Snape wasn't intriguing.

Harry had to blink a few times before he could look at his friend. "Sure. You can set the table."

Not saying anything about the relieved expression on Harry's face, Ron went to grab the plates. He hesitated for just a moment and then chose the better china; it was a peace offering, nothing more. Personally, he didn't care one way or the other.

The way Harry smiled at him made it worth the trouble.

He busied himself with the plates and silverware, grumbling from under his breath when he knew no one was listening.

Precisely five minutes to seven there was a knock on the front door.

Gazing at the closed door, Ron sighed. Of course Harry was still busy with the food. Since Hermione didn't seem to be in a hurry to answer the door -- with her room so close to it, she had to hear the knocking -- he crossed the hallway. He was glad he knew what to expect when he pushed the door open, otherwise seeing Snape standing there would have made him gibber in panic.

"Good evening, Mr. Weasley."

"Um... Good evening, sir." Ron couldn't even dream of calling Snape by his name. He gestured with his hand. "Come on in."

Stepping inside, Snape looked around. He noted a slight tingling sensation around him, a sign of newly set wards, and had to admit he was surprised the youngsters had actually remembered those.

Ron wondered what to do next. It didn't look like Snape was about to leave any outer clothing on the
rack. Not that it would surprise him if he did, for even during a nice day like this, he was once again covered in black from neck to toe.

"I took the liberty of bringing this." Without other explanations, Snape shoved a bottle at Ron. He was beginning to enjoy this. From the look on the boy's face, he could tell that he'd not been happy hearing the news about a dinner guest.

"Thank you." At least it came out without a stutter this time. Ron stared at the bottle of wine, glad that he now had something to do with his hands.

The silence stretched as they stood there. Snape didn't let the evil grin to spread to his lips, but his eyes did glint with malicious glee. When he'd accepted Harry's invitation, he hadn't realized how enjoyable this might be.

Ron was starting to sweat with panic. He'd been prepared to retaliate to any sarcastic and evil comment Snape made, but he wasn't saying anything. The man was just standing there, waiting for him to actually do something. He wished Harry were here, at least he'd know what to do.

Soft footsteps echoed down the stairs and both men turned to look at Draco Malfoy walking towards them with a slight smile on his face. "Professor Snape. Nice to see you again." The polite words sounded perfectly honest. He didn't go as far as to actually offer his hand to his former professor, but he did nod at him. Noticing the bottle Ron was holding as if fearing it was about to explode, he added, "Let's go into the living room, and I'll put the wine to breathe."

Gesturing towards the doorway leading to the living room, he took the bottle from Ron. He raised his eyebrow slightly at the label, appreciating the perfect choice in wine. Not overly expensive, but a decent vintage anyway; something that would probably go well with anything.

Snape wasn't at all surprised that young Malfoy had excellent manners. He'd probably been raised to host dinner parties at the Malfoy Mansion. This house was definitely not a mansion, but you couldn't guess that by his behavior right now.

The endless polite litany falling from Draco's lips accompanied them to the living room, making even Ron relax a little.

He wasn't sure how to behave. This was his home and he had no reason to actually fear Snape here or anywhere else really, but Snape was... Snape. You didn't just sit down and engage in small talk with him.

Except that was exactly what Malfoy was doing, his calm expression never wavering, asking polite questions about brewing. Brewing, for Merlin's sake!

A moment later Hermione appeared at the doorway. She had done something to her hair again, and was that a new frock? Ron couldn't really tell, but he was happy she was here; now he could continue sitting here and having a nice and quiet nervous breakdown without anyone noticing.

Cocking her head, Hermione offered her hand to Snape. "Good evening, professor." It only felt appropriate, considering the man had stood up as soon as he'd seen her.

"Good evening Miss. Granger." Grasping the offered hand briefly, Snape stood there, waiting.

Hermione could understand why Ron still looked so flustered. It was obvious Snape wasn't going to engage in pointless small talk. "Harry should be here any minute. He's still busy in the kitchen." At least that didn't sound completely foolish.
"I see." A faint smirk ghosted over Snape's face at the possibility of commenting Harry's cooking once again. For someone so completely inept with potions, he was actually not a bad cook. He'd be certain to phrase any possible compliment like that.

Wondering if she should ask Snape to sit down, Hermione already started a gesture towards the couch as the kitchen door banged open and Harry stumbled into the room a moment later. His face was red from the heat and his hair was messier than usual. Seeing Snape, he froze.

He grinned. "Hi, Snape. Thought I heard your voice here." He was glad everyone was already downstairs, even Ron, who looked like he was facing a big fat spider but was still sitting there bravely.

"Potter." Snape nodded his head a little.

Harry didn't mind the curt reply, he was already moving towards the small dining room. "Come, sit down. The dinner will be ready in a minute." He was glad he'd sent Eppy and Bob away for the evening. It was easier to fuss over the food than to wait for it to arrive.

"You're cooking?" There was a glint of almost evil amusement in Snape's eyes. "Intriguing."

It was so perfectly Snape that Harry could only smile foolishly at him. "Yup, I'm cooking. And though it's probably not as good as something you'd make, it'll be perfectly edible."

Snape allowed his amusement show on his face, but didn't say anything. He simply allowed Harry to fuss with the seating and the food, watching the silent play of various emotions on the teenagers' faces.

He didn't usually seek the company of such a crowd, but had indeed been intrigued by Harry's invitation. With Black and Lupin away, there wouldn't be half witted slurs and threats -- he hoped -- but then again no one could really be sure when there was a Weasley involved.

Harry managed to carry all the food to the table without dropping anything, and then watched happily as everyone started to eat. His smile got extra wide as Ron shovelled his food with something akin to fervor.

This was such a good idea.

He listened to Draco make small talk; not at all surprised that Hermione picked up the thread of conversation when there was a short silence. He didn't bother to join in except for a few chosen remarks; just listening was enough.

The food was good -- even if he said it himself -- and the wine was excellent, and Snape and his friends managed to sit through dinner without anyone making a scene. There was hope yet, but for what, he didn't dare to even contemplate.

Planting his utensils down, Snape patted his lips with a napkin before casting an amused look at Harry. "I must say I'm amazed, Potter. A kettle isn't that different from a cauldron and usually when someone fails with one, he also fails with the other. But your cooking skills are nowhere near dismal."

Harry smiled. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Yes, I'm sure you are," Snape muttered, knowing exactly how small things like this mattered to Harry. But the food really was excellent, and the company wasn't completely hideous.
At least now he was spared from listening to Filius make half-hearted jokes with Pomona.

Biting his lip, Draco concentrated on staring at the label on the wine bottle, pretending he was interested in the vineyard and the year and the small picture of a weird looking bird sitting in a fruit tree and was *not* about to laugh at the way Weasley and Granger looked.

What did they expect? Draco couldn't even begin to imagine. Somehow Snape had always defied definitions; everything he did seemed to have a purpose, but most of the time it was only known by the man himself. He had certainly not imagined Snape would sit here and wax poetry at Harry.

"Anyone up for a dessert?" Harry asked, smiling foolishly as he gathered the plates. He considered shooing Ron away as he got up to help him, but then just smiled at him too.

He was damn proud of his friend right now. Sure, Ron wasn't making any small talk, but he wasn't showing his disgust either. That was more than enough for Harry.

Ignoring the way Draco seemed to find his constant grinning hilarious, Harry sat back down and concentrated on his dessert. He wasn't really hungry with the insanely bubbly happy feeling churning in his stomach, but didn't think he could just sit here and drink in the atmosphere. That would have lead to questions and embarrassing comments, he was certain.

Hermione was practically beaming at Snape.

She hadn't known what to expect, but this was something she wouldn't have dreamed of in her wildest dreams. The sarcasm was still there, as was the apparent amusement at Ron's discomfort and yet it was clear that Snape was trying not to make any overly evil comments about stupid people. He was simply enjoying his dinner.

Seeing Harry completely relaxed and happy was the most wondrous thing. Hermione worried about him, seeing all the meetings and the training lay heavily on him, noticing the pressure he was under despite her own sadness. Or maybe because of it. There had been evenings when she'd feared Harry would break under the workload he'd taken upon himself.

She could see no sign of a harrowed expression on him now. Harry was eating his dessert with a healthy appetite, smiling as he said something to Snape.

It was the first time in a long while that she saw that smile; nothing strained or wistful about it, just a simple happy expression that made Harry almost glow. Hermione sank her spoon into the ice cream and had to admit to herself that even though all the beaming and glowing also looked absolutely ridiculous, she was happy for him.

She was almost disappointed when the last bit of the dessert was gone and there was no more reason to just sit here.

"How about if Ron and I take care of the dishes and you and professor Snape can go and sit down." Hermione made a gesture towards the living room, certain that Harry would get her meaning.

From the grateful gleam in his eyes, she could tell he did indeed. Ron looked actually happy to be carrying dirty dishes, every step taking him farther away from Snape, but Hermione didn't bother to rib him about it.

He could look as disgusted as he wanted to as long as Harry didn't see it.

Snape didn't even try to hide his amusement as he noticed the privacy given to Harry and him. "Are we now supposed to have some quality time for ourselves?" Not that it was a real question.
"Yeah," Harry nodded. Sitting down on the couch, he held out his hand. "Come on then."

Muttering, "I knew it," Snape sat next to Harry.

"Well at least I'm not trying to sit on your lap and coo." Grinning at Snape's rather horrified expression, Harry leaned closer to him. He was sure no one would barge in any time soon and he could lean on Snape if he wanted to.

"No, you're not." It was clear that Snape didn't find the prospect of such teenage behavior funny. However, he did move a little to the left to better accommodate Harry's leaning.

They sat there in silence for a while, the mood mellow and almost drowsy.

"I'm glad you came. I've missed you." Harry hadn't intended for it to just come out like that, but when the words were out, he was glad he'd actually said them. "And the dinner wasn't so bad, was it?"

Snape thought about saying something about Granger's sharp gaze on him or how Weasley had now turned denial into an art form. "No, it wasn't." Even with the tension, it had actually been pleasant. How surprising.

His words just made Harry lean even closer to him so that he had to wrap his arm around Harry's shoulders.

It was getting late even though it was still quite bright outside. Harry didn't want to move, content on spending the whole night on the couch with Snape if he could, but he could hear the others bustling around at the background, knowing they would soon start their evening routines and then it would be time to go to bed.

He closed his eyes. "Can you stay for the night?" And this time he'd really not intended to say it out loud. "Or are you in the middle of something important at home?"

It was unlikely Snape would even consider staying, but he had to ask. Evenings were usually quiet here, everyone too tired to really engage in a conversation, and even with his family all around him, Harry felt sometimes so empty without Snape.

"Poppy needs me to go through the storages and I really should debrief Albus about my research." Until spending time with Harry, Snape had never really thought about his lack of free time. Working with his potions had always been the only thing he'd really wanted.

He wasn't surprised by Harry's sigh of disappointment. Waiting for the inevitable cajoling, he had to wonder why it was so important to him to have Harry actually ask again. It would serve no purpose; his mind was already made.

"However," he added before Harry could say anything. "It really is getting late. My work will still be there when I go home. Tomorrow."

Staying here was not a burden. Seeing Harry look up with delighted amazement in his eyes was more than enough to convince him he'd made the right choice.

"Thank you."

The quietly whispered words annoyed Snape for some reason. "You don't need to thank me, I'm not doing you a favor." Then he glared, even more annoyed by his own words.
It was bad enough that he preferred this to work; he didn't need anyone else to know about his insanity.

Harry chose not to say anything, not sure he could actually get anything intelligent through the thick feeling in his throat. He just snuggled closer against Snape with his eyes closed, enjoying the moment.

No reports, no planning. He wasn't going to waste one thought to the war tonight. Like Snape's, his work would still be there tomorrow; no matter how he delegated, there always seemed to be more things for him to do.

But not tonight.

He excused himself a moment later. Walking towards the sound of softly spoken conversation, he slipped into the kitchen, surprised to find all three of his friends there. "Hey guys, I didn't mean to leave all this mess to you."

Ron almost dropped the plate he was wiping dry. "Damn it, Harry! Don't do that!" He should already be used to the sneaking up from behind after growing up with Ginny, but it always startled him.

"It's okay." Smiling, Hermione nodded towards the door. "Go back to him. You don't have to worry about cleaning tonight." With Sirius and Remus due back tomorrow, this was an unique situation for Harry, and he deserved every moment he could have with Snape.

She wasn't even ashamed of her sappy thoughts; the look on Harry's face was definitely mushier than anything she could think of.

"Yeah." Ron agreed with Hermione. It would be just fine to stay in the kitchen; that way he wouldn't stumble into Snape as he was leaving.

He continued drying the plates, handing them to Malfoy who was stacking them on the counter, listening half heartedly as soft voices murmured in the hallway. Ready to let out a sigh of pure relief as the front door closed behind Snape, he almost choked as the sound of the door closing never came. To his horror, he could only hear two sets of footsteps heading upstairs.

Only Malfoy's quick reflexes saved the plate that slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Bloody hell!" Ron staggered to the hallway, not sure what he was doing but unable to just continue with the dishes as if nothing was happening. He was horrified! He'd thought Harry wanted a few moments with Snape to say farewell, but this? Definitely not this.

"Ron?"

Turning back to look at Hermione, Ron managed to gasp, "Snape's not leaving!" Didn't she see? Snape was staying for the night! With Harry!

Hermione shrugged. "Yes. And?"

"He can't stay here!" Ron could understand Malfoy's indifferent and very annoying raised eyebrow - look, but why the hell was Hermione all right with this?

"Come on, Ron." Honestly, some days Hermione wondered when her friend would grow up. If ever. "Did you really think Harry just wanted him to stay here for dinner?"
That only made Ron look even more horrified. Hermione had thought that... Sweet Merlin! "But..." He wanted to say something nasty to her, but that would just make him feel worse. Only one thing would make him happy now, and trying not to growl, he took a step towards the stairs.

"If you go up there now, you will lose a friend," Draco said quietly. If it were someone else, he wouldn't really care, but he still recognized Snape's importance as the Head of his House. With Harry it was different; from the beginning, he had been the key element in his own survival, but now he could actually say he liked the Gryffindor hero. "Do you really think it will be worth it?"

Ron froze. He could not really deny the truth in Malfoy's words.

He'd seen Harry's slow descent into the madness of being with Snape; first the weird attitude with the git, behaving like he wasn't a disgusting creep anymore, then the long discussions with the man. The... He still refused to think about sex between those two. Now this.

He turned slowly to look at Malfoy, hating the rare and completely honest expression on his face. He couldn't even say anything hateful to him right now.

"I think Malfoy is right, Ron." Hermione said it without looking at the Slytherin, grimacing as if the words tasted sour in her mouth. "Harry can make his own decisions. Just think of how awful it would be if you went up there and made a scene. Like... If you make him to choose between Snape and you, he just might..."

"It would kill him." It would kill them both. Ron closed his eyes. He couldn't even imagine life without Harry's friendship anymore.

"Yes. I think it just might."

Draco didn't say anything, simply watched the two Gryffindors finally use their brains and understand what was going on.

Without a word, Ron returned to the kitchen to finish with the dishes. He was glad the others didn't say anything; Hermione's compassionate words and Malfoy's... whatever would have just made him explode.

Saying good night to Hermione was almost too much, and Ron didn't even try to look happy as he trudged upstairs after Malfoy, using the Slytherin almost as a buffer against any evil.

Fortunately there was nothing disgusting -- namely Snape -- in sight.

Everything was normal, or as normal as it could be in these circumstances, so Ron stepped from behind Malfoy and hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should go to the loo or not. He didn't really have to go, but it was probably better to go now when he had the opportunity to go in peace instead of later when he might run into someone.

Still trying to decide, he took a few steps towards the bathroom anyway.

Hearing faint voices drift through the wall, Ron blanched, stopping as if he'd just walked into an invincible barrier. He'd never realized just how thin the walls in this house were. "Fuck!"

"Yes. I believe you're correct." Now there was a leer on Draco's face. Every time he'd wanted to tease Weasley about what Snape and Harry were so obviously doing he'd stayed quiet, and now he was glad his half awe half respect towards his professor had always held his tongue. This was far better than any teasing words.
"Shut up, Malfoy!" Ignoring the smirk, Ron marched into his bedroom and slammed the door shut behind him. There was not going to be any fucking or thinking about fucking tonight! He was just going to bed.

Such a shame, really.

It didn't take long for the house to quiet down, all teenagers retired for the night.

Tomorrow would come soon enough, and with it more work and more training. Things would be back to normal, Sirius and Remus returning home, and even if Snuffles would sniff around the house, growling and looking like he was about to reclaim his territory by piddling in every corner, the storm would pass with simple words. They would probably not talk about it after the yelling match that would certainly occur when Sirius was stable enough to turn back into his human form.

Harry knew his schedule for the rest of the week, and knew there would be little time for him to even contemplate such peace and quiet as he was experiencing right now. But that would all be in the future.

A breeze blew through the empty streets of Hogsmeade, rattling the shutters on the windows. Harry listened to the soft night time sounds, snuggled closer against Snape and smiled.

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**Part 31**

It was strange how well Harry had got used to their new Headquarters. The large new building didn't hold the same kind of a feeling as Hogwarts did, but it was the center of their Order now.

Therefore going back to Hogwarts for a meeting felt absolutely wrong.

Dumbledore had said it was a bout of nostalgia that had made him invite them in, a way to have dinner in the Great Hall and make everyone comfortable. Harry wasn't certain it was the real reason, but decided against questioning the Headmaster. After all, no matter how wrong it felt being here, he didn't exactly hate it.

It was a small crowd tonight, just the old inner circle of the Order and a few more, the mood in the Great Hall almost friendly as they ate and talked about everything but the war. The only real exception to the easy camaraderie seemed to be Sirius who kept glaring at Snape between bites.

Harry chose to ignore it.

The calm mood followed them to the Headmaster's offices, and it was easy to sit around the meeting table holding a cup of tea and a pastry -- or two as in Ron's case.

It was a routine by now; they talked about the various smaller operations, the unauthorized Ministry links and the training.

Nothing said was actually new, but the familiar reports made everyone feel more comfortable. Aside from a few strange sightings near Diagon Alley, everything was status quo.

So why on earth were they here again?

Waiting until everyone's cups were filled again, Dumbledore straightened in his chair and said quietly, "I'm calling for another big meeting tomorrow morning." There was a strange note of finality in his voice.
"More talking." Sirius said it quietly enough to not draw too much attention to himself, but people were still nodding at his words.

Training and talking and talking some more. They were all preparing for something that was still so hidden it was sometimes difficult to actually focus on all the bad things waiting for them.

Sirius hated the waiting. They knew where the Death Eaters were, so why not go after them? Or how about the operation with the dark creatures? Not counting the threat the Dementors posed, the smuggler's warehouses would actually be quite easy to destroy.

It smelled like politics, and there were few things that stank as foul as the power games.

"Not exactly." Dumbledore actually smiled at Sirius. "It will not be a regular meeting. We'll have guests."

That was certainly new.

"Who?" Flitwick asked, his eyes wide with anticipation.

It hit Harry before Dumbledore could say a word. There was only one person whose presence would make any difference.

"Minister Fudge called me late last evening to inform me that he will be joining our meeting tomorrow. And he will bring Aurors with him." There was deep satisfaction on Dumbledore's face.

Excited babble filled the room. Most comments about the Ministry weren't exactly flattering, but no one spoke out to actually criticize.

Madam Hooch snorted. She'd never been one to mince her words and wasn't going to start now. "It's about time! The great Cornelius Fudge comes to save us from ourselves."

"The Minister and his Aurors will be here to negotiate a collaboration with us," Dumbledore chided.

It was clear that most people around the table agreed more with Hooch than with him.

"I do believe things are about to change. The Order cannot defeat Voldemort's forces alone, but neither can the Aurors." The way Dumbledore stated it was fairly frightening. "We will find a way to work together. I have the upmost confidence in us all."

The way most people reacted to that comment was a clear sign that few agreed with him on that.

"So will they come to join us or to lead us?" Hooch asked.

She didn't even flinch at the stern look Dumbledore cast at her, simply raised one perfectly groomed eyebrow. The fact that she spent most of her time flying didn't mean she couldn't keep her feet on the ground, unlike some people she could mention.

"Fudge will not give up power easily." Remus mused. He'd met up with the man a couple of times since his year as the DADA teacher, and he could honestly say he had no respect for him.

Snape had been looking at Dumbledore, sensing slight tension in the old man. That was why he was able to see the flash of pain in the wise gaze.

It chilled him, because he could think of only solution to unite their forces with the Ministry's. Most of Fudge's people would have sworn an oath to obey the Minister for Magic, and they took such an oath seriously. If Albus asked the Aurors to join him in the battle, not all of them would follow, and
the ones loyal to Fudge would probably try to stop them.

That would lead to a foolish squabble between two forces who were essentially after the same enemy.

A glance at Harry made Snape realize he wasn't the only one who had thought about that. He could see that Harry knew exactly what would have to happen, and that it was the worst thing he could think of.

No matter how strong the young man was, this could so easily break him. It would at least change him forever, destroying a part of him. Snape wondered how long he would be able to deal with such losses; losing his innocence and his illusions as well as his youth and friends. A part of his family.

"I know. However, there are ways to change his mind." Keeping his gaze away from Harry, Dumbledore nodded. "Let us not worry about that now."

Snape saw how everyone let the matter lie, and couldn't completely suppress a sneer. Didn't these people have brains? Or were they all so involved in the hype surrounding them and the Boy Who Lived that they couldn't see what was going on around them? At least he knew the reality behind all this, as well as the fact that he wouldn't get much sleep tonight.

He chose not to participate in the rest of the conversation, finding the platitudes distasteful and the barely veiled lies outrageous.

"All right." Dumbledore stood up, his expression strangely grave. "We will meet again tomorrow then."

People started to gather their things, most casting wistful looks around the room. They all knew this would really be the last time they met here and it was sad to leave this place behind. Hogsmeade was familiar to everyone, but it just wasn't the same anymore. It was time to say goodbye to this.

Glancing at Harry while trying to keep most of his attention on Remus and making sure he wasn't tiring himself, Sirius asked, "Aren't you coming with us?" It had been a relief to see that Harry had stayed clear from Snape, but the way he was just sitting here made Sirius' hackles rise.

No matter how he'd promised not to do anything stupid, he might be forced to kill Snape if he approached Harry or suggested that he stay here.

"No." Harry shook his head. "I think Dumbledore and I have something to talk about". He fought against looking up, knowing that Sirius would worry if he saw his expression. "I doubt this will take long, but... Don't worry if I don't come back home tonight."

Sirius tensed, but didn't say anything. He did not want to think about where Harry might spend the night, but since it was Harry's idea and not the greasy bastard's, he couldn't do anything.

With one more worried glance at his godson, he walked out of the Headmaster's office, letting the heavy wooden door close behind him.

An hour later, Harry walked slowly down the corridor, letting his steps lead him to the staircases even as his mind wandered. The talk with Dumbledore had held no surprises. He'd known for a long time now that this day would come eventually, but even so, he felt chilled inside. Knowing something would happen and accepting it weren't the same thing.

He waited for a moment as he reached the stairs and then continued on his way towards the lower levels of the castle. It was a good thing that he'd told Sirius he wouldn't be home tonight. Home. The
rather opulent room in the big house. The empty room, where he sometimes spent hours lying in the bed, staring at the walls around him and trying to convince himself that this was so much better than the cupboard he'd spent his childhood in.

Usually failing miserably.

That place was no home. It was a house where he was living at the moment, but it felt more like a hideaway than a real home. He needed to stay somewhere where he felt safe and warm tonight.

Darkness swallowed him as he reached the dungeons. It was quiet here, like the nothingness of a dreamless sleep, and he didn't need light to see where he was going.

Reaching the small door, he raised his hand, fingers caressing the coiled snake-figure before he pressed his palm firmly against it. The door opened soundlessly, allowing him entrance to a safe haven of sorts.

Yet, he didn't know if it was that anymore. Not now when he was doing the one thing he had always sworn he wouldn't do and was taking on the very burden that had driven him towards madness not long ago. He knew it was as if he was accepting a life sentence, for there was no way out of the stage anymore.

It chilled him to the bone. Even in this room that was brightly lit and warmed by a lovely fire in the fireplace, he felt cold.

"Did Albus say when Fudge and the Aurors are coming?" Snape's voice came clearly from where he was sitting by the fireplace. The flames were casting shadows on his face, hiding his expression completely. There were no emotions in his voice either.

Harry walked slowly towards him, needing to be closer when he nodded his answer. "Yes. They will be at Hogsmeade around noon." He sat next to Snape, relieved when the other man didn't flinch away.

"I see." There was a moment of silence as Snape lifted a glass from the small table next to the couch and took a sip. The liquid shone amber, smelling strong and earthy. "So they come to see our new headquarters and our new general."

The calm words were almost too much for Harry to bear. Still, he could only say, "Yes. I think that's exactly what they will see, even though I doubt they know about the latter part yet." He couldn't keep his voice as toneless as Snape, the soft timbre revealing his anxiety.

"No, I don't imagine they do. I don't think Fudge can even dream of someone willingly giving up such power." Now there was definitely a hint of anger in Snape's words.

"I... I know." Harry hated this. He absolutely hated this.

Snape was pulling away from him, inching towards the other side of the couch. It made Harry close his eyes. If this drove Snape away from him, he would not survive the war. He might live, but there would really be nothing left in him, no spark.

Every victory had a price, but this was too high, especially since they hadn't even won anything yet. He wasn't trying to do what was right, for tonight's decision had been so wrong on all accounts. It was simply the only way he could think of. The only way to save lives, to make sure their world wouldn't fall under the shadow of this Dark Lord and his Death Eaters.

How stupid that he would actually feel this much pain now. He had always been the one to pay the
price; with his non-childhood and his loneliness. Nothing had really changed.

Except that now he had something he didn't want to lose. Something he would have been happy to defend with his very life.

"Here. I think you need this now."

Harry looked up, startled, as a glass was pushed into his hand. He almost dropped it before realizing that Snape was now back next to him, sitting even closer than before.

"Thanks." Almost choking on the word, he hid his enormous relief by lifting the glass to his lips, taking just a sip. He didn't need to get drunk; he simply enjoyed the feeling of whiskey rolling on his tongue, burning as it slipped down his throat. The thought that Snape had offered him a drink warmed him even more.

"I don't think I need to tell you what I think about this whole matter," Snape said, not really meaning it. He would indeed tell Harry what he thought. Probably often and with a lot of sarcasm.

He was disgust ed. Appalled. To have older, wiser wizards play their little games of power and politics using Harry as their pawn made him sick. It didn't matter that at this point, Albus didn't really have a choice; he'd been planning this for a long time. Everyone else seemed to be eager to exploit Harry's fame as well, most for their own ends. At least Dumbledore's schemes would also benefit their whole world, not only one crazed power hungry man.

"No." It came out quietly. Harry had never doubted Snape's ability to read between the lines when he wanted to. "And believe me, I'm not thrilled about this either."

The agreeing silence was actually a relief.

Harry twirled the glass a little, staring into the liquor. He didn't want to think about what this all meant; not only giving up under the pressure, but also relinquishing his freedom. There wouldn't be many possibilities for him to spend time here anymore.

"Things used to be so damn easy." There was a distant echo of memories in Harry's voice. "Gryffindors were the good guys, Slytherins were the bad." His hand on Snape's arm squeezed slightly. "Sneaking around the castle was fun, and the classes were a bloody bore."

Snape let out a slight sound that was probably meant to sound offended.

For some reason it sounded amused in Harry's ears. "It was like that with people too. I mean, there were those who were good and those who were bad. Nothing in between. Well, except for maybe Lockhart who was just an imbecile."

This time the amusement in Snape's snort was undeniable. "It's good to see that you have at least some good sense in you."

Harry smiled wistfully. "And I remember how easy it was to love the Weasleys. And the Headmaster. Especially him. The strong and wise all-knowing wizard." He was quiet for a moment before adding, "Like it was so easy to hate you."

"I know. It's probably the most natural reaction for students." There was still no anger in Snape's voice. "Not that I care what they think about me."

That had always been a mystery to Harry. How could someone not care what people thought about him? He was beginning to see it now, after years of hints and barely whispered half-truths.
Resentment was not nice, but at least it was honest.

"It's just... So weird. When I think about people like Draco Malfoy. He's a bastard. I mean, he plays these weird games with Ron. Not that Ron doesn't play along, but still. He's an opinionated and snotty git who covers his own back before even thinking about anyone else." He paused. "But I kind of like him anyway."

Snape had noticed the change in their relationship a long time ago. "You do seem to have a strange tendency to like Slytherins these days." He was still surprised by the fact that Harry was able to let go of the hatred, even more surprised to hear Harry admit it out loud.

"Yeah," Harry said softly. "I do." He leaned closer to Snape and pressed his lips against his cheek, a soft kiss.

Without saying anything, Snape turned his face to capture Harry's lips with his own. He usually waited for Harry to initiate such intimacies, but this moment seemed different.

Harry's lips tasted like the fiery echo of his own, the whiskey almost drowning everything else. The melancholy in the room was almost tangible, but there was no hint of the sad taste of swallowed tears in the kiss.

"Will you stay the night?" It was almost ridiculous to ask the question since the answer was so obvious. Snape refused to assume Harry would stay, but didn't want to make him ask either. This might be the night for insecurities and worry, but he wasn't going to add to it. Harry's presence was not unpleasant, and for once he wasn't going to even hold onto the pretence that it was.

Resting his head on Snape's shoulder, Harry muttered, "Yes." He was glad he didn't have to ask.

They sat quietly for a long time, simply staring into the flames. Harry moved away just long enough to put his half empty glass on the floor and then returned to lean against Snape. All the fear and the anger were dissipating slowly, almost leaving him hollow. The strong figure next to him was enough to keep him grounded, holding back the emptiness.

"You know.... Sometimes I do want to be a hero. The kind of myth they think I should be. The one to save everyone, to keep people from dying and make them all happy." It came out hesitantly, an echo of a childish dream. "But no one can do that."

Knowing that there was no need for words, Snape sat there in silence. Even he could understand such simple hopes, a fantasy that only young people could believe in. He wondered just when had Harry stopped really believing in it himself.

"I never wanted it to come to this." Weariness and disgust were evident in Harry's voice. He looked at Snape, needing to make him understand that he wasn't being seduced by the power or the fame. He hated celebrity and this definitely wasn't a prize he'd tried to gain. It was an evil punishment; a cruel joke life threw at him.

Snape nodded. He knew. "The wizarding world is lucky you're a Gryffindor. Too stubborn to do what's best for just yourself."

A smile flickered on Harry's lips, not lingering for long. He felt enormously relieved. Everyone would look at him as a hero, a savior; it was comforting to know that with this one man he would always be seen as what he truly was.

Closing his eyes, he snuggled closer to Snape. He knew he wouldn't probably get any sleep for hours, but decided to sit here in peace anyway. Surrounded by the familiar sound of Snape's even
breathing and the scent of various herbs, he let his thoughts drift away.

Part 32

No matter how he tried not to, Harry couldn't help pacing across the small room; to the door and then back to the fireplace where the wards against flooing made the air almost shimmer with magic.

This kind of waiting was the worst kind. He could hear people gathering in the meeting hall, voices blurred by the wooden door but still echoing clear enough that he could hear the crowd.

He didn't like the idea of making an entrance, but apparently it was expected of him.

Nothing new there.

Unable to stand still, he walked back to the fireplace, ignoring the amused glance Ron threw at him. There was nothing funny about this! Then his gaze flickered to the small mirror and he had to smile a little. So maybe it was funny how he was pacing like a nervous groom before the wedding ceremony.

The thought made him stand still, but unlike before, he let all the memories of the only wedding he'd attended to flood through his mind. It was a happy memory, and if he flinched every time he remembered Percy and Penny it meant that he was giving away some precious.

He continued the pacing.

Ron's quiet presence was a relief; Dumbledore had waylaid Snape as soon as they'd arrived at the headquarters and the rest of his new family was busy somewhere else. Staying here all alone would have probably driven Harry to climb the walls.

Of course it also presented him with an opportunity to actually deal with a situation that felt like a repetition of all the preludes to a fight in their friendship. Deal with it before it exploded and icy silence followed.

Adjusting the collar of his robes, Harry let out a sigh. He wasn't really good at this, but he had to talk to Ron before the meeting. "Hey, when we get in there..." What could he say? Was there anything he could really say now that didn't take hours of explaining? "Things are gonna change."

"Yeah! I can't believe the Ministry guys are finally here!" Trying not to show his nerves, Ron muttered, "I wonder if my dad's there already."

Harry saw that Ron was ready to go to his family, but he couldn't let him leave yet. "Ron."

The very serious tone made Ron's bouncing foot still. He wasn't really good at this, but he had to talk to Ron before the meeting. "Hey, when we get in there..." What could he say? Was there anything he could really say now that didn't take hours of explaining? "Things are gonna change."

"I..." Running his hand across his face and then ruffling his already messy hair, Harry simply blurted it out. "You do know I don't want eternal glory, right?"

The familiar phrase made Ron raise an eyebrow. "This is a meeting, Harry. Not the Triwizard Tournament. And yeah, I know."

"I mean it, Ron. I don't want people to remember my name or everyone to worship me. Or follow me. But eventually everyone will come to follow me, and not just the Order. If there was any other way..." But there wasn't. Harry had known it for a very long time.
Ron waited for a moment in case Harry was actually going to finish his sentence before muttering, "Yeah, I know."

He was beginning to worry about the whole thing. What on earth were they going to talk about? What would make Harry look so scared?

It was startling to realize that Harry wasn't so much scared of what was behind the door as he was of his reaction. Ron swallowed hard at that. Yeah, so what if he spent more time with Snape? It wasn't Snape here now; it wasn't Snape whose reaction Harry needed to see. He was still Harry's best friend, and he was bloody well going to act like one. "I know it's not easy to be here, but..."

"But it's time to do what's right. Not what's easy." Harry nodded.

Ron stared at him for a moment and then burst into laughter. "Merlin! You can be such a dramatic bastard, Harry!"

For a moment, Harry could just stare. Then he grinned, joining Ron's chuckles a moment later.

No matter what else would happen, he would still have this.

When the laughter died, both stood there, staring at the door and listening to the excited buzz coming from behind it.

"You know, I've been thinking." Voice quiet, Harry leaned his back against the wall and wondered why the fact that the words didn't produce an amused snort was so damn painful. It wasn't as if he didn't already know he was alone with Ron. "I wish I could sing. Or paint. Or write books. I'd love to buy a small cottage somewhere and become an artist." With his fortune, the artistic exploits would simply be a thing to do.

Ron blinked. He craned his neck to stare at his friend. "Um... I don't think being a singer would let you become a hermit, you know."

"I know." It wasn't a real plan anyway. Just a stupid dream his stupid mind had conjured up. "Let's go. The others are waiting."

Ignoring the worried glance Ron threw at him, Harry turned to the door, hesitating just a moment before pushing it open.

He felt the curious gazes like a mallet hitting him in the face as dozens of people turned to stare at him. Keeping his expression calm, he focused on the empty seat next to Dumbledore's and walked slowly to take his place.

It was strange to be surrounded by so many people he barely knew. Most of the Order members living in Hogsmeade were present and their presence was familiar, but the multitude of Aurors was more than slightly disconcerting. The leader of their world sitting right there surrounded by his troops was even worse.

"Minister Fudge." Harry nodded politely at the man.

Nodding ever so slightly back, Fudge smiled a false smile. "Harry Potter. How good to see you again." He even gestured at the seat Harry was heading to, as if it was his hall and his right to invite people to sit.

The small gesture made some of the Order members grumble, but one look from Harry silenced most of them.
Harry sat down, leaning back in the chair. He had absolutely no idea whatsoever what he should say or do, so he waited for Dumbledore and Fudge to begin the meeting. It was clear from the expression on the Minister's face that he wouldn't have to wait for long.

To his surprise, it was Dumbledore who was the first to raise his voice.

"Welcome all to our new meeting hall." Smiling benignly as always, Dumbledore nodded at the room in general. "It's good to see so many of you here."

"It's a pleasure to be here, professor." Fudge was clearly lying. "We have been working towards the same goal for a long time now, and it's definitely the time to unite as one. No darkness shall prevail against the Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix."

Random applause came from the ranks of the Aurors, with a few members of the Order joining in.

Dumbledore clapped his hands together louder than anyone else. "Excellent!"

His example made more people show their enthusiasm, and for a moment, everyone in the room was united by the strangely festive mood.

It didn't last for long.

"Before we start negotiating about our joint venture, I must insist on one thing." His voice deceptively sweet, Fudge glanced around the room. "There have been many losses when our people have met the Death Eaters, even in places we'd thought were safe. We can not be too careful these days."

He sounded concerned and earnest; as if he weren't the same man who had only weeks earlier tried to pretend that the Dark Lord and his followers were simply a very bad dream.

Those who had been in the Order since the first Voldemort war looked suspicious. They did not trust anyone except their own people, especially not Fudge. Others however were nodding, young people whispering and pointing at where Hermione was sitting next to Ron and Blaise Zabini. They knew betrayal could be disguised as anything.

Dumbledore cocked his head. "What are you suggesting, Cornelius?" There was nothing but polite curiosity in his voice.

"We do know how the enemy identifies itself. They are loyal to the Dark Lord and his cause, proud of what they are." It was becoming quite clear on where he was heading. "I must insist that everyone in this room roll up their left sleeve to reveal their arm."

There was an excited murmur coming from the crowd. Some were clearly agreeing with Fudge, already rolling up their sleeves. The most enthusiastic ones yanked both their sleeves up. Once again there were those who clearly didn't like the idea, casting annoyed looks at the Minister.

Fudge held up his hand. "I'm sorry, but I do not see another way. I must insist." He knew Dumbledore wouldn't refuse his order. They needed him.

Hard look in his usually twinkling eyes, Dumbledore nodded once. "We will of course agree to your proposal."

The Aurors started rolling up their sleeves after a moment of silence. They exposed their left arm with crooked smiles. This was familiar to all of them, the paranoia driving them to test each other every once in a while. One by one, people revealed their unmarked forearms.
Most of the young Order members followed their suit, with older ones hesitating for a moment before complying. It was almost amusing to see similar irritated expressions on professor Hooch, McGonagall and Arabella Figg.

Remus pushed his sleeve up with some difficulty, revealing an angry looking red scar on his wrist. It was extremely strange to see him sitting there alone, without his shadow, but if things went well, they would call Sirius in later.

When Draco straightened his back before moving to open his cuffs, there were whispers, his last name repeated over and over again in the room. People all concentrated on him, most wondering if they would indeed see the black mark on the boy's forearm.

Sneering, Draco showed his arm, daring anyone to make a comment of his pale skin.

There was a worried look on Hermione's face. She'd noticed a few bruises on him, all of them looking like fingerprints. They were faded a bit, but it was still clear how he'd got them. It made her glance at Ron. They really needed to talk. She didn't like Malfoy and wouldn't change her mind as long as he still considered Muggleborns less than those with so called pure blood -- that meant probably never -- but this was just wrong.

The room was quiet now, except for the rustling sound as people pulled their sleeves back down. Sharing this was somehow uniting everyone. The Aurors felt relieved, knowing that they wouldn't have to fight these people. Members of the Order could see the Aurors meant business. They were all fighting a common enemy.

Harry was watching the progression with disdain. He could understand how this would seem like a good idea to some, and of course they needed to know whom to trust, but there were better ways to show if there were any Death Eaters with them, like various potions or the wards even now surrounding the large building. This would be their headquarters for the duration of the war. Did Fudge really think they weren't prepared?

Seeing the smile caress the Minister's lips, Harry realized he indeed knew what was going on. All this seemed to be just a way for the man to show who was in charge. And maybe something else.

Up until now, he'd resented this turn in the events, wishing he wouldn't have to go through this. Another emotion was now slowly replacing the melancholy; anger.

There were only a few people in the room who had yet to prove themselves. Harry didn't even bother to look at Dumbledore when the old wizard showed everyone his forearm. He was already concentrating on the man next to him.

Snape looked as cold as ever, his gaze burning black. There was no evidence of worry or fear on his face as he faced a room of wand happy Aurors. Moving slowly, he pushed the sleeve of his frock coat up, revealing a white undershirt. His ink stained fingers formed a strange contrast against the shirt as he deftly opened his cuffs.

Everyone knew about Snape, Harry was certain of that. There had been rumors of him being a former Death Eater circulating in Hogwarts for years. Of course there had also been rumors about him being a vampire, but that had just been a wild tale with no evidence. There were records about Snape's association with the Dark Lord.

Those in the Ministry had to know exactly what they were about to see, so this was futile. Yet it was probably what Fudge wanted; to cause a rift between his Aurors and Dumbledore. Maybe one of the jumpier Aurors would react to the mark and try to kill Snape. That would certainly destroy
Harry could feel the anger burn even brighter now. It was almost ridiculous how easy Fudge was making this for him. All Harry wanted was to do his job, would be glad to follow orders, but their world would be doomed if someone like Cornelius Fudge got to make the rules.

He couldn't step in and stop this. Not only would that look insane, but it would completely humiliate Snape. Harry knew how the man thought, and such an act would never be forgiven, but he couldn't just sit here and watch.

Snape started to inch the sleeve up.

"We all know what we are about to see next." Harry's soft words startled most of the people who turned to stare at him as he stood up. He smiled slightly, refusing to show his anger. At least yet. "Everyone here knows Snape used to be a Death Eater, so we know he is still wearing the Dark Mark." Hoping his words wouldn't make Snape hex him later, he gestured towards his arm.

He had never paid much attention to the Mark, knowing it was a source of pain and regrets for Snape. Curled up in bed with him, he'd skimmed his palms over it, feeling the residual salve covering it and almost tingling against his skin, but had never lingered. It was an unspoken deal between them. He did not make a number of the Mark and Snape didn't trace the scar on his forehead.

It was ugly, the skull with the snake lolling out of its mouth making people shiver with disgust. All those who had encountered Death Eaters or come across the scenes they'd left behind after a raid hated the symbol. It didn't matter whether it was burning on the sky, dancing over the dead bodies, or forever etched on someone's skin.

Standing there without moving a muscle, Snape let the angry and revolted glares wash over him. This humiliation was familiar to him from years past and he didn't let any of his inner turmoil show on his face.

He was surprised no one had actually tried to hex him, especially since it was obvious what all the Aurors were thinking right now.

"Professor Snape used to be a spy for the Order for decades." It wasn't even hard to bend the truth slightly. "He has risked his life on many occasions to keep our people safe, and he has sacrificed more than most of us." Allowing a grin to spread on his lips, Harry cast a look at the young Aurors, people he remembered seeing at school. "We all know he's not a nice guy, but he is one of us."

That gained him some laughter as well as amused snorts. Snape glared at him, but didn't say anything. He simply rolled his sleeve back down again. Before anyone could say anything, Harry yanked up his own sleeve to show everyone that he was indeed not a Death Eater himself.

The gesture made even more people laugh.

Fudge for one was not laughing. He was having hard time keeping the disappointment from showing, and in the end, he didn't completely succeed.

As the laughter died out, the last remaining Order members finished proving their trustworthiness, and then everyone sat down. It was time to start the negotiations.

"Today, we must decide on how our joined organization will best serve the wizarding world," Fudge announced, hurrying to begin his well-practiced speech before Dumbledore could. "Our main objective is of course to destroy..."
"Pardon me, Minister."

Fudge turned to look at Harry who was still standing. "Mr. Potter?" There was honest worry in his voice. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Yes. We did not complete the demonstration. There is still one person here who has not showed us his arm." Harry kept his voice level, his whole body looking relaxed. His hand was clearly ready to grab his wand if needed, though, the posture familiar to all Aurors.

Looking completely baffled, Fudge stammered, "I... I thought we had..." Realizing he was losing his authority in front of everyone, he snapped his mouth shut and took a deep breath before asking, "Who?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "You, sir. Don't you think it's necessary to show that we are all indeed on the same level here?" His words clearly reminded everyone of seeing both him and Dumbledore roll up their sleeves.

"I... Of course." Ruddy color was spreading to Fudge's face as he stood up and then fumbled with his robes. He managed to pull up his sleeve after a few moments. There were a few liver spots on his forearm, but no black tattoos.

Looking satisfied at this, Harry finally sat down.

Fudge muttered, "Yes, yes of course it's good to be absolutely certain about everyone." Noticing how his words made most of the people nod, he forced a fatherly smile to his lips. "At least now we don't have to worry about an attack from the inside."

"That's not exactly true."

A soft murmur of dismay echoed in the room as everyone turned to see who had just spoken.

"What did you say?" Fudge tried to pinpoint the young woman who had said the preposterous words out loud, his gaze coming to rest on one of Potter's friends.

Hermione looked up, her expression unreadable. "I said; that's not true. Terry Boot didn't have a tattoo on his arm when he tried to kill me and Blaise." It was clear what she meant with that.

It took a moment for Fudge to control his expression, but then the condescending smile replaced hesitation. "And such a horrible betrayal it was!"

Muttering agreements, most people seemed not to notice that he hadn't exactly replied to Hermione's words but simply offered a meaningless phrase.

Harry had never been interested in politics, but he could see when someone was playing a crowd. He didn't think Fudge was doing a good job of it, and so it was surprising to find out that the pompous declarations and fancy words actually seemed to fool so many people.

"Our future fight will be hard, for we'll be facing the most dangerous enemy; a Dark Lord with minions from some very influential families," Fudge said as if that was a revelation. To him it probably was. "And by his side stand the most horrendous creatures of all; the Dementors!"

Harry wondered why was Fudge saying this. Could it be that there were still people here who didn't know about this already? It didn't look like that; there were no gasps of surprises or horror on anyone's face.
It was irritating; the way Fudge kept listing the enemy, saying things they had known for weeks, maybe months. Ambition didn't make Harry territorial, the need to steer clear of such blind stupidity did.

He didn't want to lead, but he would never follow Fudge; his willful blindness and arrogant belief in a world that had probably never existed would simply lead them all to death.

Usually when someone made a speech in a meeting, Harry let them drone on and allowed his mind to wander. He already knew these things. But he couldn't simply ignore the ridiculous phrases and declarations coming from Fudge. There was a plan behind all this, and no matter what happened next, he'd have to work together with the Minister in the near future.

"No more hiding, no more secrets."

The words coming from Fudge almost made Harry laugh hysterically. With some effort, he managed to swallow the chuckles.

"The time for talking is coming to an end." Fudge straightened his back. "Our world needs something it hasn't needed in nearly two decades. We need a strategy, we need a war plan, and we need a general to lead us."

Excitement showing clearly on their face, most of the Aurors leaned forward, anxious to nod at the Minister's words. They had heard this before and everyone agreed that while Dumbledore was a good Headmaster and a teacher, they needed more than an old man to win this war.

"This is not the time for discussions or egos. It's the time for action! For the good of our people everywhere, we need to unite as one force, Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix fighting together as one." Hand held high, Fudge looked at the eager faces focused at him and smiled.

Harry had to agree with him, even though the pomp and very poorly hidden self-promotion did make him sick. "Yeah." He nodded slightly.

"I couldn't agree more, Cornelius. We can not fight this war as two armies, we need to stand as one, with one leader and one purpose; defeating Voldemort for good." Dumbledore paused for a moment to see if Fudge would say something. When he didn't, he added, "It is indeed time for decisions."

That seemed to be what Fudge had waited for. "So what do you propose, Albus?"

Dumbledore shook his head slightly. "I can't propose anything. Since last night, I have resigned my place as the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. There is nothing more I can do, except to offer advice. You must negotiate with our new leader."

There was utter silence as everyone stared at the man. Only three people in the room had known what would happen; all the others were now in shock, especially the members of the Order. Dumbledore had led them since the beginning. They'd been reluctant to even think about cooperating with the Ministry, knowing Fudge would do anything he could to take over power, but for Dumbledore to hand over control like this? It was inconceivable.

A terrible suspicion was creeping over Remus Lupin. He knew there was only one person among them who could take over the Order. One person who would succeed in what Albus would have failed, one leader whom they would all follow, both the Order and the Aurors.

He turned to look at the head of the table, his eyes widening in shock as he saw Harry's expression. It almost seemed as if he had grown up overnight. Until now, he had been James' son, the child they all had loved and cherished. Now he was something quite different.
Remus' heart ached for him.

"Who?" It felt to Fudge as if he was repeating himself. "Where?"

Eyes twinkling, Dumbledore turned to nod at Harry. "I believe you two have met already. Cornelius, our new leader is sitting right here. Harry Potter."
Harry yanked on his sleeves a little nervously; a habit he hadn't got over yet even though the sleeves weren't too short anymore. He had to concentrate against fidgeting; it would just make more people stare.

And so many still were, even though all the big revelations were now out in the open, the speeches over and everyone ready to leave whenever they felt like it.

Seemed like no one wanted to leave the Order headquarters yet. There were too many things to ogle at. Some people were whispering quietly while casting furtive glances at Dumbledore, who was chatting merrily with Minerva McGonagall, turning to look at Harry every once in a while. Most, however, were staring at the man standing next to Remus Lupin who didn't seem to be too pleased to be in the middle of the crowd but stood there nevertheless.

Harry had to smile. His first action as their new leader had been to ask Fudge to sign a pardon for Sirius, and no matter how it had made his stomach turn to see the Minister sign it without a word of protest, he was still glad he had this power.

His godfather deserved this; deserved to stand here openly. They all did.

It had also felt so good to be able to do this one simple thing, as if all the heavy decisions and commands that would come might somehow be easier when his first action had been to pardon, not condemn.

There had been curt explanations about Sirius' innocence, Harry once again repeating the story of betrayal. No one had questioned him.

That was probably something he would have to get used to.

"Mr. Potter."

A sarcastic smile flickered on Harry's lips for just a moment and was gone by the time he looked at Minister Fudge. "Minister." He was still not going to play this game with Fudge.

Staring at the astonishingly large crowd, Fudge sighed, the sound of utter defeat. He said quietly, "Your people are surprisingly loyal to you, Mr. Potter." It was exactly as he had feared all along.

Harry shrugged. "They all fight for the common cause." He had to believe that they would still be together even if he was gone. Otherwise the responsibility would paralyze him.

"Oh come now! No need for such false modesty." Fudge could so easily see what this was really all about. What had earlier been two groups of people -- his Aurors and Dumbledore's Order -- were suddenly a united force, Harry Potter's own army. "You know as well as I do that every person in this room would die for you."

Probably without any hesitations too. Some Aurors would die for their Minister no matter what the situation, and most of them would die protecting him, but he knew that he didn't command such loyalty as this young man did. His authority went beyond the Ministry's simply because to the people, he was not an elected leader but a living legend.
Harry could do nothing but nod at that, because he knew it was true. "Yes." To him, the mere thought was nauseating.

He didn't want anyone to die for him, didn't want to be the one to send people towards their deaths. These days, he wished there had been some kind of a prophecy or a charm to bind him and Voldemort in life and death so that no one else would have to die.

It was no surprise to Fudge that Harry would admit it so easily. He'd seen the way the boy had sneakily moved towards the power and the quiet reluctance he tried to project to most of his troops did not fool him for a moment. "So what happens next?"

He didn't believe for a moment that Harry didn't have a plan. The boy and Dumbledore had so clearly plotted this for ages, and he wanted to hear all about it.

Harry was glad he'd changed the subject, not wishing to think about death right at the moment. There would be plenty of time for that later. "We need to deal with the various operations Voldemort has launched already. There are dark creatures being smuggled into the country and people gathering in Voldemort's strongholds and ancient manors, getting ready to fight us. There's the thing with the Dementors. We also need to train our people more. I'm certain the Aurors are more than capable, but we need to make sure everyone can fight and work together as a group."

"Ah, yes." Cataloguing all the possibilities, Fudge focused on the one matter that would really make no difference to him and his position in this new reign. "Training. I have heard about your strategy, and I must say I don't exactly approve."

"You don't approve of training people?" Cursing his own stupidity, Harry tried not to fluster as soon as the words left him. "Or just the curses we are dealing with?"

Fudge shook his head. "The Unforgivables can only be used under strict supervision." It had been possible to avoid this issue until now. But not anymore.

Behind him, Arthur Weasley blinked. He'd been lost in thought before his boss' voice had penetrated his mind.

He could remember squeezing his wand as the masked men had closed in on his home, coming to destroy the only thing that really mattered to him; his family. Professionalism had stilled his instincts, driving him to defend his whole world with simple curses only, but that had been nowhere nearly enough. Seeing the green sparks fly towards his son had changed his life forever. Mind on fire with agony, he'd flung the curse back at the Death Eaters, not caring if they didn't survive their fall.

"I agree." Harry nodded. "That's why we need to supervise our troops while they practice."

It wasn't even said with sarcasm. As far as games for power went, he wasn't going to play anymore. The way their joined forces had cheered him showed quite clearly how this war would be won, and it wasn't under Fudge's command.

He didn't care who got the honor and the glory -- and the blame -- as long as they got rid of Voldemort and his people. If the world remembered Fudge as the heroic Minister during whose era the Dark Lord was defeated, Harry would be perfectly happy.

As long as they actually defeated Voldemort.

Fudge pursed his lips together, but refused to say anything. He wasn't going to start arguing with Harry Potter in front of everyone barely an hour after he'd lost everything.
When it became obvious Fudge wasn't going to comment, Harry sighed. "We also need to concentrate on the people Voldemort relies on." He didn't want to have to say the names again, knowing everyone already knew of whom he was talking about.

"Of course, we have to establish negotiations and..."

Harry couldn't let Fudge continue his sentence. "That will not work, Minister." He couldn't help thinking his words were shattering the last remnants of the walls this man had built between his ideals and the harsh reality.

There was no one to talk to, no one who could stop this. He knew that Fudge had to be thinking about Lucius Malfoy right now and knew that whatever faith the Minister placed on that bastard was unfounded.

"We can not burn the bridges behind us," said Fudge, looking desperate. "Maybe we can avoid an open war. There are reasonable people on both sides."

Harry wished he could believe negotiations would help and that their combined force would be big enough to scare some sense into the most sane of the Death Eaters, but he'd seen too much to believe in their sanity anymore. "I don't believe we can make deals with Voldemort or his people."

"But..." Fudge hesitated. "There are those we have dealt with before. People and... People we've negotiated with before. We don't have to make any definite plans, but we can't be blinded by hostilities either."

It was too hard to hear the desperate hope in the Minister's voice. Nodding, Harry muttered, "All right. Since you are better qualified to deal with such negotiations than anyone here, it would be great if you..."

"Yes, of course." Grasping the hesitant words as they were his last chance to regain some kind of dignity here, Fudge smiled. "That's an excellent idea."

To his shock, Harry Potter added quietly, "But I want you only to open talks with the people you think are necessary to negotiate with. Don't make any deals with anyone."

Fudge stood still for a moment, before nodding. "Of course." With a forced smile and a nod, he turned around and walked away.

Tugging his sleeves again, Harry watched him go, wondering what everyone would say if he ran to the nearest loo and threw up. He certainly felt nauseous. But at the same time there was a strange calm over him, the knowledge that this was the way things would be from now on and no matter what he might wish for, his life wasn't going to be quiet again for a very long time.

Hopefully Fudge would come out of his daydreams soon. Until then, he was free to talk to anyone he wanted. Maybe the empty conversations with the enemy would finally force him to open his eyes.

Harry smiled at that, realizing the futile Gryffindor optimism when he saw it.

"What's so funny?"

He turned to look at Ron, the smile still hovering on his lips. "You know... I think there's probably nothing that isn't funny right now." Hysterical even.

The look Ron cast at him spoke volumes.
After a few deep breaths, Harry managed to suppress the insane laughter that tried to bubble out. He didn't really feel like laughing, the situation so far from amusing it almost made him want to weep instead. People would be shocked to hear his thoughts, everyone casting furtive looks at their new leader who was standing there, looking calm and holding steady, just like a proper hero should.

Raising an eyebrow, Ron said, "Some change, eh?" He was still boggled by the reverence people showed to Harry.

"Yeah." It was clear from Harry's sigh that he wasn't exactly happy about the whole thing. "Some change."

Ron didn't like the way Harry looked; as if he was waiting him to say something nasty. It had taken him weeks to get over the whole Triwizard thing and when McGonagall had gone missing, he'd taken out his anxiety on Harry. Not because he was a stupid git, but because it was really hard to understand things when you were kept in the dark.

"You know, it would make things a lot easier if you just told me stuff. I really like to be told, you know." He managed a smile without real effort.

Harry nodded. "I know, Ron. Sorry about that."

"And just so you know... Dad's told me a lot about the Ministry and I know that leading people is hard work. No eternal glory there. I think... I think anyone who'd actually want that job has to be barking mad."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

They both grinned at each other, happy that they had managed to deal with it so easily.

"So, what happens now?" Ron bounced on the balls of his feet, ready for some action. "We have an army. Are we going to use it?"

Harry nodded, his expression turning grave. "Yeah. But not yet. We can't battle Voldemort's forces on their turf."

That made sense. Sort of. "Okay. So we finally have the Aurors here and we have you as a leader. Good, everything's brilliant." Even as he said it, Ron knew it was a mistake. Almost like saying things couldn't get any worse.

This time, 'worse' was Snape walking past them, casting a dark glare at Harry before disappearing into one of the smaller rooms.

"I'd better..." Cringing at the mere thought of dealing with Snape right now, Harry gestured at the door.

"Yeah."

Not looking back at Ron, knowing there wouldn't be an encouraging smile on his face, Harry followed Snape, making sure he locked the door behind him before turning to face the man.

It did not look good. Snape was pacing back and forth, his back ramrod straight, hands hidden inside his sleeves. His every fiber screamed the need to be left alone, but Harry knew that wouldn't work. Not with Snape.

Harry knew he had some quick talking to do if he wanted to avoid a fight. Or a freezing silence that
would go on forever. "I'm sorry."

Stopping his pacing, Snape turned around and glared. "For what? What would you possibly be sorry for?" He sounded like he had a few suggestions.

"I didn't intend to..." The word 'humiliate' refused to come out. Harry shrugged. "Insult you or anything by talking about the Mark."

He wished Snape would believe him and stop glaring. It was the truth; he never wanted to publicly insult or humiliate Snape. Making comments about his past had been necessary, but he knew Snape wouldn't simply let it go.

Snape snorted. "Your words probably saved my life there." It was said through clenched teeth, and was definitely not meant as a thank you.

"I'm... not sorry for that. For the saving your life part. But the rest of it..." In all honesty, Harry couldn't really say he was sorry for speaking up for Snape either. An old memory from Dumbledore's Pensieve flickered through his mind, and he wondered if anyone had ever said those words so that Snape actually heard them. "Fudge was trying to stir up trouble and I just said the truth."

That seemed to please Snape. "I see." The anger melted away from his stance a bit.

"But I'm still sorry."

Snape stared at him for a moment and then nodded. "Apology accepted." He cast a look at the door. "And no, that was not an encouragement for anything."

"Got it." This was definitely not the time nor the place, Harry agreed. "So, what do you think of Fudge then? He seems okay with the new order, but I can't help wondering..."

"Yes?"

Harry was quiet for a moment, trying to put his gut feeling into words. "He seems to think we can avoid war, even with everything that's happened already. He talks about politics and negotiations... I don't know. I bet he's going to try to talk Voldemort and his people out of the whole thing."

"I see." It wasn't difficult to read beyond Harry's words. "I can guess exactly who he intends to contact first."

"Yeah, so can I."

Smiling sarcastically, Snape said, "If Fudge thinks that Lucius will listen to reason, especially now that their side is stronger than ever, he really is insane."

It was something Harry had to agree with. "I know. He's a bit..." He couldn't find a proper word, but by the nod his words received he knew that Snape knew exactly what he meant. "I just never thought he'd be this desperate."

He had never held much respect towards Fudge. Ever since seeing him for the first time in Hagrid's hut, when he'd come to take Hagrid away, Harry had seen the Minister as someone that couldn't be trusted. Nothing he'd seen later on had made him change his opinion.

"Seems to me he's still trying to find a way to win this war without using the Order." Snape could read the nervous Minister like a first year Potions textbook. "He probably thinks his only way to
regain some kind of control over our world is to deal with Voldemort's people himself.

Harry nodded. "I know."

"Especially when he has to face the fact that if we win the war, people will probably want to see someone else as the Minister for Magic." There was definitely genuine amusement on Snape's face now as he nodded slightly.

It was not shared by Harry. Feeling nauseous, he shook his head firmly. "Don't even joke about that. Minister for Magic? Me? That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard of." A prison worse any he'd ever imagined.

Snape had known he'd say that. For a long time he'd wondered if the weird refusal to accept all the praise was just a show, or something taught by Dumbledore. Now he knew it was neither. "I never joke, Potter."

"I know." Harry really didn't want to talk about this right now. Even though he agreed this wasn't really the proper place, he stepped closer to Snape and planted a soft kiss on his cheek. "That's because you're not a nice guy."

This time his words only made Snape cast a knowing look at him, as if it was now accepted as a part of the things they shared and not as something bordering on insult.

Harry let his touch linger for a brief moment before muttering quietly, "And neither am I."

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**Part 2**

"We should probably go... Walk with me."

Draco nodded at Harry's words, glad to be able to escape the crowd. "Sure."

It wasn't exactly simple to leave the Headquarters, with Order members and Aurors needing a word with Harry, some to congratulate him on the new situation, others to ask pointless questions that were aimed at keeping Harry with them for just a moment longer.

Keeping slightly behind Harry, out of the way, Draco watched the way no one seemed to notice how uncomfortable their hero looked. As another Ministry goon passed them by, he had to revise that thought; he could still remember how everyone used to touch Harry, pat his shoulder or hug him. There was no trace of that anymore.

That had to be a good thing.

Draco didn't really know what to think about the latest turn in events. He'd known there was something going on, but never in his wildest dreams had he believed that Dumbledore would give up an ounce of his power.

But of course it was genius. He could see it already, as people passed by with awed expressions on their faces, Aurors and Order members all looking up to Harry. He'd already heard the words; the hero, the general.

Some things had indeed changed.

Smiling a little, Draco turned his gaze away from Harry and encountered a glare from Mad-Eye Moody who was standing with a group of scarred old Aurors. All right, maybe some things would
always be the same.

It was weird seeing the suspicious looks and the barely veiled anger. He could almost feel anger and distrust emanating from everywhere around him, people looking at him and clearly seeing only his heritage.

Draco should be used to it, but now he realized that what he'd seen as suspicion before was nothing compared to this. The Order members barely noticed him, some even nodding at him in greeting right after the cheery calls to Harry.

The contrast was quite shocking, especially since Draco had never stopped to think about it. But yeah, ever since Harry had started to call him by his first name, their people had started to treat him like a person.

His step faltered for a moment, but he recovered immediately, covering the slight lapse with a cough and a murmured, "I'm fine!" when Harry turned to see if he was all right.

He kept his expression bland as they finally left the Headquarters. As they stepped out, he could hear a relieved sigh escape Harry, but said nothing about it.

There was a sigh working its way out of him as well.

Draco kept thinking about his life and how things were once again different; so the Ministry people would look at him and only see a Malfoy. Tough. He didn't really care about them, there were others who mattered. Blaise was up and about, still blind but looking a hell of a lot better than earlier. Snape seemed to be as loyal to his Slytherins as always. And beyond those two, there were Gryffindors who seemed not to only tolerate him but actually...

He didn't exactly know what to call it. There was probably a Gryffindor term for the acceptance he got from McGonagall or the approval in Sirius Black's insane gaze or the way Harry was now glancing at him as he opened the door to their house.

"You hungry?" Harry asked, slipping his shoes off and running his fingers through his already messy hair. "I could make dinner."

Draco had to actually think about that. Was he? He knew it was getting late in the day so he probably should be, but... "Not really."

"Me neither. Tea and sandwiches then?" Now there was a smile on Harry's face; it looked kind of weary, but it was still a genuine smile.

It was the first one Draco had seen since last night's meeting at Hogwarts. "Yeah, I think tea would be nice." Not just so that he could sit down and have tea with the de facto leader of their whole world now -- and boy did that sound weird -- but because he really needed to spend some time with a friend.

Shooing the house elves out of their way, Harry went to grab a loaf of bread and started making sandwiches. Draco stood near the table for a moment, feeling a bit useless, and then moved to grab the kettle. Tea wasn't that hard to brew, he'd done it a dozen of times since the first time when he'd ruined the first cup and then never got to drink the one that had come out perfectly.

He refused to turn around and look at the table behind him.

They sat at the table and had tea, not bothering to really talk about anything. Draco could see how Harry was lost in thought, and didn't want to be a nuisance and ramble about anything insignificant.
He kind of liked this; the companionship he shared with Harry was different from any friendships or relationships he'd ever known. There was nothing he could compare to it, except maybe flying over the Quidditch pit with a team mate flying nearby.

Of course that would be a fellow Slytherin and not Harry Potter.

"More tea?" Harry was holding out the pot. Pouring another cup, he added, "It's very good."

Draco smiled. "Yes, it is." He blew into the steaming liquid before sipping it. "And what lovely weather we had today."

He was awfully pleased with himself as Harry barely managed to put his cup down before bursting into laughter. "Yeah, the weather is very nice indeed. Care to speculate about the Quidditch World Cup next?"

The words were light, but the teasing was unfamiliar, sounding almost like something Harry would say to Weasley. Simple and almost innocent without even a hint of an ulterior meaning. With anyone else, he would have suspected this was a game; a flirtation, a play for power, but with their great hero, this was probably just as it seemed to be.

Draco liked it; liked the friendship and the acceptance more than the mindless adoration, even though a small part of him was still laughing hysterically every time he allowed himself to acknowledge the fact.

"Snape would be so proud of us, if he could see this," Harry said, his eyes glinting with mirth.

"I..." At a loss for words, Draco just shrugged. He didn't really know about that, didn't really know if he should care whether Snape would be proud or not. "I guess."

Harry watched Draco squirm and hide the squirming by fussing with his tea some more. It wasn't often that he saw him look this open, and he decided to probe a little. "You really like Snape, don't you?"

Not long ago, he would have argued that something as human as that was beyond Draco Malfoy's grasp. He knew better now.

Draco nodded hesitantly, deciding that this was still a normal conversation to someone like Harry. "Yes." He wouldn't use the word 'like' himself, but it was probably the only one Harry would understand. "He's the Head of my House." That sounded more like it.

He didn't want to explain it more, knowing that things about the purity of blood and House loyalty would most likely be mocked. It was likely that Harry would never understand just exactly how profound those things were to him.

"I believe it might go further than that," Harry said. With all the things that had happened, between Draco and him, between Draco and Ron, he wanted Draco to admit that sometimes there was no logical Slytherin reason for things, especially for emotions.

There was no reply.

"Come on, Draco. I know it's more than just reverence towards a professor." Now there was a teasing sound in Harry's voice, once again sounding like he was talking to one of his housemates.

Draco nodded. "Yes." It was the truth after all. "It is." It had always been.
"Okay." It was clear to Harry that there was more, but Draco wasn't comfortable of talking about it. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

The conversation felt suddenly stifled, Harry wondering if he'd stepped on some conversational mine and Draco staring into his tea, wondering if his silence would seem rude and suspicious.

"Draco? I mean it. We don't need to talk about it if you don't want to."

Looking up, Draco could only see honest worry in Harry's eyes. "No, I... It's not something you and I should discuss." He could be honest if the occasion called for it.

For a moment, Harry simply stared at him, his expression puzzled, and he almost asked if Draco used to have a crush on Snape or what before he realized that it took more than that to make Draco look so uncomfortable. Then understanding dawned and the soft green gaze turned flint hard. "Am I right if I assume the discussion would involve Voldemort and the Death Eaters and your father?"

Seeing Draco nod, he realized that the odd silence was quite likely for his benefit. "Maybe it's best if... I don't want to say things about your father."

Draco agreed, knowing there were things he didn't want to say about his father either. Not about the things he'd seen, and especially not about the things he'd heard. Even though Voldemort's past had been the best kept secret ever, the Death Eaters did gossip, and their progeny had heard about most rumors.

What good would it do to tell Harry about the rivalry between his father and Snape? Or about the rumors that had Snape been a woman, Draco would undoubtedly call Snape mother right now.

"Me neither." Draco didn't trust his voice beyond those simple words.

Harry just nodded, knowing that whatever was going through Draco's head was bad, and he never wanted to hear it. He could already guess some of it, from half remembered conversations and from scars on Snape's skin, and it was making him sick. "Good."

The following silence wasn't exactly uncomfortable, but Harry dreaded what would happen when they finished with their tea and there was nothing left but the awkwardness between them.

"I wash and you dry, okay?" Raising an eyebrow, Harry nodded at the sink.

Draco groaned. "Oh great... Okay. I'll dry. But don't blame me if I break something." It wasn't an empty threat.

"I won't," Harry promised, smiling as he felt the tension dissipate. "I'll just let you buy us more china then."

They worked in silence, Harry washing the cups and the saucers and Draco drying them before putting them on the shelf again.

Harry enjoyed the simple task, working in the kitchen because it was his kitchen and because no one was ordering him to. It wasn't as good as some things he could name, but since there was no way for him to go to Hogwarts tonight, he'd settle for this.

At least Draco knew how to work in silence, and how to treat him like a human being. This was so much better than fretting alone for hours.

Finishing with the washing, Harry walked to the living room, not really liking the idea of going
upstairs quite yet. Sirius and Remus were still at the Headquarters, and Harry doubted they would come home any time soon now that they both had the chance to be out there with other people without the need to hide.

"Did Ron say anything about when he's coming home?" The question slipped out before Harry could really think about what he was saying, and he cast an apologizing look at Draco. The last time he'd seen Ron, he'd been heading towards his brothers.

Draco hesitated at the doorway, his expression completely unreadable. "I heard him telling Granger that he would go out with his family."

He didn't add that he'd walked away then, not wishing to face the redheads again.

Grimacing at the flat tone, Harry chose not to pursue the question further. No matter how much he sometimes wanted to shake both Ron and Draco and tell them to stop playing, he knew it wasn't up to him to deal with their issues. It would be too much like the kind of thing people expected of him, of the perfect leader who knew everything and fixed everyone's problems.

"And Hermione went to spend some time with Parvati and Lavender," he mused out loud, thinking about the strange female solidarity they were showing to Hermione these days.

"Lucky her." It was meant to come out with sarcasm, but instead it was almost a sigh.

Draco was tired of spending all his time at home. It gave him too much time to think about things he'd rather forget. Still, this was better than going out on his own. Even with the sympathy some of the older Order members had shown him -- and it was so hard not to hate them for it sometimes -- he was pretty certain he wouldn't be welcome to the Three Broomsticks if he went there without Harry.

Before, there would have been mudblood idiots trying to make him miserable. Now there would be armed Aurors there mingling with everyone. He knew he could deal with puerile insults and glares, but he wasn't going to put himself in danger.

"Do you play chess?"

The hesitant question startled Draco, making him reply honestly, "Sort of. But I'm not really good at it." He'd never had the patience to really learn beyond the basics. "Why?"

"I'm just asking because I'm so very interested in every detail of your life." Rolling his eyes to emphasize the stupidity of the question, Harry gestured at the chess set on the small coffee table in the corner. "Want to play?"

Draco raised an eyebrow. He knew for a fact that Harry wasn't exactly good at the wizarding chess either. "Sure."

The board was already set, and it was simple to draw the table between two chairs and just start playing. Harry kept his mind on the game, refusing to think about how absurd it was that he was in here with Draco Malfoy, playing chess, when he could change the lives of everyone in Hogsmeade - - and probably in their whole world -- with a few simple words.

Playing chess was nice and simple, and he didn't even mind when Draco won most of the games. Winning didn't really matter, it was just fun to play.

The sun was setting by the time Sirius and Remus came home, both talking in low tones. Harry looked up from the game to greet them both, frowning as he saw how tired Sirius looked. A quick glance at Remus told him that nothing was really wrong, but he couldn't stop wondering if something
had happened or if Sirius was simply overwhelmed by everything that had happened these past few days.

The way both men went into the kitchen and then Remus came back with a cup of tea in hand, a scroll under an armpit and a black dog following him a moment later was kind of telling.

"I think I should go to bed."

Harry nodded, realizing that maybe they were all kind of exhausted right now, weary beyond the simple need to spend hours asleep. "Sure. Sleep well."

"Yeah, you too."

Watching Draco walk out of the room without a single glance at the still half full chess board, he decided that maybe they were all entitled to be tired. It had been a long day, and he couldn't really see the days becoming any easier in the near future.

Not wanting to retire for the night yet, he fiddled with the chess pieces and ignored the way they so obviously wanted to finish the game. He wasn't in the mood for more games right now.

Harry sighed, turning away from the board. It was nice just sitting here and watching the flames dance in the fireplace. He didn't even bother to grab a book and pretend he was reading. For this evening, this specific evening, he was going to enjoy the peace and quiet as if he was still just Harry and could ignore everything beyond this moment.

His gaze wandered to the soft rug in front of the fireplace where Remus was lying, reading through the scroll, the black form of Snuffles curled next to him.

It was a familiar sight. Most of the time Sirius stayed in his human form, especially when it had become safe for him to move around in Hogsmeade as himself. Still, there were evenings when he grew restless, when he paced around the room for some time before giving in and turning into the Animagus form.

It reminded Harry of the time he'd seen Dumbledore holding a grey cat on his lap, scratching her ears absentmindedly. He wondered if it was a common thing for Animagi to escape from all the pain and fear into the animal form.

He didn't think he'd ever ask his godfather about the thing, especially now that he could actually be himself and not hide from the Aurors anymore.

Sometimes, he wondered what it would be like to be an Animagus. Now, as he watched Snuffles twitch in his sleep, he was glad his curiosity had never driven him to find out first hand. If the animal form was indeed a sort of escape from reality, it would have been too tempting.

What if he'd chosen that instead of going to Snape? He had no doubts of where he'd be right now if he had chosen the Animagus way. Not here in Hogsmeade fighting Death Eaters; that was for certain.

He was a bit amazed to realize that he didn't regret the choices he'd made.

Harry Potter, the living legend and the leader of the Order. It still sounded almost like a joke, but he wasn't laughing.

He was pretty sure that Voldemort wasn't either.
Snape walked through the doorway of the Headquarters, swooping into the hallway without really intending the intimidating gesture, his robes billowing.

He could feel the stares on his skin and scowled at the Aurors who were milling around, his expression barely softening as he saw a few familiar faces in the crowd. The only people he really greeted were his colleagues.

Everyone seemed to spend their time in Hogsmeade these days.

The morning classes had not been exactly a disaster, but Snape wouldn't describe them as a success either. His quiet presence in the training room had been enough to curb the usual teenage enthusiasm to waste time on playing foolish games, but it was clear that most of the young people had not really paid attention to most of the lessons.

Even though Lupin's suggestion of an early lunch had been irritating, Snape had agreed. Keeping the youngsters here was a futile effort, succeeding only in frustrating their teachers.

He had cast more disgusted glances at their students as he'd left the training hall.

The short walk to the bookstore had given Snape enough time to stop fuming at the idiocy of most of the people that he was supposed to teach how to survive the war and making his purchases had calmed him down even more. He would give Lupin and his soft strategy one more chance, but then it would be time for something more drastic.

He was most definitely not looking forward to it.

But since he had agreed that his expertise would be needed, he would do his duty, no matter how unpleasant it felt.

He wished people would take things more seriously; looking at the classes and the training as a way to keep everyone alive instead of a boring addendum to old DADA classes that had bored most of them into tears.

There were no people in the hallways leading to the big meeting hall, a thing Snape was grateful for. He wasn't about to head to the mess hall for lunch and would enjoy the privacy of eating in here. The noise in the mess hall was usually deafening, with the teenagers being a loud lot even after leaving Hogwarts.

He would get the house elves to bring him something to eat, knowing from the experience that they wouldn't mind serving him lunch in here. He was already known for working through most meals.

Walking on, he refused to acknowledge the fact that the leading house elf assigned to the Headquarters seemed to be the one with mismatched socks who had always looked after Harry at Hogwarts.

That probably had nothing to do with the way the house elves catered to Snape.

He rapped his knuckles against the door frame as he stepped into the big room to alert anyone there to his presence. He knew that not only the Aurors had the tendency of being paranoid, and that it would be quite foolish to startle people who still instinctively pointed a wand at anyone who walked in unannounced.

"What?" A startled voice rang in the room, and then blinking green eyes focused on him. "Oh, hi
Snape." Harry made an aborted move as if to get to his feet and then seemed to think better of it, nodding at Snape. After all, they weren't in private here.

Snape wasn't at all surprised to see Harry. There were days it seemed like he was almost living in here. "Potter. Getting ready for yet another afternoon full of meetings?" He almost shuddered at the thought of suffering through yet another one of those, hoping the ones he would be attending would not be a repetition of the ones he'd sat through dozens of times already.

It seemed that the Ministry loved meetings and paperwork and most of their people annoyed even the field working Aurors who seemed to view sitting down and talking about things endlessly as a waste of time.

Not that Snape could really disagree with them.

"Yeah. We have a talk with the Department for Magical Beings and the Department for Lost Curses and then probably a training session before we sit down to talk about fighting gear." Followed by more training, then probably by more talking. Harry knew he'd be lucky to get home before dark.

Snape nodded.

Most people had probably found Fudge's speech a few days ago inspiring and uplifting, with the comments about acting instead of talking. Those people had to be disappointed by now, when things had changed very little even with their reinforced troops now gathering in Hogsmeade.

He knew the importance of doing things properly. One couldn't make the cauldron boil any faster, and even though there were ways to make the fire burn hotter, such trickery usually ruined the brew.

He chose not to use that metaphor with Harry, even though the likely grin and the Quidditch reference would have made him look less tired.

The term he'd used registered a moment later, making him frown.

Of course only an idiot would have thought this change would lift some of the burden from Harry's shoulders instead of adding to them, but he'd at least hoped the Ministry people would be of some use and deal with some of the practical things they had to face with.

It looked like Harry was taking on more responsibilities himself, tiring himself with obscure paperwork once again.

He watched Harry blow a stray strand of hair out of his face and then concentrate on the papers he was reading.

He certainly didn't like this; not the silence in the room, not the way Harry hunched over the table. The idiot should be out there, eating lunch with his friends and relaxing instead of spending the lunch hour working alone while everyone else was taking a break. With this stubborn Gryffindor, such a break would be well deserved, unlike with most of the people attending to Lupin's class.

Refusing to even think about those morons, he contacted the house elves, ordering enough sandwiches and tea for two.

It was telling that Harry didn't even notice the tray appearing in front of Snape.

"When did you last eat something?" For a moment Snape contemplated on levitating the plate full of food in front of Harry, but discarded the notion as he realized that the plate would probably go unnoticed.
Harry looked up from the paper. "Er... Breakfast, I think." He didn't really have time to go to the mess hall, needing to finish the report on the Magical Creatures and how Walden Macnair had been spotted by the main facilities for the smuggling operation.

"I see." Pushing the chair next to him back as if intending to sit down, Snape grabbed the plate instead, wincing at the creaky sound the chair made against the stone floor. "You should eat something."

With that, he planted the plate on top of the papers Harry had been reading, blocking the text. This way, Harry would at least have to acknowledge the food if he wanted to go on working.

Harry blinked owlishly and then his gaze went from Snape to the sandwiches, widening slightly. "Oh. I didn't realize it's..." He cast a look at the clock, stunned to see it was indeed lunch time. "Thank you."

Reaching out for the food, he realized he was actually starving.

"You're welcome," Snape said curtly.

He didn't even want to wonder how long Harry would have simply sat here with his papers and then with his endless meetings without remembering to eat something. Neither did he wish to contemplate on how long Harry would spend in this room alone after the final meeting, going through the stack of papers piled high in front of him.

They ate in silence, Snape pouring Harry some tea when it became evident he wasn't going to do it himself.

Snape had been watching Harry, noticing the way he was pulling away from people more and more these days. The Aurors hadn't been here for even a week now, and already there was a clear change in their leader.

People had been so enthusiastic about touching and hugging Harry ever since their first big Order meeting, but now no one would dare to approach him like that anymore.

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Keeping his distance from all the brainless idiots who were milling around was a way to maintain at least some grip on his sanity. But he could see from the dark circles under Harry's eyes that he wasn't dealing with the changed situation well, probably agonizing over everything even when he should relax and sleep.

Not that he was surprised; everyone seemed to have trouble sleeping these days. He was just certain that Harry was taking it farther than anyone else.

The errant strand of hair was once again hanging loose on Harry's forehead, swinging slightly as Harry pushed the plate a bit to the side so that he could read while he was eating. Snape rarely paid attention to Harry's looks -- except to see if he was once again exhausting himself -- but even he couldn't ignore the messy hairstyle. Without thinking, he reached out with his hand and pushed the lock behind Harry's ear, wondering if he should tell him to take some time for a haircut.

Eyes going wide, Harry looked up at him, the hand holding the sandwich frozen on its trip towards his mouth. He cast a glance at the door that was still slightly ajar and then returned to stare at Snape, who was calmly sipping his tea.

The gesture had been almost absentminded, a simple touch that left Harry tingling.

Snape ignored the change in Harry's expression though it always amused him to see Harry look so
silly over insignificant little things like that. It was not as if he'd concentrated on a thing, touching Harry for a touch's sake. "Eat your sandwich," he said curtly.

"Yeah." Smiling slightly, Harry took another bite, concentrating on his sandwich and not even looking at the report. The ever-present headache seemed to fade away slowly. Dear Merlin, he'd needed this; both the food and that strangely gentle gesture.

Snape had already finished with his lunch when people started slipping through the doorway, getting ready for the next meeting. He watched Harry hold onto the still steaming mug of tea even as the Ministry people came in, looking more relaxed than in quite some time.

Of course it didn't last for long.

Sitting back and observing the meetings, Snape wondered just exactly when had the Ministry joining them had turned into the Ministry bringing all their problems to Harry to be solved. He could understand how they needed Black and Lupin's reports for the dark creatures when they discussed about the Magical Beings -- the discussions quickly dissolving into a shouting match as Black got tired of the platitudes, something that was quite astonishing -- but the whole deal with the curses was fairly ridiculous.

Bill Weasley apparently thought the same, ending the half hearted arguments with a few scathing words that didn't only show his annoyance but also his expertise on the matter.

It seemed that the abrupt ways of the goblins rubbed off after a decade or so of working for Gringotts.

Snape offered very little to the discussions, content with watching the proceedings and wondering just when Albus had stopped coming to these meetings altogether. Fudge's absence was easily explained, but he couldn't really understand why Albus wasn't here.

That wasn't the only thing that was hard to understand.

It was clear that Harry was thinking about the same things himself, especially from the tired look on his face after the third -- or was it fourth? -- meeting ended.

Snape found himself sitting alone by the wall. Everyone else had left the room, the Order members looking busy once again, the Ministry officials muttering to themselves with nervous energy and only their great hero was now standing near the window, his back turned towards the room.

"I'm thinking of putting Bill Weasley in charge with the curse -lessons. Sirius and Remus can continue with the smugglers, and I'm certain Remus can liaison with the Ministry."

"That is probably the best plan I've heard today," Snape said, knowing that Harry hadn't missed his presence.

Harry didn't turn away from the window. "It only took three meetings and more than two hours to get to that point. At this rate, I'll be seventy by the time we'll actually get to do something."

Snorting, Snape didn't bother to say anything. His thoughts weren't that far from Harry's after all.

Standing ramrod straight, Harry squeezed his hands into fists. "At least the Order can deal with some things on their own. Fudge's kept his people so firmly under his thumb they'll probably ask for permission to have a second cup of tea or use the loo."

"That doesn't sound that far fetched."
It didn't make Harry relax one bit. "So they want me to tell them what to do. Take responsibility over everything and everyone." That was the worst of his nightmares.

Snape agreed. "Yes." He was quite certain Harry would not let that happen.

"I wonder when people will start asking about power. I know some already want to, those who see me as their great leader. I wonder when the first person will make the comparison to Voldemort, but with me having good intentions." Harry didn't say anything about how most of the people already seemed to view Dumbledore like that, worshipping the old man without question.

Trust was a good thing, but blind trust was insane.

Snape knew that better than anyone.

"I doubt anyone will ask that just yet. People are too happy to see you take care of things to accuse you of taking over the world." Snape knew it might happen later on, especially after they started losing people.

It wouldn't be Albus Dumbledore who got the blame then, even though most of this was orchestrated by him.

"Power." Voice quiet, Harry mused out loud. "It corrupts, doesn't it? People who are worshipped get so used to that feeling that they'll do anything to have more of it. More worship and adoration." He shivered at the thought.

It would be so easy to believe in the mindless idolizing and be exactly what people wanted him to be; allow everyone to glorify him and his myth as they had for his whole life. He would be worshipped by the masses, known and loved by no one.

Snape nodded. That was the way it usually went, and most people never even thought about it. "Yes."

He would always be suspicious of peoples' motives, the things he had experienced with his former master made certain he would never again follow anyone without questions.

"I'm tired."

The simple confession made Snape sigh. At least Harry wasn't trying to live in denial. "I can see that. Maybe you should take the rest of the day off. Go home. Take a long shower. Read through one of your silly Quidditch magazines."

Harry nodded, turning slowly to face Snape. "Yeah." He knew there was no real alternative for this evening, or any other evening in the near future. The leader of their army couldn't simply disappear and spend his evenings at Hogwarts, no matter how he wanted to, and it was painfully obvious he couldn't really invite Snape over until Sirius went on another mission. "I think you're right."

His whole body ached with the need to go to Snape, but he knew it would be stupid to start something here where anyone could walk in and interrupt them.

Forcing himself to sit tight, Snape watched Harry walk out of the room.

It was all set in motion now; the Order was finally working on defeating Voldemort, and soon there would come a time when Harry would indeed lead them all to battle, and then it would all be over. He had never allowed himself to think beyond such a point and didn't linger there now.
What mattered was this moment, and whatever desires he might harbor about the future were completely unimportant.

Gathering up the potions books he'd purchased earlier, he walked out of the Headquarters, knowing he wouldn't exactly be missed from whatever meetings there would be left. Not staying to listen to the useless arguments would probably do wonders for his mental health. It would be much better to just go home and work on something. Or maybe just go to bed early.

He firmly refused to even contemplate the fact that he was getting more tired these days too.

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**Part 4**

Ron walked into the living room as soon as he'd kicked off his shoes, already relaxed when he'd seen Harry's shoes and robes, but needing to see him anyway. "Harry?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Looking up from where he was sitting by the fire, Harry managed a slight smile. "Sorry I didn't tell you when I was leaving, you were in the middle of something and I didn't want to interrupt."

It was a very polite way of saying he didn't want to explain his sudden departure to anyone.

Most of the people probably thought he had something important to do at the house and the rest could speculate all they wanted. Snape had been right. He'd needed to get away from it all on his own and take that long shower without anyone fussing around.

"That's okay. I think we're all tired of the crowd by now." Ron had noticed how some of the Ministry people had left early as well.

He didn't know why. Maybe they had something to do, or maybe they were overwhelmed by the insane amount of people milling around the Headquarters. He'd seen Hermione rub her temples more than once, and Malfoy had slipped away over an hour ago, probably sitting in his room already.

"Yeah."

Yawning, Ron pulled his robe off, tossing it towards the couch, missing. "Well at least you didn't have to spend the whole evening listening to people argue about fighting gear." He couldn't believe how the others had been so annoyed about the whole thing. "Oh. And you should have heard Trelawney."

"Why?" Only half listening to his friend, Harry cocked his head. "Predicting death and destruction again?" It wasn't exactly a morale boost, but sometimes her somber predictions actually lightened up the mood.

It was good to find something they could still laugh at.

"Not exactly. She was doing that thing with her cards," Ron made a shuffling motion with his hands. "Muttering stuff. Then she suddenly sat up and started dealing. You should have heard her. It was weird. Kept talking about the fool going towards his doom and his followers banishing the shadow that claimed his soul or something like that. It was creepy as hell."

Harry was used to creepiness. Sometimes it seemed that there was nothing else left in the whole world.

He hoped that his old Divinations professor hadn't scared anyone with her nonsense. "Sounds really
weird. Maybe I should talk to her tomorrow." The reality was bad enough, they didn't need this as well.

It still made him feel strange to say something like that, to actually acknowledge himself as the great leader everyone saw.

Ron nodded. "Sure. Whatever." He stretched and then said, "I'd better go to bed. I'm exhausted."

There was a small silence laden with all the half nasty quips Harry could make about the fact that Ron would have to decide whose bed he'd climb into. He hadn't missed the looks or the sounds, but was unwilling to say a word about it.

Mainly because it was really none of his business.

He picked Ron's shirt off the floor, briefly wondering if Sirius' mother hen attitude was contagious, before following Ron upstairs.

Trying not to laugh too hard at the sounds coming from Ron's room, he went through his evening routines and then headed to bed, tired enough to fall asleep in mere minutes.

The house quieted down soon after that.

Harry woke up with a jolt, his head hurting in a most peculiar way. He'd never felt like this before. Remembering how Aunt Petunia had always talked about her pressure migraines before thunderstorms and the weird relief that had come over her when the storm finally broke, he sat up, touching his forehead gingerly. No. His scar wasn't burning.

It was still dark outside. Harry wondered if he should go back to sleep, but already knew he'd just toss and turn if he tried. Maybe he should go downstairs to see if there was something to eat; not just the hot chocolate that never lulled him to sleep as it probably should, but something that would help him think. The day that hadn't even dawned yet would be a long one.

They were facing battles on so many fronts it was almost ridiculous. Voldemort's followers had potential strongholds all over Britain and from what Remus had told him, they were still bringing the dark creatures in. He didn't even want to mention the Dementors, shivering at the thought of engaging the hooded creatures again in a fight.

Staring into the darkness, he waited for the familiar feeling of terror to land over him at the mere thought. When it never came, he frowned.

Was he already so cold inside he couldn't even feel fear of the soul-eaters?

Harry pushed his covers off. "Lumos." The floor felt unpleasantly chilly under the soles of his bare feet, and he tiptoed to get socks. Smiling a little, he chose the ones with red and yellow stripes. They were still his favorites, despite the look Snape always seemed to cast at them. Or maybe because of it.

Something was nagging at the edge of his consciousness. A memory or a thought, maybe something he'd heard over the past few days. He was feeling a bit fuzzy, but it was probably because of the weird non-headache.

He padded downstairs quietly so that he wouldn't wake anyone up. Even though he knew the hot chocolate wouldn't help him sleep, he put the kettle on stove anyway; this didn't feel like his usual insomnia, and the familiar hot drink might soothe his nerves.
The house elves were still asleep, so after drinking his hot chocolate, Harry put the cup and kettle into the sink and ran water over them. It still came as an instinct, feeling like making others clean after him was somehow wrong. Sometimes he had to wonder if he'd ever learn to relax about things like this or if he was indeed doomed.

Smiling, he grabbed the brush. The early hours always made him think foolish thoughts.

He stilled as a memory of familiar words hit him, and realized that there was indeed something bothering him.

It wasn't anxiety or a nightmare, nor was it the weird sense of being too tired to sleep. He wasn't feeling the almost overwhelming loneliness and even though he now kind of missed Snape all the time he wasn't with him, it wasn't like the need to be with him was making him stay up either.

He snorted. Yeah, some great leader he was, standing in his kitchen in the early hours of the day, analyzing something that was quite probably just a normal headache. He really was a fool.

The thought froze him, and for once he didn't feel the warm fuzzies about being called an idiot. A fool. Doomed.

With a very unpleasant shiver running down his spine, Harry turned around and rushed back upstairs, taking the stairs two at the time. He didn't pause to knock on Ron's door, simply pushed the door open so hard it banged against the wall.

"What the hell?" The sleepy voice was joined by a terse, "Lumos!" that came from the other doorway as Draco reacted to the sudden sounds with quick reflexes and rushed into the hallway.

Harry ignored Draco's curious stare, glad that someone had enough sense to actually turn on the lights. He also chose not to acknowledge the fact that the Slytherin was so clearly naked under the sheet he'd wrapped around himself as he'd scrambled out of his bed to see what was going on.

"Is there something wrong?" Not moving his wand one inch, Draco looked around, trying to see if there was indeed something wrong and pinpoint if there were noises coming from outside. Even though there had been less reports about raids these past few days, he was not about to relax and stop worrying about the Death Eaters somehow breaking through the wards.

Pushing his way inside Ron's room, Harry didn't waste time trying to be discrete or wait until Ron had stopped struggling with his blankets. "What did Trelawney say yesterday?"

"Huh?" Finally able to sit up, Ron blinked owlishly. It was so damn bright in here! He glanced at the clock and groaned, "It's in the middle of the night for Merlin's sake! Can't this wait till morning?"

Harry stepped closer to the bed, hearing Draco follow him into Ron's room. "This is important. What did she do? What did she say?"

"I don't know... She was playing with her tarot cards. You know I bet she was playing solitaire or something with them." Ron scratched his head and yawned, his voice blurring. "Anyway, then she said something about the fool. Like... The fool trying to become the magician. Dealing with the devil. But that he should stay away from the tower because its shadow will only claim his soul."

Repeating the words in his mind, Harry groaned. "Bloody hell... What else?" He was sure Ron had said something more, something that had made him have a bad feeling about the whole thing.

Now Ron was looking worried as well. "I'm not sure. I think she said that the fool's followers will..."
He frowned. He couldn't remember the exact words.

"'The fool's disciples shall banish the shadow, elevating his memory amongst the heroes.'" Draco said, sounding awfully casual for someone who'd just been rudely awakened. At Harry's quirked eyebrow, he muttered, "Can't really help it if I have perfect memory."

"Good. Okay. Shit." Running his hand through his hair, Harry collected his thoughts. "Okay. I think we're in trouble."

Ron frowned. "You think?" He saw the glare, unpleasantly reminded of Snape. "All right." He could deal with this. After all, Ginny had always loved it when he read the cards for her. He knew his tarot. "The fool is someone trying to be more than he is. So that someone is doing something that's probably really dangerous. The devil is temptation. The tower represents betrayal."

"Thank you." Never really getting into anything that had to do with Divinations, Harry nodded. He was starting to feel really bad about this.

For only a moment, he wondered if he was overreacting. Sometimes dreams were dreams and Trelawney sure had a flair for making utter rubbish sound plausible. He couldn't help thinking about the only time when -- looking back after it had all happened -- her prediction had indeed come true. When Wormtail had gone to Voldemort.

"I..." Shaking his head as if he was trying to collect his thoughts, Draco mused out loud, "This can mean so many things."

Harry had to agree. "Yeah, and none of them good." There was a crawling feeling moving up his spine, and he could see from the way Draco was fidgeting that he wasn't the only one having the premonition of doom.

Yawning, Ron muttered, "You're barmy, both of you." Too bad he didn't sound like he believed it himself.

"We need to talk to Dumbledore. Both of you, get dressed and meet me downstairs." For the hundredth time, Harry cursed the lack of a floopoint in the house. They would have to hurry through the nightly streets of Hogsmeade and that would probably wake a lot of people up.

It couldn't be helped now.

By the time they were all dressed -- Harry and Ron changed from their pajamas and Draco actually wearing something -- Sirius and Remus were up too, both looking worried. The argument following Harry's decision to go to the Headquarters as quickly as possible in the middle of the night woke Hermione up too, and by the time Sirius finished yelling at Harry, they were all ready to go.

The streets of Hogsmeade were dark, but there was no need for an illumination spell. Harry hurried onwards towards the Headquarters, seeing the light shining from dozens of windows.

"Oh man..." Ron muttered. He'd hoped this was a false alarm, but honestly, he hadn't been able to shake off the memory of running down these same streets behind Harry and Malfoy and hoping that Malfoy's weird deductions had been just Slytherin suspicion and not some weird intuition.

He grabbed a better hold of his wand, knowing they were all prepared for an attack.

There was a crowd gathering outside the Headquarters, and it was clear to see that there were even more people just inside the large doors, milling around like a flock of sheep.
It made the knot in Harry's stomach tighten even more.

He ignored the greetings and the way his name was almost sobbed as soon as everyone noticed him in the middle of the protective group made by his friends and family. "Stay here." The wave of disapproval coming from Sirius hit him almost like a real blow, but he ignored that as well.

"Fine." Ron was the only one managing actual words. "Look, my dad's over there."

Grateful for small mercies, Harry cast a glance at Arthur Weasley who was standing by the wall looking more angry than pained. It had to mean that whatever had happened, the Weasleys were safe, but it was clear that something big had indeed happened.

There was a group of Aurors and other Ministry people near Arthur Weasley; people huddled together, some standing, others slumped on the floor. The devastation on their faces was terrible, most either crying openly or looking completely lost.

Harry looked frantically around, relaxing only slightly as he saw the familiar trio on the other side of the room. At least nothing had happened to Snape, Dumbledore or McGonagall. Not that he'd really thought they'd been in danger; there were many words he could use to describe them all, but 'fool' wasn't one of them.

He walked to them, moving to stand next to Snape and leaning towards him ever so slightly before asking, "What happened here?"

Dumbledore replied with equally hushed tones, "I believe the Aurors have lost some of their force tonight. Something happened that has never happened before. I felt the door open and then close again." He shrugged, as if banishing fog from his mind. Meeting Harry's completely puzzled expression, he said, "The portal between planes. I believe it was opened and then closed after the shadow passed through. The Dementors are gone."

It made Harry's eyes widen. Suddenly he didn't need any more explanations. "Fudge. Fudge did that." He'd always talked about negotiating, but could anyone be foolish enough to try to make a deal with the Dementors?

"Yes. Long ago, the Ministry summoned the Dementors from the shadows. I assume Cornelius thought he could use that as leverage. Banishing the Dementors was maybe foolhardy, but a brave deed also. One that cost him his life."

Harry had already understood that, but hearing it out loud made it real somehow. Fudge was dead. The Dementors were gone.

He wanted to curse and scream, at the same time wondering if Fudge had known this would be the most significant thing he could ever do for their world. The thought brought a wave of guilt he tried to suffocate as he looked around at the chaos in the room. "We have no Minister for Magic?"

There were so many thoughts running through his head, but this was the one thing he had to concentrate on, even though the mere words made him feel cold inside.

McGonagall let out a choked sound, but it was Dumbledore who answered, "We have no Minister for Magic."

Harry didn't dare to look at McGonagall, not wanting to see disappointment in her eyes. "We need to do something about that." Right now. It didn't matter that it was the middle of the night; most people in Hogsmeade had already heard the news from the looks of the growing crowd, and by morning their whole world would be in turmoil.
Voldemort would undoubtedly try something.

"Yes, we do." Dumbledore nodded, gesturing towards the doorway to his left. "Let's go in there and have some privacy for this."

Harry followed him without a word, glad to see that there were only a few of the Order gathering in the small meeting room instead of a huge crowd full of strangers. He already knew the rest of the night would be a waking nightmare, one of those where he found himself forced to take charge of everything and everyone, but right now he wasn't ready to pretend he was in control of anything.

He sighed as the door closed after Ron and his dad, shutting the grieving crowd outside.

"What the hell happened, Albus?" Hooch asked, her eyes glazed over as if she was in shock. "Is Fudge really dead?"

Dumbledore sat down, waiting for everyone to find a place before answering, "Yes. He is gone."

Everyone seemed to erupt into heated comments at once, the room filled with shocked exclamations. The question 'why' seemed to be repeated over and over again.

Sitting back, Harry let Dumbledore launch into a detailed explanation, listening to the words with a slight disbelief driving away the numbness inside.

He still couldn't believe Fudge had tried to do something like this. The Dementors were -- had been -- the strongest and the most unpredictable creatures one could imagine, and Fudge had tried to control them? Why?

The answer was so obvious he almost laughed. Biting the inside of his lip, he tried to concentrate on what went on in the room, on the comments people made.

He didn't say anything, but nodded at the plans. Yes, they had to move quickly, yes, they needed a new Minister by the end of the day --or preferably by the end of the night. And no, he didn't want the Order to get involved in that; it was the Ministry's job to deal with the politics.

As long as they remembered they really were at war here. It was no time for internal fights or hubris.

Arthur Weasley nodded firmly at that, even though there was a hint of doubt in his eyes.

When it became clear that they wouldn't be making any important decisions, Madam Pomfrey left the room, driven by the need to look after the well being of all the suffering Aurors. Others fidgeted in their seats, unable to leave just yet.

It was Minerva McGonagall who voiced the question that was on everyone's mind. "Harry? Are you all right?"

"I don't think any one of us is all right right now, professor," Harry muttered, taking a deep breath. He looked around, seeing the agreeing nods. "I..." There were so many platitudes, so many encouraging things he could say as their leader, and he couldn't find any words because no matter how he lied, things were not going to be better any time soon.

Sprout blew her nose in between snifflies, nodding so hard her hat fell off.

It was clear that her silent sentiments were shared by most in the room. They were the oldest Order members and the professors, all knowing what this was about. With only Harry's friends representing the youngsters here, they could show their horror and sadness openly.
Harry had to look down, unable to face such raw emotion. "I can't help but feel guilty. He had to do this because he thought I wanted his place." It was something he was getting really tired of; the endless guilt over everything.

No one said anything.

Moving silently to his godson, Sirius kept his gaze on Harry. He didn't know what to say either, but he did know what to do; he put his hand on Harry's shoulder as a soft gesture, immensely happy when some of the tension seemed to ooze away from him.

Sirius sat there in silence, feeling that it was enough to touch. Sooner or later Dumbledore would think of something good and comforting to say, and everything would be better.

Snape stared at Harry, his gaze completely unreadable. "Fudge chose to attempt this on his own. Not because he wanted what's good for everyone, but for the more common reason. He wanted to help himself."

No one could really argue, but it wasn't really nice to talk about the recently dead without at least a show of reverence. Shocked to hear Snape actually make a comment like that, people just stared at him.

"He was the Minister for Magic. Supposedly the wisest man in our world. But of course when he makes a stupid and selfish decision that gets him killed, it's all your fault. Yes, that makes sense." There was absolutely nothing but malice in Snape's voice. "Do you wish us to leave you alone so you can wallow properly, or shall we try to deal with the situation and prepare for a retaliation?"

The change in the mood was instant, even though no one still said a word. Ron was staring with his eyes wide. He'd never heard anyone say anything as cruel; figured it would be Snape saying this. Sirius' lip was slowly curling up, revealing his teeth as if he'd forgotten that he was in his human form.

Harry looked up slowly. There was a mixture of pain and anger in his gaze, but oddly, there was also determination. "You are a bastard." He had known that all along, but never as clearly as now. They might joke about Snape not being a nice guy, but it was the absolute truth.

"Crass, Potter. I would have thought better of you." Snape said it calmly; he had heard worse. He didn't care about the silence in the room, knowing most people would like to hex him right now. They didn't really matter. Months ago, he'd held Harry tight as he'd cried his pain and guilt over deaths that were none of his fault, but that Harry Potter had had the luxury of grief, being only a teenager.

Unlike this man who had the responsibility over hundreds of lives.

He didn't know how much Harry could handle, but it was clear that his calculatingly cruel words might well be the end of the foolish attraction that had formed between them. He barely acknowledged how painful the mere thought was, concentrating on the necessity of why he was destroying everything.

Right now, coddling and hugs wouldn't help. Harry needed to snap out of the useless guilt and remorse and deal with the way things were or else they would lose everything. The only way Snape knew to make that happen was to be blunt about this and say out words that would cut deep.

Harry kept staring into Snape's eyes, trying to breathe evenly. There was still anger evident on his face, but the resignation was gone.
"There are people waiting for you. Do you want us to tell them you're indisposed?" It would spread the chaos, but not more than a weeping, guilt ridden leader would. "Sir?"

If there was something Snape mastered, it was getting the desired reaction from people. He could see his words hit Harry as if he'd slapped him, and for the smallest of moments Snape regretted that he had to be the only one in their world who was able to do this.

"No." Taking a deep breath, Harry stood up. "We have work to do." His voice was quiet but steady. With a slight gesture, he motioned at the door.

Looking relieved, people started moving out of the small room. Remus was there by Sirius' side before he could do or say anything he would probably not regret later. Ron and Hermione padded closer to Harry, wondering if he would appreciate their show of support now.

The five Gryffindors were the last people standing by the table. Even Snape was slowly moving towards the door, his shoulders hunched as if he carried a heavy burden.

"Snape," Harry said, freezing everyone still in the room. Those just passing the doorway stopped to look behind as well.

Keeping his expression neutral, Snape looked at him. "Yes?" He could feel murderous glares still aimed at him, glad that simple looks couldn't kill.

Even if death might be more merciful than whatever would come next.

Harry walked from behind the table and stepped next to Snape. He was feeling raw all over, the guilt and the pain still just below the surface, but they weren't paralyzing him anymore. Yes, Fudge had been a fool, but he was going to make sure he hadn't died in vain. "Don't ever call me sir again." His hand touched Snape's arm in a familiar gesture.

He could see the shock in Snape's gaze as he let his touch linger for a moment before walking out of the door.

Wishing he could hug Harry tight, Sirius hurried to walk by his side and muttered quietly, "Don't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault." He hated the fact that his words were basically the same as Snape's had been, but at least he knew how to say them gently, so that they didn't hurt.

Harry sighed, but chose not to say anything. He did know that, had known even before Snape had told him, but knowing and believing were sometimes two different things.

"Yeah." He didn't want to do this now, didn't need Sirius' kind words that were only making the guilt and sorrow bubble closer to the surface. If he allowed himself to let go of his slight irritation, he would drown under the enormous responsibility this had brought upon him.

Straightening his back, he cast a glance at Remus and then left him to deal with Sirius and his worry. He had work to do.

The rest of the night and the following day were full of urgent meetings. Aurors and other Ministry personnel kept coming to the meeting halls, needing to have the horrible rumor confirmed. People milled around in shock, no one really comprehending that something like this could happen.

Harry moved from one meeting to another, his mind completely blank. Facing the grieving people got no easier as the hours went by, but he found that he could keep his own sorrow in check. The guilt still lingered somewhere at the back of his mind, but he didn't let it gnaw on him.
Not now.

They needed to hold up the structures and find out a way to keep the Ministry running without spending days or weeks organizing an election. Fudge had ruled with an iron fist hidden in his expensive and smooth leather glove, and there was no one who was ready to step into his place.

There were those who wanted Harry to take over all Fudge's responsibilities. Harry listened to them and tried not to let out the hysterical laughter. Snape's words had indeed been prophetic in their ridiculous prediction.

He politely declined. Then had to decline again as people went from asking to begging.

Agreeing that they needed a new Minister as soon as possible, he still thought it should be someone who actually knew how to deal with their government. He wanted nothing to do with such a responsibility and said it quite clearly.

It took him a few tries to make everyone understand he was serious.

In the end, the important Ministry people -- including all the department heads, old witches and wizards and a few Aurors -- held a meeting in one of the larger meeting halls, emerging half an hour later to declare that they had chosen Arthur Weasley as the Acting Minister for Magic, effective immediately.

Harry chose not to laugh at the absurdity of that, refusing to react to the fawning looks that were seeking for his approval. It didn't matter that Mr. Weasley had probably been chosen for his close relationship with him. Harry was simply glad they had someone to lead the rest of their world while he concentrated on Voldemort.

He did however feel slightly sorry for Mr. Weasley. His position was definitely not one to be envied.

Considering the reasons why Fudge had made his foolish decision to make a deal with the Dementors, it was ironic that Acting Minister Weasley's first order was to officially transfer all control over the Aurors to Harry Potter.

There were no protests. After the death of the elected leader of their world, the witches and wizards were content on handing the power to someone who worked on ending the conflict.

It was dark again when people started to leave the Headquarters, everyone looking more exhausted than in days.

Harry felt relieved, even though the strange headache that had woken him up so many hours ago had never really left him. Their world was still standing, the Ministry people already back where they belonged with their new leader and the Aurors now almost shivering with the desire to destroy the Dark Lord and his minions.

He had to admit that Fudge's rash actions had probably done more good for their fight than he'd ever thought possible.

"Harry? Are you ready to go home?" Ron asked, looking at his friend hesitantly.

Blinking, Harry glanced around, seeing that the meeting hall was almost empty now. He hadn't noticed people leaving, a true testament of how tired he was. "Yeah..." His gaze caught a familiar figure standing next to a window on the other side of the room. "No, wait. I need to..."

Ron's carefully blank expression already told him he was well aware what Harry needed to do.
Moving quietly across the room, Harry walked towards Snape's quiet form.

"Snape?"

Turning around, Snape looked at Harry, his face expressionless. "Yes?" He had been waiting for this, and even though he would have preferred to have this conversation in private, he couldn't really tell Harry to follow him to one of the empty rooms.

He cursed at his blindness and the strange need to stay here and witness his own doom.

"About earlier..."

Snape couldn't read Harry's tone, waiting for him to continue almost breathlessly. No matter how Harry's strange emotionalism sometimes puzzled him, this was truly a moment he didn't know what to expect.

He had never wanted to be the object of Harry's affections, but now that necessity had driven him to push Harry away with his words, Snape found out that he rather regretted being forced to sever the unexplained bond that had been forming between them.

Harry let a wry smile appear on his lips. It made him look as tired as he felt. "I'd like to thank you for reminding me of... You know." He didn't really even know how to put it into words, but he knew they both knew why he was thanking Snape.

The complete shock made Snape blink. He'd been preparing himself to face anger and scorn and most definitely rejection.

It was always a bit amusing to see Snape so clearly speechless, but this time Harry was too tired to really feel the amusement. He just wanted to go home and sleep for hours and wanted to do it without facing the kindness of his housemates or the compassion radiating from Sirius and Remus.

The cruel honesty in Snape was in a way easier to bear, even now.

Harry could see the shock in Snape's eyes, and realized that he was genuinely baffled by his actions, as if he'd expected a completely different reaction.

The man's incredible dedication to the Order -- his dedication to defeating Voldemort -- would come before his own needs or desires. He would not spare himself or anyone else if it was necessary. It was clear that he thought his words might have ruined everything between them.

"For Merlin's sake, don't thank me, Potter!" Snape choked out.

Harry nodded, recognizing the danger there was in their discussion, the overwhelming need to hold Snape and tell him things he'd never dared to say out loud as devastating as the guilt still lurking at the edge of his thoughts.

They stood there in silence for a moment, both feeling the curious glances on them as the few people remaining in the room kept staring at them. Harry's skin tingled with the tension, with all the unsaid things, and he wondered if there would ever be a time for him to have a private conversation with Snape again.

The war was indeed coming between them, separating them even better than any words ever could. There was no time for quiet evenings together, no place they could share now.

Harry forced himself to nod at Snape again, a curt farewell before walking out of the room.
The clock ticking on the mantle sounded really loud in Harry's ears as he finally sat down on a chair, cradling a cup of tea in his hands.

He could see from the disapproving glare Eppy threw at them all from the doorway that they would probably have to deal with the dishes later on, but right now that was the least of his problems.

Simple chores would be a relief after all the insanity he'd faced today; the china wouldn't demand his full attention, neither would it demand him to become something worse than even his worst nightmares. There would be no guilt in cleaning either.

Smiling a little, he fidgeted with his cup, glad that no one in the room could read his thoughts.

"Harry?"

Harry looked up to meet Sirius' worried gaze, shaking his head slightly. It was pretty sad how something as simple as a smile could make his godfather look like that. But then again he didn't exactly have much reason to really smile right now. "Nothing, am just..." He made a gesture with his hand. "It's just been a crazy day, that's all."

That certainly made everyone nod.

"Yeah," Hermione muttered. "I can't really remember when things haven't been crazy."

Another sentiment everyone could agree with.

Remus took a better position on the couch next to Sirius and offered hesitantly, "I know we're all tired of talking, but I think we should... Things have changed and I for one need some time to deal with everything and I thought we shouldn't just brush everything that's happened today under a rug and go on as if nothing's different."

All the meetings he had taken part of today were even now a blur in his mind, decisions and plans making his head spin and he could only imagine how it had to be with Harry who had been at the center of everything.

Harry nodded. "You're right. We really should talk about what happened." He looked around the living room. "And since we're all here..." It was almost as if they'd already known they couldn't just go to bed after all that they'd been through today, gathering together in here for a bit of a snack and the mellow atmosphere that was light years away from the bustle back at the Headquarters.

He could see worry in Sirius' eyes, the sentiment mirrored in the way Remus was looking at him and the quiet nod Hermione threw in his direction.

Maybe Remus was right; for once they couldn't simply brush things away.

"Before anyone says anything nice..." Or Sirius rushed to give him yet another hug. "I just want to say... Fudge's dead and it's not anyone's fault. No need to circle around that subject and worry I'll break. Yes, I feel bad about it, but... you know."

Sirius let out a choking sound. "Oh, Harry..."

"No, I mean it. Honestly. You don't have to think you'll say something wrong; believe me, you can't say anything I haven't heard already." Harry didn't know any other way to say it. They had never
talked about things like this, not openly anyway, and he was so tired of polite platitudes and hesitation right now.

Draco nodded at that. There was a time and place for games, but when they had to deal with serious business, they couldn't just sit around and talk in circles.

"You can say that again..." Muttered Sirius, his expression darkening.

There was a very uncomfortable silence in the room. They all knew what he meant by that, and it was kind of hard not to agree with him.

Harry nodded. "Yes. I have heard it all before, and it's a good thing because I'm the one person who can't simply sit in silence and think about everything until I go crazy. And yeah, I know you hate Snape for what he said today, but he was right. I do tend to wallow sometimes."

He was glad no one tried to even deny his words, knowing himself all too well on this account.

"I don't care! He didn't have to say it out loud like that!" Sirius growled. If Harry really intended to be open about this, he could be honest with his opinions. Not that he tended to hide what he really thought about Snape most of the time.

"Yes he did."

The glare Sirius cast at Harry showed clearly that this was the one thing they would never agree on.

Draco nodded quietly, understanding Harry's comment better than these Gryffindors ever could. They coddled each other and used all the soft emotions to carry each other through everything, and while that was probably all right during most of the time, it wouldn't work now.

"But this isn't just about Snape." Harry knew that they should move on, or they'd be doing the 'no he didn't' 'yes he did' -thing for the rest of the evening. "We have a completely new situation at hand. Think about it, Sirius! No more Dementors!"

That seemed to push all thoughts of Snape away from Sirius' mind. "Yes!" Besides the worry about Harry, that had been the one thing he'd focused on all day. "No more Dementors."

"Of course that means Voldemort will be totally pissed off now and he'll do something rash." Draco couldn't help pointing that out.

Sirius rolled his eyes, muttering, "Slytherins!" Always concentrating on the bad things. He for one was going to be deliriously happy about the fact that he would never have to face a Dementor again. Probably celebrate the whole thing with Remus just as soon as the children went to bed.

Taking the muttered word as a compliment, Draco nodded. He wasn't certain just when exactly he'd stopped being afraid of Sirius Black and his insane eyes, but it was clear to him now that Harry's godfather wasn't as dangerous as he'd thought. "And proud of it."

Harry grinned at the way Sirius rolled his eyes again, glad to see that not all the relationships between their two houses were strained. Not that he found it hard to deal with Slytherins, but it was nice to see that Sirius was treating Draco almost like he treated Ron and Hermione.

It was also good that the banter was taking them away from the topic of Snape and honesty; he didn't want to explain more about it, pretty certain that no words could really describe the whole thing.
Remus coughed. "House pride aside... Are we going to be ready for whatever happens next?"

"Yes." They had to be. Harry had to believe all their plans would work and that they would indeed be ready for Voldemort's attacks. "We will deal with Voldemort and the Ministry will deal with the rest of the world."

He didn't really like the way he felt about the whole mess right now, but was honest enough to admit that Fudge's death made things easy. At least now he didn't have to worry about the Ministry's agenda and power plays.

"Oh fuck!"

Everyone turned to Ron, who had been sitting in silence until now, nursing his hot chocolate.

"Ron?" Hermione poked at him. "You okay?"

"I.... Fuck!" Completely shocked, Ron looked around the room. "Oh fuck! My dad's the Minister for Magic!"

The words made Harry laugh out loud. "Just figured that out, eh?" He'd been wondering just exactly when would that sink in; Ron had been acting way too calm all day.

"Yeah.... Merlin! How the hell did that happen?" Ron's eyes were wild, his hands shaking so hard that Hermione grabbed his mug and placed it on the table before he could pour his drink all over his already crumpled robes.

Harry chose not to voice his earlier thoughts, just happy that they had someone to deal with the day to day business of their world who would let him deal with the war.

"I think your dad will be an excellent Minister," Hermione said, smiling at her friend. "At least he's not a pompous ass like..." She flustered, realizing that she was going to criticize a man who had just died.

Sirius didn't seem to have a problem with the whole thing, considering he was nodding firmly. "So true." He looked at Ron. "Minister Weasley. That doesn't sound bad."

That brought a blinding smile to Ron's lips.

Harry noticed the way Draco's eyes went blank for a moment, and had to wonder if the Slytherin was thinking back to the way things could have gone. After all, he had been preparing to become the son of one of the most important people in the Wizarding World.

The way the blank look turned into a speculating squint wasn't as worrying as it probably should have been.

"Of course that means things around here will change too." Harry didn't like being the voice of reason, but someone had to point this out. "We now have our great leader and the son of the Minister for Magic living under the same roof. People will be even more interested in us."

"Great..." Hermione sighed.

Remus nodded, agreeing with her completely. "Yes." He looked at Ron. "But I believe we should take this seriously; a situation like this might even put you in danger."

Hiding a crooked smile behind his cup, Harry listened to his friends discuss about being more careful
from now on, wondering just how blind even those closest to him could be. Ron was already in more danger than most people could ever be, simply by being his friend.

But maybe it was good that they were talking about the whole thing. He needed everyone to be able to take care of themselves, and if this forced Ron to be more on guard from now on, so be it.

He sat back, content with just listening, glad that no one expected him to take charge of the discussion as if this was just another meeting. It wasn't like he had all the answers anyway.

This was now life, and he couldn't honestly say he was feeling bad about the way things had turned out. The way Arthur Weasley had been shocked but determined spoke volumes, and Harry was certain he would be able to organize the Ministry like he would organize his plug collection. There would be no more questions about how serious the war would be; Fudge's death had already showed everyone just how serious this was.

Part 6

Rumors about the attacks started to pour in next.

There had been a few incidents everyone knew of but didn't really speak about, but now it was different. For a few days after Fudge's death, there had been a silence, as if Voldemort had been regrouping his troops, but then a strange light phenomenon had colored the sky over a Muggle village, the only wizarding family there murdered and their house burned to the ground.

That had been the first. There had been others following.

It was still clear that people weren't convinced that there really would be a war at hand, something that was hard to remember when you lived right in the middle of the army constituted of a multitude of Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix.

Harry left Arthur Weasley to deal with the world in general, the determination showing on Ron's dad clearly indicating that he was more than capable of handling his new duties.

He could only imagine how strange it had to be to know so many things that couldn't be said out loud. Even if everyone could name known Death Eaters, no one went above a whisper yet, letting people like Lucius Malfoy live in peace. None of Voldemort's closest seemed to operate their usual business anymore, all disappearing to their estates for the time being.

Though he didn't say it, Harry did wonder if that was one of the biggest mistakes Voldemort was doing. History showed that their world hadn't crumbled during an attack inside the system, and the following battles had failed as well. But maybe if Lucius had lobbied with Fudge when all this began, they would now be bowing to the Dark Lord.

One thing was certain; it was now too late for intimidating those in high places. Arthur Weasley might not be a political creature like his predecessor, but he was intelligent enough to see the realities. He would also be the last person ever to suggest making a deal with Voldemort.

He was, however, very keen on investigating the rumors about attacks.

"We have another one."

The weary words greeted Harry as he stepped into the small meeting room that people were starting to call his office these days. He nodded at Dumbledore and then turned to Arthur Weasley who was holding a parchment in his hand, looking as tired as he felt. "A raid?"
"Yes." Since it looked like Dumbledore was just sitting there, Arthur cleared his throat before saying, "We think. There were no masked people in the village, no fighting, no..." He paused for a moment, clearing his throat again.

Neither Harry or Dumbledore said anything, both knowing all too well why the subject was so difficult, both also knowing that there was nothing to say.

Arthur shook his head slightly, as if driving away memories. "Sorry. Where was I? Oh, yes. No clear evidence of the Death Eaters making a physical attack, but someone cast the Dark Mark in the sky, and the... er... my Aurors have reported that there was a suspicious death in the village."

There was an awkward silence, as if there was more, but Arthur didn't know how to say it. He was casting questioning looks at the Headmaster, as if waiting for him to finish with the report.

Harry looked from Dumbledore to Arthur. "And?" There had to be a reason they were both looking so uncomfortable.

"The attack was made in Godric's Hollow."

The name of the small village made Harry's eyes widen and he stared at the two older wizards. "Godric's Hollow?" His very first home which he couldn't really remember anymore; the place where he'd lived with his mother and his father until Voldemort had come and taken it all away.

Arthur nodded. "Yes."

There was no need for further explanations or a plan; Harry knew he would have to go and see this for himself even if it could very well be a trap. It took a few minutes to gather a small group of people with him, Moody and a group of Aurors already ready for action, Ron a bit baffled but then eager to accompany Harry.

Another owl brought additional information from the Ministry by the time they were all ready.

"The witch..." Moody paused, trying to remember her name. Eventually he had to glance at the young woman standing next to him.

She didn't even flinch at the sight of his wonky eye. "Alice Skively, sir."

Moody nodded. "Yes, Skively. She has lived there for the past forty years, working on some animal project. The villagers say she is almost a hermit." His voice indicated he liked the idea. "They got worried when she didn't go out to get water from the old village well last night. She was known for her healing potions."

Harry could see why that was worrisome. It had been a new moon last night and if the witch had indeed been working with potions, she wouldn't have missed the chance to get one of the main ingredients.

He refused to think too hard about it as they Apparated to Godric's Hollow, keeping a tight rein on his emotions as Moody talked more about the witch and her ways and the Morsmordre that had announced her death to the world. Still, he had to wonder if Snape knew her. He tried to push the other thing out of his mind, and almost succeeded until his gaze met with the ruins just to the side of the small house they were heading to.

The years had made the place almost unrecognizable, and if he didn't know the tale, he might have thought it was an ancient church or a castle, somehow allowed to remain untouched by anything but time.
Harry didn't know what the name of the place should have made him feel, but strangely enough, he felt nothing. Seeing the grass grow on ruins didn't make his own past any more tangible to him, and the wildness of trees and bushes surrounding what was left of the Potter home just gave the place a sleepy look.

It had been the house where his parents had been happy, where he had lived the first months of his life with them. How could the thought of that time make him anything but happy and maybe a bit wistful?

If Voldemort had intended to make him do something rash because of this, he was sorely mistaken.

"Harry? You okay?" Touching Harry's shoulder, Ron looked at him.

Harry took a last glance at the mold covered stones and then turned to his friend, smiling a little. "Yeah. I'm all right." It was not even a lie.

Without another look back, he continued towards the scene of the crime.

A group of Aurors and Order members were standing outside the small house next to the ruins, all looking rather green. One young Auror was leaning against the wall, throwing up in the bush of pale yellow roses. All the others tried not to pay attention to him and milled around, trying to look like they were actually busy.

"Stop milling around you fools!" Moody didn't seem to be in the mood of tolerating lollygagging. He limped towards the Aurors, his eye rolling wildly in its socket. "I want the report. Now!"

"Oi, Seamus!" Ron yelled. He wasn't surprised to see him here. After all, Seamus seemed to be in the front line of action just like he'd always been back at Hogwarts.

Seamus turned slowly to nod at Ron.

There were too many people, too many voices calling out at the same time, and Harry hesitated between listening to one of the Aurors stammer at Moody and going to see for himself. He didn't want to really go into the house, but a part of him knew he had to.

"Let's go." He barely glanced at Ron before taking the first step.

Gesturing with his hand, his movement oddly wooden, Seamus guided Harry and the others inside.

Harry closed his eyes as he saw the scene of the crime, understanding perfectly why the Auror was retching outside the small hut. It wasn't only the sight, it was also the smells; the sweet cloying scent of lavender mixed with the overpowering stench of decay.

He didn't want to look again, but he had to. Forcing himself to open his eyes, he took in the horrendous sight in front of him; the body of a witch, curled on the floor next to the fireplace with her eyes staring lifeless towards a small bundle of fur, her hand reaching out for another. It made bile rise to Harry's mouth, and he had to swallow hard so that he wouldn't have to join the vomiting Auror outside.

It made no sense. This place was far from everything, even the vicinity of the ruins that made this village so famous couldn't explain this massacre. He didn't even remember the name of the woman who lay dead amongst her dead cats, even though Moody had said it before they got here. There was no reason they were all dead, no reason at all.

"What the hell happened here?" Ron could only whisper. His face was white and he tried not to look
too closely at the small furry bodies lying all around the room. "What the hell happened here, Harry? Why did they do this? And how?" He couldn't believe anyone could have managed to do something like this, especially with the wards still around the hut.

"I don't know." It was a lie; Harry could well guess.

Seamus said hollowly, "They were poisoned."

It only confirmed what Harry already suspected. The strong odor of lavender he'd smelled ever since he'd stepped inside was clearly coming from a broken vial that was forgotten on the floor next to the fireplace, just a few steps away from the dead witch.

Sent through the floo, the poison fumes had probably killed even before the witch had noticed the whole thing.

Quiet and lethal, leaving behind nothing but the scent of death.

This was a message, nothing more, most likely ordered by Voldemort himself. Harry wasn't even surprised. A man who could walk into a house to kill a young couple and a baby could definitely kill a woman and half a dozen cats to send a message.

Ron tried to say something, but instead of forming words, he gagged and then rushed out of the small house. He almost collided with Seamus on his way out.

Sighing, Harry let him go and simply stood there, staring at the witch. He felt like he should do something or at least bear witness and nothing he could ever do would do a thing for this woman. Not even destroying Voldemort would change this, wouldn't bring her back.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he whispered quietly as Seamus stepped even farther away, hoping his housemate hadn't heard the way his voice broke with the useless apology.

The words didn't make him feel any better.

Seamus was walking away from the witch, his eyes going from her to the cats, looking fragile. He reached out a few times, his expression growing more brittle as none of the small animals responded to his touch.

"Seamus?" Harry asked, worried about his friend. "Seamus, what is it?"

He could see that Seamus didn't really hear him, so focused on his desperate search.

It was unclear what he was searching for. Harry tried not to wince every time Seamus moved on, from one dead cat to another, his movements almost frantic now.

Maybe this was something Seamus needed to do so that he could finally join the Auror -- and probably Ron too -- at the rosebush.

At the other end of the room, Seamus was looking at the last sad bundle on the floor. Bending down to touch the body of a grey kitten with his fingertips, Seamus yelped as he felt the small bundle move against his touch. "He's alive!" He lifted the kitten up, staring at it in shock.

It seemed as if he didn't even notice his fingers lose their grip on his wand.

Harry watched it bounce on the floor once and then lay there.

"Thank Merlin..." Seamus whispered as he ran his hand gently over the kitten's back. "Thank
Moody and his assistant banged the door open and walked into the hut, neither paying any attention to Seamus. "Who cleared the scene?" Moody asked, his expression thunderous.

"I don't know. One of the Aurors?" Harry turned his attention away from Seamus. "Why?"

Moody didn't waste any time launching into an angry rant about constant vigilance and the fact that they could have all been killed when they stepped into the hut if there were still poisonous fumes in the air. He was still ranting as his assistant guided him, Harry and Seamus out, not noticing how Harry picked up a wand from the floor and tucked it inside Seamus' robes.

Apparently Seamus didn't notice either, too busy petting the little kitten.

There was nothing they could really do here but to talk to the shocked people milling around the street and then *obliviate* the Muggles who had joined the crowd. The Aurors didn't need any instructions; most of them had been through this before.

It was all very efficient, looking professional, and Harry watched from the distance as everyone did their jobs.

He was beginning to realize all the implications of this horrendous attack, and by the time the Aurors were finished, he was anxious to get to Hogwarts. This was far from over, and even though the poor witch didn't seem to have any family to console, Harry knew for a fact that there was someone who might need his company tonight.

The grounds here were already covered by Aurors, and Mr. Weasley could organize whatever happened next with Dumbledore. They could deal with this.

Seeing Ron stand at Seamus' side, scratching the kitten and looking rather freaked out, Harry went to mutter a few excuses to him that didn't really fool his friend. It didn't matter; he simply needed Ron to tell Sirius that he wasn't going to come home that night.

"You're going to Snape, right?" Muttering it quietly so that none of the Aurors could hear, Ron made a slight face.

Harry stiffened, the ugly rant about duty and honor and caring clawing its way out of his throat and he barely managed to shove all the anger back. Then he realized Ron had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. "Ron, she was poisoned. This was not aimed to hurt *me*." Not only him.

He wasn't going to spend the evening away from his duties and work, finally succumbing to the need that had burned inside since he'd accepted the responsibility over the Order. This was not about pleasure, or even duty; Harry refused to put a label on it. He just knew he had to go.

"Oh." Ron frowned. Then it dawned on him. "*Oh!* Yeah, sorry. I'll tell Sirius you're not coming home, then."

Harry couldn't say anything, he just clasped his hand on Ron's shoulder for a moment and then let him go back to Seamus.

There were a few people walking past Harry as he headed to the dungeons, but fortunately no one tried to stop him for a conversation. From the very morose looks some of them threw at him, he could tell that the news had already spread here.

It only made him hurry towards the dungeons, but when he was finally there, standing in front of the
familiar door, he hesitated.

What if Snape wasn't there? Or what if he hadn't heard the news yet, and it would be Harry's job to tell him about the dead witch and the poison that had killed her? The mere thought was enough to make him nauseous.

Sighing, Harry rested his forehead against the cold stone wall. It was a familiar and almost comforting feeling, a moment of respite before facing a battle he had chosen to fight. He had absolutely no idea what he would say to Snape, but he couldn't stay away right now.

He didn't say anything as he slid his hand over the snake, wondering for a moment if the door would even open to him. When the wards simply tingled against his skin like always, he took that as a good sign.

There were no words of greeting as he stepped into Snape's rooms. Not that he'd expected there to be any.

Snape was standing next to the fireplace, his hands moving almost frantically between a cauldron and piles of ingredients. He barely glanced at Harry, choosing to ignore him after checking the intruder.

Hot fumes filled the room.

Harry's eyes widened as he saw the broken vials on the floor by the door. There was a burn mark on the wall next to him, as if someone had thrown a fire charm at the stones. At least now he wouldn't have to worry about how to tell Snape; he obviously knew already, and his reaction was exactly what Harry had feared.

He didn't say anything. The silence in the room was brittle somehow, and he wasn't going to destroy whatever peace there was left. Moving quietly towards the cupboard, he kept his gaze on Snape's back, hoping his slow movements wouldn't drive the man to throw him out of his rooms.

He grabbed a broom from the cupboard and went to brush the shards off the floor, working slow enough to make as little sound as possible.

The message Voldemort had sent had indeed been understood. Harry breathed in the myriad of scents floating from the broken bottles, knowing well that there were dried branches of lavender in the cupboard. Snape had been the Dark Lord's Potions master for years, one of his best assets; whatever poisons he still had were undoubtedly made by Snape and using them to kill people was an accusation on its own.

Clearly hitting Snape where it hurt the most.

Guilt was a familiar feeling for Harry; it could eat you alive better than any other emotion. This was probably worse than anything, for Snape knew without any doubts that this was his doing. No matter how he tried to leave his past behind, the Dark Lord would never really let him go.

Harry pushed the shards into a pile, sweeping the floor with a steady motion. He couldn't even begin to guess what was going on in Snape's mind now. Snape was always the first one to make acerbic comments about his need to self flagellate over things that went wrong, but it seemed he was very good at it too.

Especially when no one could deny he had a very good reason for it.

There were no more shards here, so Harry walked to where deep yellow potion was slowly oozing
down the wall back on top of the broken bottle. He took a better hold on the broom and started sweeping the floor again.

"For Merlin's sake, Potter!" The angry words were shouted. "You don't have to do that!"

Freezing for a moment, Harry lifted his gaze to see Snape glare at him. He didn't say anything, because he couldn't think of anything that would work right now. If he tried to actually put his thoughts into words, Snape would most likely explode.

He had never before really understood how it felt on this side; when you wanted to make someone feel better and nothing you could say or do would make any real difference. Everything in Snape's demeanor warned him to stay away from him, so a hug or some other form of touch wouldn't do. Snape hated unnecessary babble, tolerated it most of the time but definitely not now.

So this was all that was left.

Harry was going to stay here and try to show Snape his support without being a total idiot. Maybe it would help if he tried to make things just a little better, even if it was nothing more than sweeping the floor clean and bringing some resemblance of order into the chaos.

"You..." Squeezing the small jar filled with something looking familiarly like a bezoar so hard his knuckles turned white, Snape growled, unable to finish his sentence. He turned back to his cauldron, ignoring Harry completely.

A moment later the faint sounds of glass shards being swept off the floor filled the silence in the room.

Harry didn't know what Snape was working on, but he knew that it was something vital to the man now. There was no sign of the usual silent pleasure of brewing in Snape, his movements almost distraught. Observing him quietly, Harry kept sweeping the already clean floor.

There was really nothing else to do.

Stirring the brewing potion, Snape concentrated on his work and tried to convince himself he didn't care if Harry stayed or left.

Talking to Harry about anything would be a waste of time right now. This potion was needed sooner or later, and he intended to make enough for the whole Order, including everyone from the Ministry. He should have thought of this ages ago, when they had considered the Dark Lord's plan of using exotic beings as a weapon! Whatever sludges some hapless idiot would now make for Voldemort wouldn't be of concern; Snape's own work would be the worst thing they encountered.

The slight shift in the scent wafting from the cauldron was enough to tell Snape the potion was ready. He grabbed a scoop and drizzled a portion into a cup.

A self mocking smile appeared on his lips as he stared at the one thing that would slow down most of the poisons he'd once brewed long enough for someone to make an antidote. He didn't need to drink this. Once, so many years ago it seemed like eternity, he had sampled most of the things he'd ever thought of, trying to protect himself from everything.

He wasn't ashamed of his survival instinct, but he wasn't especially proud of it right now either.

Snape knew he'd have to bottle the potion before it congealed, but he couldn't go to the cupboard for the empty bottles yet.
"Potter."

Harry almost dropped the broom as his name rang in the room. "Yes?" He hoped Snape wouldn't ask him to leave, for that would only lead into a shouting match.

Face unnaturally pale, Snape offered the small cup at Harry. "Drink this."

He didn't want to explain, but thought he should. How could anyone ever accept his brews again without knowing exactly what they were? "That should delay the effects of most of the poisons I..." And after all these years of being brutally honest with himself, he still couldn't say it without almost choking. "Poisons I made for Voldemort."

"Thank you." Lifting the cup to his lips even before Snape was finished with his explanation, Harry drank the bitter potion, not hesitating for a moment.

The trust he showed made Snape shake with utter shock. How could Harry be such a fool as to trust him? No one should; not after everything that had happened. He wanted to yell at Harry, to curse him and drive him away, but there was a flaw in that; he didn't think anything he could say would manage that.

He took the cup from Harry, placing it on the table before going back to his cauldron. There was a lot to do, bottling the brew and then cleaning up. It would give him something to focus on.

Shutting out everything else, he turned back to his work, to the bubbling potion that was so different from those he'd made ages ago. Poisons, truth potions that might kill the subjects or at least drive them mad, dark potions meant to harm and maim.

He'd faced his deeds ages past, when there had been nothing in his world but pain and disgust at what he'd done. There would never be anything to give him any kind of a redemption and no matter what he did, he would always have to carry his past sins with him. Killing Voldemort wouldn't change that, going to Azkaban wouldn't change that. Even his own death would not take away all the pain and horror he had once inflicted the world.

Working helped. It didn't change everything, but it did make a difference. It had been the one thing Dumbledore had pointed out when he'd turned away from the Death Eaters, and he'd held onto those words like they could really save him some day. He didn't know he really believed in them, but he had to at least try, had to keep working.

Wallowing didn't help; it would be such a Gryffindor thing to do, wasting time in idle daydreams. He could not change the past, but he'd make sure they would survive the present.

Snape moved mechanically, filling small bottles with the pale blue potion.

The quiet sound of the broom brushing the floor had never ceased. Harry kept the motion steady even when he was sure he'd got all the shards, real and imaginary. The silence was still tense, but he tried not to add to the tension.

Looking up, he realized Snape had finished with the bottling. There was a large wooden tray filled with rows of small bottles on the table but Snape was standing next to his cauldron, looking like he was rooted there.

Harry put the broom away and sent the shards to the bin with a flick of his wand. Half expecting Snape to comment on the futility of his work, he turned to walk to the table.

"Snape?" Not even his soft footsteps had brought the man out of his somber thoughts.
Slowly, Snape turned to glare at him. The expression in the black gaze was once again blank; hiding everything, the shield as unbreakable as ever.

"I'll take these to Albus." Grabbing the tray, Harry nodded towards the bathroom. "You should take a shower while I'm gone." He kept his tone as calm as possible.

The glare held real emotion now. Fury.

Harry didn't show any reaction to the angry way Snape looked at him, he simply walked to the door. He did however notice that Snape made his way towards the bathroom almost immediately.

Slamming the bathroom door shut so hard one of the panes cracked, Snape stalked towards the shower. Damn Harry Potter! He hated such blatant show of complete stupidity and Gryffindor superiority! Just because the idiot guessed correctly that he intended to hand the potion to the Headmaster, it didn't give him any rights to order him around in his own rooms.

He took a long shower, refusing to admit he'd really needed one. The hot water was almost scalding his skin, but he didn't care.

Some people used this as a ritual, washing away all the ache and pain and bad memories. Snape had never understood such unimaginable stupidity. Letting hot water and soap remove the sweat and dirt was comforting, but it never took anything else away. All those things that stained him were deeper than the smears on his skin and could never be washed away.

Finishing his bathing routines was mechanical. Snape applied the protective salve on his arm without looking into the mirror, knowing all too well what would greet him there.

The lights were low in his rooms as he padded out of the bathroom wrapped in an old but clean robe. He wasn't particularly surprised to see Harry sitting on his chair, looking at him expectantly.

"Potter." It came out with a note of resignation, no sign of anger in his voice anymore. "You're not going to leave no matter what I say, are you?"

"No."

Snape hadn't thought so.

"Are you hungry?" Harry asked quietly.

"No." It had been ages since Snape had felt this nauseous after brewing potions, but he couldn't even imagine eating anything right now. "I'm just..." He paused for a few heartbeats, seeing from the knowing look on Harry's face that he knew already. "Tired."

Admitting such weakness made him wish he could feel anger instead of the bone deep weariness. It didn't exactly help that Harry nodded slightly, his expression saying that he knew exactly how Snape felt.

Harry got to his feet. "Okay." He padded towards the bedroom, not looking if Snape was coming or not.

Sighing with exasperation, Snape followed him, extinguishing the lights from the living room and then closing the bedroom door firmly behind him. He didn't know exactly what Harry wanted of him right now, but he hoped it wasn't anything complicated. He just wanted to go to bed and pretend he could sleep.
There had been a time when he would have gone for the sleeping potion he kept on the nightstand, gulping down a measure quickly before putting the bottle away again. That way the insane thought of emptying the bottle and most likely never waking up again had barely surfaced in his mind.

He didn't even think about the potion right now, not because he feared choosing the coward's way out, eternal oblivion, or even being reluctant of giving Harry more power over him by showing just how weary he was.

Making his way slowly to the bed, he watched Harry strip down to his boxers and then joined him under the covers without words. He didn't want to talk, didn't want to share things with Harry, knowing all too well that the idiot already knew most about what made him so angry anyway. He curled on his side, his back to Harry.

There was a rustling sound as Harry pulled covers over them both.

"Nox," Harry murmured quietly before lying down next to Snape, chest against his back. His arm curled around Snape's body instinctively and he sighed as he could feel how tense Snape was.

He waited for a moment, his touch light, just a reminder that Snape wasn't alone here. Then, he pulled Snape a little closer, muttering, "Come here, you."

For a moment Snape tensed even more. He was not in the mood for this and sex would certainly not bring the slightest of relief tonight. It would only remind him of the time when all the pain and the sorrow had been hidden under layers of debauchery, turning him into something he didn't want to remember anymore.

Harry's arm around him tugged him back a little.

"That's better." There was a soft kiss on his cheek. "Good night, Snape."

Swallowing hard, Snape closed his eyes.

There was a soft sigh behind him and then silence. No other touches, no words; only a warm presence against his back, steady breathing caressing his neck.

He waited for words, maybe awkward consolences or empty phrases and then realized that there would be none. Harry wasn't stupid enough to ask if he wanted to talk about it, and wouldn't waste his breath on futile condolences.

The realization made him relax slightly, molding his back against Harry's chest.

The world didn't become a better place because of the idiot holding him. This simple touch took away no memories, cured none of the old hurts. But somehow it was enough right now.

Relaxing completely into the strong embrace, Snape pushed all thoughts away, content on just lying here with Harry until he could drift into fitful sleep.

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Part 7

Amazingly enough, it was Blaise Zabini who actually asked Harry how he was doing the next morning as he sat down at his usual place at the Headquarters to read through the reports piled on his desk.

It was equally amazing that when Harry said he was fine, he wasn't lying.
Suppressing a yawn, Harry ignored the way people were staring at him and wished he could have stayed in bed instead of dragging himself back here so damn early. But he'd known he was needed here even before Snape had said it after breakfast.

Duty before anything else and all that crap.

The thought brought a cold smile to his lips, probably shocking everyone even more than his early appearance with the Potions master.

He was glad he'd followed his instincts and stayed with Snape last night; no matter how he accepted his place in their world, he wasn't going to sacrifice everything in order to keep up appearance. So if people wanted to see his absence as grief or shock, they were allowed to do so.

Yesterday had been awful, and the badly slept night only slightly better, but Harry knew that whatever Voldemort had intended to do with his attack, he had failed.

Snape's calm and quiet words this morning had showed he wasn't crushed under the remorse, just as Harry couldn't really find it in him to wallow.

A part of him wondered if that was a bad thing; if he should feel awful and blame himself. But he simply didn't have it in him to waste time doing exactly what Voldemort wanted.

He was going to sit through yet another day of endless meetings and maybe practice dueling with Arabella later on, maybe when the others were doing something else and he could fight as dirty as he wanted, knowing that she wouldn't be shocked by anything he threw at her anymore.

Sighing, he focused his gaze on the report again.

The small room was half empty, most of the people lounging around reading or scribbling down things were younger members of the Order and Hogwarts professors. Harry was glad of it; the new people always seemed to be so very much aware of where he was and what he was doing, and the peaceful atmosphere was exactly what he needed right now. No one was approaching him with anything, no one wanted to ask him questions.

Harry leaned against the backrest of his chair, stretching his legs in front of him and looked around.

Maybe he should have a cup of tea like Blaise who was sitting near by, his face blank as he sipped from his cup. He was certainly not going to pay any attention to the heated discussion between McGonagall and Hooch on the other side of the room, nor was he going to spend one moment worrying about the rather theatrical way Trelawney was shuffling through her deck of cards.

He pushed the report away, spotting extra cups on the table next to Blaise. A cup of tea was never a bad idea. "Hey, Blaise, you mind if I..."

Blaise turned around slowly at his hesitant words, his expression showing nothing but confusion. Even as Harry's words died away, he cocked his head as if he was hearing things that weren't really making sense, trying to pinpoint the source.

"Er... Blaise?" Harry looked at the Slytherin, wondering if he should alert someone. It almost looked like Blaise was going to have a fit.

Raising his head as if to look at Harry, Blaise tensed, his whole body going rigid. "Harry!"

It didn't sound pained, but Harry leaned forward anyway, ready to catch Blaise if he fell. "What is it?"
That wasn't exactly what Harry had expected. "Huh?" He cast a look around instinctively, even though he knew Blaise couldn't see anything in the room, but there was no trace of Snape anywhere.

Frowning, Blaise shook his head. "Something's not right. No, wait..." He raised his face a little, sightless eyes staring at nothing. "Draco?"

Harry stood up. "What's wrong?"

"Trouble!" Scrunching his scarred face into a deep frown, Blaise turned to Harry, starting to get to his feet as well, as if something was calling for him. There was no sign of hesitation in him anymore. "Snape and Draco are in trouble. Go to them! Now! Go!" He gestured unerringly at the door.

There was something compelling about him, making Harry gawk for only a second before running across the room as fast as he could.

Behind him, the room was full of shocked babble, Trelawney's voice raising above the commotion in a wail about Blaise Zabini having the Sight.

Harry didn't really care what had caused Blaise to urge him to go; it could be the Sight or it could be intuition similar to Draco's or maybe it was something quite different. The only thing that mattered was the uneasy feeling between his shoulder blades telling him that something was indeed wrong and that the only thing that mattered was getting to Snape and Draco before anything bad could happen.

Right now, those two should be in a meeting with people who were planning the extended training sessions. That meant Remus would be there as well and wherever he was, Sirius would be too. Harry refused to think they would have anything to do with the naked panic in Blaise's voice, more concerned that they might be in danger as well.

Passing by groups of stunned people, he ran towards the big training hall, hand already reaching for his wand.

This should be a safe place, safe from Voldemort and his people. He couldn't even guess what was happening, but that one thing kept playing in his head; the wards should indicate if it was a Death Eater attack, and anything else was just too horrible to contemplate.

"Harry! Thank Merlin you're here!" Lavender called out from the other side of the hallway. "They've gone insane!"

Not pausing to even ask of whom she was talking, he pushed his way through a group of gawking youngsters and stepped into the training hall just in time to see one of the Aurors he'd seen at the scene at Godric's Hollow aim a curse at Draco.

It was an insane scene; a battlefield inside the Order Headquarters, the fight almost like an organized training session if not for the looks on everyone's face.

Harry could only stare as Draco deflected the curse and then another one was aimed at the Aurors, not by him or Snape who was standing right there next to him, but by Bill Weasley who was covering his youngest brother with his body, his look grim. Next to him, two other redheads stood with their wands aimed at the Aurors.

Like so many times before, a strange calm set on Harry and he catalogued the situation with no hint of emotion. Two Aurors were down, but it didn't seem to concern the rest of them, more intent on
aiming curses at Draco and Snape than checking their comrades. On the other side of the room, Snuffles was growling low as he stood between Remus and the curses, the warning coming from his throat the only sound echoing in the room before yet another curse was aimed.

That made Harry's detachment disappear and he banged the door fully open, stepping into the room.

"Enough!"

Everyone froze instantly.

In the sudden silence the yell caused, the Weasley brothers moved closer to Ron as if it was as important to them as breathing. Remus sighed with relief, putting his wand away and sharing a knowing look with Sirius who had morphed back into his human form the moment the door banged open.

The parchments on a side by table were fluttering as if they were disturbed by a magical wind. Lights were flickering, and the sense of barely controlled rage filled the room.

Squeezing his hands into fists, Harry stood there, taking in the situation, glaring at the Aurors facing Snape and Draco, both those on their feet and those who were lying still on the ground. He ignored them after the first glance, concentrating on his friends.

"Are you all right?"

The parchments fluttered harder, a stack of documents falling on the floor.

"We're fine," Snape said, his tone unreadable.

Harry wondered if it was pride talking. He knew Snape wouldn't admit he was in pain, not in front of anyone, especially the Aurors. "Would someone care to explain just exactly what is happening here?"

His tone indicated it wasn't exactly a question, and not aimed at his friends.

After a moment of silence, one of the Aurors cleared his throat. "We... We thought that... He said..." He looked down, unable to meet the angry green gaze anymore.

"Some of these people made comments about Slytherin Death Eaters." It was clear from Ron's voice that he couldn't believe he was saying this. "Er... Things got kind of out of hand after that."

"Yeah! He tried to curse us!" Outraged, one of the Aurors pointed at Snape who was still holding his wand ready. "With a Dark Curse!"

"Is that so?" Harry barely even looked at the Auror.

Snape nodded. "Yes." He offered no excuses or explanations. Words had never really changed anything. The facts were never on his side as long as his past was dragged into the daylight as a reason to justify attacks against him.

"They started it!" Sirius snarled. He didn't care about what the Aurors had said about Snape, but he drew the line on trying to curse Malfoy. Besides, having some hothead kill Snape would make Harry sad and no matter how he hated the git, Sirius never wanted that. No one was going to make Harry suffer if he could help it, and if someone were to have the satisfaction of killing Snape, Sirius thought that should probably be him.
At least the Aurors were smart enough not to cast any accusations on Sirius Black. Ever since Harry's little speech about his innocent godfather, they'd known better than to say bad things about him out loud. That didn't mean they would really trust the man.

No one who had been sentenced to Azkaban could be a true innocent. That simply didn't happen!

"But he cursed us with Dark Curses!" It was repeated as if the simple fact would be enough to explain every action.

Ron muttered quietly, "He didn't really hurt any of them." It had been strange to watch Snape fight the Aurors. Even stranger to stand next to him and assist him in his fight. He wasn't as good at curses as some, but even he could see when someone tried not to use unnecessary force.

The world was definitely turning upside down; him fighting Aurors, Snuffles defending Snape and Malfoy, and Harry looking angry enough to kill someone.

His own fingers felt nerveless and all he wanted was to put down his wand and lean against Bill. His big brother looked just as murderous as Harry did. Next to him, both Charlie and George were holding their wands ready, pointing them at the Aurors with no hesitations.

"Why?" The question hanged in the air unanswered until Harry added, "Why would you attack on any member of the Order?"

The looks he received for that were incredulous. Did he really need it spelled out? Why would anyone confront someone like Malfoy or Snape? The answer should be obvious.

"My parents were killed by the Death Eaters," one of the Aurors spat out. "His father was seen at their house." He pointed at Draco.

Harry nodded curtly. "When you see Lucius Malfoy, you can challenge him into a duel if you want to. I'm sure most of us will cheer you on. But in case you haven't noticed, this is not Lucius Malfoy. His name is Draco, and he's a member of the Order. He's not the enemy."

The Aurors fidgeted uncomfortably.

There had been rumors and eye witness reports of the things that had happened in Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, and it was documented that Draco Malfoy did not only live with Harry Potter but had actually saved his life a while back. Maybe he wasn't the enemy, but someone else in this room definitely was.

"Snape is a Death Eater. There is nothing he can ever do to change that!"

This time there were others nodding, with no sign of the earlier embarrassment. Attacking the boy had been dubious, but this one was a legitimate target. They all knew it, had seen the Dark Mark on him.

"These men are both members of the Order. They're also both my friends. If anyone has a problem with that, they're free to leave." His voice didn't waver. "Of course leaving is only helping Voldemort and his people. Your choice."

"But..." It was clear the Aurors were not convinced.

Harry shivered at the rage that went through him. He had never felt like this towards anyone but Voldemort and his people and feeling the surge of white hot rage now was enough to make him nauseous. Squeezing his hands into fists, he growled out, "They are my friends." It didn't matter if
Snape didn't like him using the word; he would probably like the other descriptions Harry wanted to use even less.

The silence in the room was absolute.

"You don't harass them. You don't hurt them." Harry could almost feel Snape's disgusted glare on the back of his head and didn't turn to look at him. "And you definitely don't try to kill them!"

He wasn't going to tolerate this. They would have to learn how to work together if they wanted to beat Voldemort. "If you have a problem with my friends, you talk about it. With them or with me, or if you prefer, you raise the question with Minister Weasley. But if I ever see you raise your wand against either of them again, I will kick your sorry arses."

The Order members who'd slowly drifted into the room to see what was going on nodded in agreement.

They didn't really like Malfoy, but if he was going to fight his own family to do the right thing, he couldn't be a total git. With Snape it was different; dislike was too mild a word. Still, he'd saved their people and was helping them with the training.

Above all else was the loyalty they had to the Order. No one could argue that. If they had to choose between them or the Aurors, who had until now stayed locked in their ivory tower, hiding from the very real fight they were engaged in, the members of the Order would choose their own. Even if they were Malfoy and Snape.

"But.... It's Snape! He's a..."

Harry knew this couldn't become a real fight. Squabbles between Aurors and the Order would be utter stupidity. Keeping control over his emotions, he said quietly, "Snape has proven his loyalty over and over again. If I thought he was really a Death Eater, I would hex him myself."

He was certain the glare focused at him was murderous now.

It didn't matter. Snape could be as angry as he wanted, as long as he was alive. Everything he said was true. He trusted Snape. To make it absolutely clear, he repeated the words out loud, "I trust Snape with my life." All right, so it came out a bit differently than he'd planned, but he couldn't help it now.

That definitely shocked most of the people in the room, and not only the Aurors.

Not trusting his ability to keep other words unsaid, Harry muttered darkly, "Now get the hell out of here and don't come back before you've thought about what I said." His gesture towards the door was impossible to misinterpret.

The Aurors lined out without a word, most looking either shocked or embarrassed.

It was rather like a father sending his children to bed without supper.

"What a lovely declaration."

To Harry's amazement Snape actually sounded amused. Nodding firmly, he said, "I think they needed to hear the truth." Seeing the amusement turn into something slightly malevolent, he added, "Or at least a part of the truth."

Snape refused to comment on that, but he did wonder what the world would say if they knew what
Harry really meant with his words.

The crowd of Order members was slowly relaxing, people lowering their wands now that the Aurors were gone. Casting curious looks at the disheveled Slytherins as well as Harry, they started muttering at each other, all fairly excited by the near disaster.

"Is he really... You think Snape's your friend?" No one was surprised it was Lavender asking the question. She'd always been too curious for her own good.

Harry stared at her, not saying a word.

The atmosphere in the room was becoming oppressive the longer the silence continued. It didn't take long for most of the people to find some excuse to leave.

Walking out of the room after Parvati, Lavender whispered, "I told you I was right about that dear man all along!"

Snape shivered at that. Not again! He would rather face an army of angry Aurors than the well meaning Gryffindors.

Somewhere behind the Weasleys, Sirius couldn't completely suppress the snort that wanted to escape.

Ignoring the people walking out, Harry turned to look at his friends. "Is anyone hurt?" That was the most important thing, even though other questions would undoubtedly follow.

Bill Weasley shook his head in behalf of all the Weasleys, casting a glance at Hermione as well. "Nah, we're all right." He still didn't know what this was all about, but the moment the Aurors had started casting curses and Ron had stepped in the fight right next to Malfoy, it had become their fight as well.

He was not going to lose another brother, no matter what.

"We're fine." Leaning against Sirius even though he didn't really need the support, Remus nodded as well. "They didn't really get to do anything serious before you appeared; there were some words and then some shoving and pushing before the curses, that's all."

The look Harry cast at him showed that he should probably practice his calming words. These ones weren't really working.

Harry turned to the Slytherins. "And you?" He could see that Draco was just shaken and not hurt. He knew that Snape had most likely shielded him from most of the curses, Slytherin solidarity showing in this unexpected moment.

It made him look at Snape more closely. He knew that the stubborn man would probably hide any and all injury even from people who were trying to help, choosing to suffer in silence and then self medicate in the dungeons.

Managing to curb the touch just barely, Harry asked, "Are you all right?" He could see the way Snape cradled his arm and could bet it was more than just a scratch.

"I'm fine." The words escaped before Snape could even think how ridiculous they would sound accompanying a flinch.

"Stop being so damn brave all the time!" Harry put his wand away and grabbed Snape's arm,
noticing that his hands were shaking only when he touched the torn sleeve.

He was rarely this angry. It made him sick to think that this was done by those who were supposed to protect everyone. He didn't want to torture anyone, not even Voldemort. He wanted the war over, and if that meant killing the Dark Lord, then he would do it, but not like this. Not if it meant he was going to play with the man and take pleasure in doing so.

Muttering curses from under his breath, he peeled the black cloth away from Snape's arm, hissing with sympathy as he saw the blood. "You're bleeding!"

"What an astonishing observation." Of course he was bleeding! Snape wondered what inanity would come next. 'You're hurt?' It would definitely not surprise him.

"You'd better go and see Poppy about this." Harry doubted he would. More likely he'd try to heal it himself. "I'll come with you."

"You most certainly will not," Snape said. He didn't even bother to try to sound outraged at the suggestion; it was exactly what he'd anticipated. "I can take care of myself."

Harry wanted to disagree, but he managed to bite his lip. After a moment, he gave a curt nod. "All right. Go on then." He gazed at Hermione. "Would you please escort Snape back to Hogwarts? Take Mundungus with you just in case."

He was not going to see another one of his friends get hurt.

"Okay." Hermione was definitely not looking at Snape as she nodded, knowing that he would not like this at all.

"I don't need an escort!" Outraged, Snape drew himself straighter, ignoring the piercing pain on his arm. He was used to such agony already and didn't need this kind of fussing over.

Instead of arguing, Harry simply said, "Please." He didn't even try to hide his worry.

This was the one thing Snape couldn't argue against, not in public, and usually his half hearted arguments in private didn't work well either. "Fine!" He swept out of the room and headed towards the exit, not even waiting to see if Granger or anyone else was following him, quietly muttering darkly about the stupidity of overprotective idiots.

Back in the small meeting room, Harry was slowly letting go of the control, finally acknowledging the fact that he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. Damn it! Seeing the Aurors flinging curses towards his friends would probably haunt his dreams for a long time.

"Harry?" A hand landed on his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

Looking up, he saw Ron's concerned expression. He opened his mouth to say something vaguely assuring, but found out that he couldn't. "No." A deep breath. "I'm not all right. Those idiots almost killed you. They know you're my friends, and they still tried to..."

The bile rising to his mouth made him gag. They had really tried to hurt Draco and Snape. Maybe even kill them.

Looking around to see if there was something he could smash, he met with Bill Weasley's worried gaze. It made him hold his tongue, even though it was harder now to hold the nausea back. Seeing the four Weasley brothers stand side by side only reminded him of the losses.
He never wanted to lose another friend again. Not ever.

"No one really likes Slytherins." Nodding knowingly, George added, "And I've never heard anyone call Snape their friend before." He shook his head. "Defies all laws of nature."

Ignoring the heartwrenchingly familiar speech pattern, Harry squeezed his wand tighter. He knew it was a joke, but he didn't find it at all funny. "You don't know what you're saying." His throat hurt with the low growl his voice had turned into.

"Harry!" Seeing the rage bloom again in his friend's eyes, Ron stepped in before something horrendous happened. He knew Harry was mad at the Aurors and not George. "It's all right."

"No! It's not all right! They tried to kill my family! It's not all right!"

Maybe the Aurors had targeted only Snape and Draco, but they had ended up fighting against Ron and Hermione and Sirius and Remus and that was something Harry could not forgive!

Silence fell into the room after his declaration, broken only by his harsh breathing. The Weasleys all shared a very knowing glance of shared grief, while Draco was staring down at his shoes, mind completely blank.

Holding out his hand, Remus kept Sirius from going to Harry. He sensed it was too early for hugs. Sirius wouldn't admit it, but he was glad of his touch. His mind was full of insane laughter at the word friend being used at someone like Severus Snape and the strong hand on his arm was grounding him, keeping the hysterical chuckles at bay.

"Harry..." Ron said quietly. "We're all right. No one got hurt. We're fine." He even made a gesture at Malfoy, who was still looking at the ground.

For a moment it looked like Harry would nod. Then he shook his head instead. "You and Malfoy are, but they hurt Snape." The rage was building again. On the table, the parchments were fluttering once more. "They tried to kill him!"

He wanted to scream out the words, march into the meeting hall and declare that any assault against his friends, especially Snape, was a direct assault on him.

"You really like Snape?" Open curiosity that was so clear in George's eyes also echoed in his voice. "Like, really like him? Honestly?"

Harry looked at him, unable to control his expression. All his fear and anger were plain to see. "Yes." He wondered how many times people would ask him this.

"I think we should leave the kids alone now." Murmuring the words quietly, Remus tugged on Sirius' sleeve. He was a bit astonished to have his friend follow him without speaking, but was glad anyway. Sirius would probably rant and rave later, when they were alone, but that would be all right.

He didn't think Harry could handle any more arguing right now.

The slam of the door barely registered as everyone was still staring at Harry, most in confusion.

It was George who let out the, "Why?" He sounded genuine in his confusion. Why would anyone like Snape? This had to be a joke, the biggest joke of all times, and he couldn't see the punch line.

Harry took a deep breath. It helped to dissolve some of the rage, but otherwise it didn't do anything
to help. He'd known all along that sooner or later one of the Weasleys would ask the question, and he had no idea what to say to them.

He glanced at Ron, wondering if he could just blurt out the good old 'Harry is shagging Snape!'. That way he wouldn't have to explain it to anyone in his own terms.

To his disappointment, his friend just stood there, looking slightly embarrassed, as if determined not to say it again, even if he wanted to.

"I'm... Seeing Snape," Harry finally said. It sounded inadequate even in his own ears.

His words didn't seem to register. The older Weasleys were waiting for an explanation that would make sense.

"I'm with Snape. Seeing him. You know?" The way everyone kept staring told Harry that they didn't. "Oh for crying out loud! I'm having a... I'm with Snape! As in him and me and stuff!"

Three stunned pairs of eyes focused on Ron, asking for some kind of a confirmation. Grimacing at his brothers, Ron nodded. "Yeah. You got it right." He almost made an obscene gesture, but curbed it at the last minute, knowing Harry would probably curse him with something even Bill would have problems breaking. Or tell everyone he was shagging Malfoy. He didn't know which would be worse.

Bill tried very hard to act as if he wasn't totally stunned, failing miserably. Next to him, Charlie was frozen in place, able to only stare at Harry with his mouth open. He could understand people raising dragons and breaking ages old curses. Compared to having a relationship with someone like Snape, they were a piece of cake.

"Really?" George didn't pause to think as he saw Harry nod. "Is he any good?" His gaze glinted with mirth.

A couple of years ago that information would have been worth his weight in Galleons.

His brothers all groaned. "George!" It was definitely not tactful to say something like that. However, all four Weasleys were intrigued on whether Harry would answer or not.

Harry hoped he wasn't blushing. He knew Ron and his brothers, and they would tease him forever for it. "That's none of your business."

"Whooa! That good, eh?" George crowed out.

The leer was such a normal reaction; the first time Harry didn't feel like there was something very wrong about being with Snape. It made him grin back at George. "Well if you really must know..."

"No!" It came from Ron, echoed by his older brothers. "We really don't need to know that. Ever."

Seeing that George was going to say something, Bill placed his hand on his brother's mouth just in case.

It was good to laugh at the whole thing.

Harry waited until even Ron stopped laughing, wishing he didn't have to remind them all of what was going on and knowing it was still his job. "Bill, I need to talk to your father. Would you please go and ask him to come here as soon as he can?"

He didn't want to ask any of the Aurors or the Ministry officials working in the Headquarters. He
didn't trust any of them, not like he trusted the Weasleys.

"Yeah." Recognizing the question as a barely veiled order, Bill nodded immediately and headed towards the door with Charlie and George in tow.

The sound of the door closing behind them was loud, echoing in the training hall.

Before either Ron or Draco could say anything, Harry muttered, "Fuck!" Slowly, he managed to push his wand under his robes.

It was so uncharacteristic to Harry, Ron could only stare for a while. Damn, such language was his way of coping, not Harry's, and as soon as the thought materialized, he realized just how silly he was being. "Yeah. Indeed."

Draco said nothing, keeping his distance from the two Gryffindors.

Harry looked at Ron, his expression grave. "Thank you. I..." He didn't know how to say it. Ron disliked Snape, and no one really knew what he thought of Draco, probably Ron didn't know that himself either, but he had stood between them and the Aurors anyway. "Thank you, Ron."


Looking slowly up from the floor, Draco muttered, "Yes. Thank you, Weasley." For once, there was no hint of sarcasm or a leer on his face.

Ron didn't know how to deal with Malfoy being honest and earnest, so he just shrugged. "Yeah." He didn't want to look too closely at the anger that had driven him to draw his wand at the Aurors, but it was a safe bet to say that it hadn't been to protect Snape.

"I... I should go and..." Gesturing at the door leading to the small changing room right next to the training hall, Draco hurried away before anyone could say a word.

Harry realized he probably needed some time alone. "We'll wait for you here." Turning to Ron, he muttered quietly, "I want you to stay with him today. Make sure none of the Aurors get close to him. Can you do that?"

Since it was a request for a favor, Ron could nod without hesitations. He'd thought of the same thing, but there was no force on earth that would make him volunteer to keep Malfoy safe. Not without a nudge from a friend anyway. "Sure."

The two friends stood alone in the large room, neither finding the silence oppressive, not really paying attention to the sounds of people walking and talking in the hallway. The door was firmly closed and Harry was certain no one would come to see what was going on.

Merlin! Wiping a hand down his face, he sagged against the wall. His hands weren't shaking anymore, but he knew the nausea would stay with him for a long time. It was a natural reaction to the shock, and he could only imagine how much worse it was for Ron, who had actually faced the Aurors with a wand drawn.

Squirming a little next to him, Ron murmured, "Harry... You..." He sounded like he didn't know how to finish that.

Harry let out an encouraging grunt, "Yes?" They were past all the lies and obfuscation. Whatever Ron needed to ask, he could. He'd try to even answer honestly.
"Do you ever have nightmares about those Death Eaters? When... When Bill... I mean when you... You know." Voice quiet, Ron let the words slip out. He didn't look at his friend, didn't want to see the pain his question would quite probably cause.

There was a long silence. Harry kept staring into the dueling platform on the far side of the room, his eyes unseeing. Did he ever dream of the men he had killed? He knew he could never tell his friend just how often. He dreamed of killing them over and over again or them killing Bill and Molly Weasley. Some nights the Death Eaters won, and he could see the green sparks flying at him.

The worst nights, their dead bodies morphed into Cedric Diggory, staring at him with unseeing eyes.

"Sometimes," he said, his voice tight in his throat.

Ron had known the answer, but he'd hoped he'd been wrong. "Do the dreams ever get better?" He didn't want to think he'd spend years seeing Terry's dead body in his dreams or staring into an Auror's wand as he stepped between it and Malfoy.

"I don't know." Harry wished he could assure his friend, but he couldn't. "I hope they will."

The quiet words made Ron stare. He'd never heard Harry sound like that; as if he'd seen too much and been through things that he did never want to think about again. It had to be the truth, and he hated it. "Oh." What could he say to that? Nothing, really.

Harry seemed to think that as well. "Yeah," he sighed.

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**Part 8**

There was only one meeting in the meeting hall that day.

It didn't take long for the story of what had happened spread throughout the Headquarters, and for once people read their glorious leader correctly and didn't even try to approach him.

Harry didn't say anything about the incident as he returned to the reports with Ron and Draco almost as his shadows, except when he offered his thanks to Blaise Zabini.

The whispers became even more excited when Remus Lupin, Sirius Black and Minerva McGonagall joined the small group, all looking angry enough to hex someone. None of them really said anything, simply sat there and pretended to be busy with reports.

Waiting.

It was almost lunch time when the waiting finally ended with a group of redheaded men arriving in the Headquarters. Arthur Weasley barely stopped to greet Harry Potter before going to see to his youngest son, ignoring his protests that he was fine and pulling him into a hug.

That was a clear hint of how their new Minister felt about the earlier incident.

Announcing that there would be a meeting right after lunch, Harry guided Arthur Weasley as his guest to the mess hall and spent most of the lunch hour concentrating on his food instead of the worried looks that were thrown at their way.

Harry didn't like telling Mr. Weasley what to do, but right now, he didn't think it would be wise to confront the Aurors himself. Technically, they could still be considered to be under the Ministry's jurisdiction.
To his surprise, Arthur Weasley had nodded, looking slightly uncomfortable at the power he wielded, but prepared to deal with any problem he faced.

It shouldn't have been as big a surprise as it was, Harry thought, managing the first genuine smile in hours.

Even though the announcement had specifically mentioned 'Ministry officials, the Aurors and all those who had nothing better to do', the meeting hall was packed with people. Murmuring quietly, the Order members looked around to spot familiar faces, waiting to see Harry appear next to the Acting Minister any time now.

Harry stood just outside the door, hidden in shadows.

He wasn't prepared to face anyone right now, not wanting to be the one to tell these people to stop fighting amongst themselves as if he was the greatest authority here.

Watching quietly from the crack between the door and the stone wall, he focused his gaze on Arthur Weasley who was talking quietly to Dumbledore. He wondered if his reluctance to leave completely was because deep inside he knew he would be needed. Most likely. He was a realist, and only the most idiotic optimist would think this meeting would go well.

He had to force himself not to push the door open as he saw Snape appear in the meeting hall, his arm in a sling.

They were all in there; his friends and family, his Order and the Ministry, all ready to sit down and talk and still they were waiting for something more.

Well, if they were waiting for him, they'd have to wait for a lot longer.

Eventually Arthur Weasley stood up and raised his hand. "All right then." There was enough steel in his voice to make everyone quiet down.

Harry was impressed.

"I would like to know exactly what happened earlier today." Casting a look at the group of Aurors sitting close by, Arthur prompted, "Now."

One of the men that had been most enthusiastic about the attack stood up and gave a short but precise account of the fight as if he was used to reporting battles. He probably was.

"At the beginning of the meeting about training, Yabbersmith questioned the use of Unforgivables and other curses. There was a slight disagreement during which Mr. Lupin made a comment about things not being as black and white as some people wished to think."

There was excited babble and most people turned to stare at Remus who sat there with a carefully crafted nonexpression on his face.

The Auror cleared his throat. "There was some... heated discussion about the morality of teaching, followed by some questions about the teachers themselves."

This time the babble was just as excited, but the looks were aimed at Snape.

"Yes, professor Snape was the target of most such comments, and if I may say so, justifiably so!" the Auror added.
"No, I don't think you may say so, Mr. Purvis." Arthur Weasley shook his head slightly. "Go on."

A bit flustered, Purvis took a moment before continuing his story. "Er... Yes, sir. It was at that point that we noticed Mr. Malfoy in the room. Things got out of hand soon after that."

Harry could well imagine. No matter how much he liked Draco, he could be a smug bastard at times, and it was clear that simply looking into his face was too much for some people. It didn't make it right, but it explained some things.

"So you threatened Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes." Purvis shrugged. "But he made some very nasty comments back, and then things got heated and..." He made a shrugging gesture. "There were curses."

Arthur Weasley nodded. "I see." He tapped his fingers against the table before asking, "Who threw the first curse? And do be truthful, Mr. Purvis. We can do a Priori Incantatem on your wands as you well know."

Before Purvis could say anything, another Auror got to his feet. "I did, sir."

The man's confession caused yet another wave of shocked exclamations. In a battle between the Aurors and the son of Malfoy and a former Death Eater, it had been an Auror who cast the first curse? It sounded rather unbelievable.

Harry could hear words about Auror instincts and he shook his head slightly, glad that no one could see his expression. It was one thing to act instinctively in the field, where hesitation could kill you. Attacking people without a good reason led to murder.

He hated the fact that Mr. Weasley would have to spell it out to the Aurors and tell them not to harass people. Their job was protecting and saving people, hunting things that harmed. Fudge's death and the attacks the day before had probably brought forth old fears and grudges, but no one should lash out like this.

"Mr. Yabbersmith." Arthur acknowledged the Auror. "You cast a curse at Mr. Malfoy. Then what happened?"

Glaring at Yabbersmith, Purvis turned back at the Minister. "Mr. Malfoy grabbed his wand and professor Snape followed his lead. It all became a bit rushed at that point."

"I see."

It was clear that Purvis could read Mr. Weasley's tone correctly, squirming as he forced the words out, "And then others joined the fight."

There was a silence as everyone stared at Arthur Weasley. It wasn't hard to guess what was coming next.

"Tell me, Mr. Purvis. When you saw Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black, Miss Granger and my sons stand up to defend both Mr. Malfoy and professor Snape... Did it ever occur to you that you might be doing something wrong?"

There was a slight commotion and then Moody stood up. "If I may, sir?" He waited for the nod before continuing. "Sometimes when facing Dark Curses, like these men did today, there is no time for second guessing."
Purvis nodded. "Yes. I... I mean, we know it was wrong to bring the civilians into the fight, but it was..."

"Wrong?" Arthur Weasley suggested. There was no trace of the usual jolly man in the hard look he cast at the Aurors.

"Yes, sir. We are prepared to apologize to Misters Black, Lupin, Weasleys and Miss Granger."

Purvis cast a look at the ones he was naming, giving each and every one of them a small bow. After a moment, he added, "And to Mr. Malfoy of course."

The way the Aurors around him glared made it clear they hadn't actually reached a consensus on that.

"Malfoy is a backstabbing basta....aaagh!" Yabbersmith groaned and grabbed his left foot as Moody's cane slammed against it with considerable force.

Harry felt waves of relief as most of the Order people started defending Draco, noticing how Ron was nodding at the words even though he said nothing himself.

He chose to see that as a good sign.

"Like I said," Purvis yelled over the commotion, "We are prepared to apologize, in written statements if necessary." He looked genuinely sorry.

It was however unclear if his remorse was due to the fact that he acknowledged that he'd been wrong or if it had dawned on the Aurors that drawing wands at the Minister's sons was a very bad career move.

Arthur Weasley nodded. "You may issue such apologies, but they may not be accepted." His tone indicated that he was not going to accept or forget any time soon. "You said Mr. Malfoy. What about professor Snape?"

No one said a word.

Harry closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against the cold stone wall. He hated this, absolutely hated a scene like this. He could only imagine how it would be for Snape; to sit there and listen to this and not be able to really do anything.

Yabbersmith let go of his foot and glared. "Snape is a Death Eater."

He didn't need to worry about anyone smashing his other foot. It was obvious that none of his colleagues would argue with that.

Dumbledore muttered, "Former Death Eater."

It was as if he hadn't said a word. Moody nodded. "You can't trust him! Ever!" His eye spun around wildly and then focused on Snape.

Minerva McGonagall stood up, casting a freezing look at Moody. "He saved my life, Alastor. I trust him."

Harry muttered the words quietly as well, glad that he wasn't the only one. He'd expected the way Draco nodded, but the hesitant way Ron seemed to agree with the former part of McGonagall's declaration made him swallow. Ron might not like Snape, but he wasn't an utter moron.
It was as if the Aurors couldn't even hear the protests, so locked in their hatred. "It's no crime attacking a Death Eater! It's justice!" Moody called out.

"Wild justice!" Arabella Figg yelled at him, "Attacking someone like that, it's not justice at all!"

Moody scoffed. "You don't believe that yourself!" Turning away from her, he addressed Snape directly. "No one's protecting your Death Eater hide anymore, Snape. The only thing that's kept you alive so far is Dumbledore's support and he's not the leader of the Order anymore." The fact made his wild eye roll in glee.

"No, but I am." It was the first time Harry said that out loud without feeling absurd need to laugh.

People swiveled to look at him march into the room.

Harry hadn't planned this, it had just happened; the moment Moody threatened Snape his legs had carried him here with no clear command from his mind. He wasn't going to interfere with stupidity, but he had no doubt the Aurors wouldn't try something after such a threat.

The desire to throw a few hexes at the Aurors was almost overwhelming.

He wanted to walk to Snape and say lots of things about friendship and trust out loud and maybe then Snape would just hex him for being a total idiot. No matter how amusing Harry found Snape's protests about his silly declarations, he knew there was nothing funny in a situation like this.

"And I'm telling you, any and all threats against the members of my Order -- any member of my Order -- will be a threat against me. It doesn't matter if you don't trust them, it doesn't matter what they're called or what they used to do. They are the Order of the Phoenix, fighting Voldemort. If you have problems with that, go and join his fight."

There was an absolute silence.

Harry stared at Moody until he looked away. Then he did the same with the other Aurors, noticing it got easier with each and every one.

"I will not make speeches about working together. We all know what we're doing and why. If you choose to help Voldemort by squabbling with each other, it's your loss." Harry could see the words hit the Aurors hard.

"There's no way in hell I'd join the Dark Lord..." Purvis muttered, squeezing his hand into a fist.

His sentiments were clearly shared by everyone.

Arthur Weasley was the one to voice it out loud. "No one wants that. What happened today... won't happen again."

"No, it won't." Harry agreed.

His calm words were even worse than angry threats, making it clear that the matter was not up for discussion.

People were nodding, some reluctantly and some with anger in their eyes, but no one seemed to wish to argue with Harry Potter.

"Then that seems to be it. Meeting dismissed."

The strangely anti-climatic ending of the meeting made some grumble, but a glance at Harry made
sure none of the complaints were actually said out loud.

"Oh, and before you go... I would like you to apologize for your actions in person." Harry took a step towards Snape, barely resisting the urge to put his hand on his shoulder. "My friends deserve that."

There was a shocked buzz at his words.

Since it was clear that Harry had said that to the Aurors only, people kept walking out of the door. To the Aurors’ relief, their leader seemed to be willing to wait until the door closed after the crowd, leaving only a few people in the meeting hall.

"Harry..." Shaking his head, Arthur Weasley got up and walked to Harry. "I truly am..."

"Please, Mr. Weasley." Harry smiled, knowing exactly how absurd it was to have this man try to apologize.

Seeing the knowing look in Mr. Weasley's eyes, Harry wondered about the insanity of this all. Here they were, the most powerful men in their world; one a young man who just wanted to live in peace away from the maddening crowd and the other a family man who would probably be most content polishing his plugs.

"This really won't happen again." Arthur would make sure it wouldn't.

Harry agreed. "I know. And who knows, maybe now they will try harder to work together." All such efforts would be needed when the time for real fights came.

He listened to the apologies half heartedly, relaxing slightly as Purvis continued to Snape after a few stilted but polite words to Draco and repeated his apology. Not wishing to humiliate anyone, he looked away only to meet Dumbledore's knowing gaze.

For a moment it looked like the old man could read his thoughts.

Harry had to wonder what would have happened if he'd just said out loud the thoughts that had been running through his head, that he trusted both Draco and Snape, that he had feelings for Snape. That if the Aurors had indeed managed to kill Snape, their great leader would have packed his trunk and left them without a word.

It would have caused unnecessary panic, but Harry knew beyond a doubt that he couldn't have stayed and played this part if Snape was gone. He would have left, probably after doing something horrible, and life beyond that was too awful to even contemplate.

He glanced at Snape, smiling a little at the way he was nodding at the Aurors with a haughty look on his face, and knew he'd been right when he had curbed all the declarations he'd wanted to make.

Turning away, he missed the very familiar twinkle in Dumbledore's eyes.

Part 9

Harry cast a worried look at the sky as he hurried out of their house. It looked like it would rain soon, the dark clouds gathering overhead. He could hear from the few softly muttered words that Draco agreed with his thoughts.

He knew he was late; the morning classes had already began and there would be at least a few
meetings held by busybodies and those who wanted an excuse not to spend the whole morning casting charms and hexes at each other. His people should be able to conduct themselves without his presence, but he was sure that as soon as he appeared, there'd be enthusiasts demanding his attention.

That was fine by him. After yet another poorly slept night, he welcomed the challenge.

Right now, there was another challenge waiting for him right beside him.

"Draco?"

Starting at the sound of his name, Draco muttered, "Yes?" as if he wasn't even listening.

"You want to tell me what's going on?" Harry asked. He had noticed Draco's reluctance to speak with anyone since the attack, and while the Slytherin was sometimes withdrawn, he usually spoke when someone asked him a question. Now he was once again doing that perfect door mat routine.

Draco stopped walking. "No, not really." There was hesitation in his voice.

"What is it?" Turning to face his friend, Harry prodded him a little, guessing that even the street was a better place for this discussion than the Headquarters.

Slowly, Draco looked up, not even trying to mask the intent burn in his gaze. "You don't want to know." There was a warning in his voice, but also a dare of sorts. Let Harry ask if he really wanted to hear what was going on in his mind.

Harry didn't need to ask again; he could see it clearly in Draco's eyes. "You're angry."

"You're damn right I'm angry!" And not in a good way. The anger had been simmering there ever since yesterday, not disappearing with the apologies or the frantic shagging with Weasley later that night. He had no idea when it would escape his control.

Sighing, Harry nodded. He could understand exactly what Draco was feeling, just as he'd known the sadness so evident in Ron earlier. It was all a part of being a human, being tossed into this insane situation with battles and tension and decisions you could barely live with afterwards.

"Those bastards!" Muttering it quietly, Draco waved his hand in the air, almost as if dismissing his own words. "And now that they've apologized..."

"There's nothing you can do. I know." Harry agreed.

"Yeah." Shuddering, Draco added, "No matter how much I might like to," Kicking someone's arse would help, but he couldn't really prove the Aurors right by starting a fight.

Harry started walking again, seeing that the clouds would probably empty their contents on them any moment now. When Draco matched his pace step for step, he asked quietly, "Want to do some training later on?"

He rarely trained with anyone but Arabella and Dumbledore, not comfortable with people who were either intimidated by him or who had no real skills. Draco would be a perfect opponent on every level.

The way Draco's expression seemed to brighten at he prospect told him he would get no special treatment in the dueling.
Perfect.

They managed to reach the Headquarters before it started raining, but Harry could see it would be a miserable day. Damn, what else could go wrong?

He bit his tongue before he could say it out loud to Draco. It would be really stupid to tempt fate like that.

The entrance hall should have been empty at this hour, but as Harry closed the door behind him, he could see someone sitting on a bench by the wall. Sighing, he wondered if he should just ignore whoever it was or go to see if there was something important for him to do.

"Seamus?" The name slipped out as soon as he realized who it was sitting there.

It was rare to see him here; Seamus had been one of the most anxious to join the Aurors in trying to stop raids, preferring doing things instead of sitting around and talking.

There had been occasions when Harry had envied him.

"I think I'll stay here for a while." Smiling at Draco, he walked towards Seamus. "Don't forget the training."

"I won't." With a curious glance at the Gryffindors, Draco walked away.

Harry rolled his eyes, knowing that their training session would probably attract a shocked crowd later on. Then he turned his attention back to Seamus, who looked like he hadn't noticed them enter. "Oi, Seamus!"

Moving his head slowly, Seamus looked up from the squirming bundle on his lap. "Oh. Harry. Hi." He didn't sound like he was happy to see him.

"Hi."

Harry didn't know what else to say, but it seemed as if Seamus wasn't expecting any words; he had already turned his attention back to the floor. Suppressing a sigh, he wondered if whatever problems Seamus had would be as easily dealt with as Draco's.

A moment later he realized that Seamus wasn't staring at the floor and avoiding his eyes like Draco had, he was staring at the small kitten now nestled on his lap. It was a familiar sight of sorts, he could remember how Seamus had cradled the kitten after leaving the dead witch's hut, refusing to let go of him for even a moment.

It didn't look like he was about to change his mind any time soon.

"Seamus? Are you all right?" There was hesitation in Harry's voice. Seamus had always been cheery and so eager to be involved in things, and now he was simply sitting there, looking forlorn.

Seamus looked up again, and this time there was a very fake smile plastered on his face. "I'm all right, Harry." He sounded tired.

Harry didn't comment on the obvious lie, turning his attention on the kitten. "And how is he? Have you named him yet?"

"Yes. His name is Zlito." Seamus' expression brightened just for a second as he looked down at the small furball. "After one of the cards Viktor Krum sent Ron a few years back."
"I remember." It was the last completely happy memory Harry had of that spring. "It's a good name."

Seamus nodded, keeping his gaze on little Zlito.

The others were already gathering in the big meeting hall, but he didn't want to get up. He'd come here early, unable to stay away but unwilling to actually join the others. The sounds all around him had felt harsh and unreal and all he'd wanted was to go back to his small apartment with his cat and never to come out again.

He knew what they would talk about today; more missions, strategies to help people in small villages all around their world, and patrols.

He also knew he couldn't go to the others and talk about it. He couldn't even think about it anymore. These past few months with all the fear and the pain and the killings were destroying him. Alice Skively's hut had been the last straw; he couldn't go into another scene like that again.

Not realizing that he was rocking himself back and forth while holding the kitten closer, he startled as a strong hand grasped his shoulder.

He saw the worry on Harry's face, but it was as if he was blurred somehow. "I'm all right." The sob in his voice ruined the message.

"Seamus..." Crouching down next to his friend, Harry muttered his name out. "You're not all right, and you don't have to be. It's okay to not be all right."

The tired tone just made Seamus' world blur even more. He opened his mouth to repeat his words, to assure Harry that he was really fine, but no words came out. Instead there was a blubbering kind of a cough, dissolving into nothing.

Sighing, Harry held on tighter as Seamus started to cry. With a flick of his wand, he conjured up a handkerchief and handed it to him.

He didn't like the implications of that small act, remembering a box of tissues appearing on his lap so long ago.

"I can't do this anymore, Harry." His eyes huge, Seamus raised the handkerchief to his face, trying to wipe off the tears that were running down his cheeks, holding the kitten tight against his face with his other hand. He'd never felt like this before; the mixture of desperation and embarrassment. He didn't want to be this weak, but doing this was killing him. He couldn't handle the fighting and watching people die around him.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment. He could see that Seamus was more than broken; he was shattered, with the shards of what he'd been chafing with every breath he took. "You don't have to. You don't have to."

"Really?" Seamus didn't believe his ears. He felt so small saying that to Harry, and had been certain he'd be ridiculed. Or cursed.

Harry nodded even though he knew he wouldn't see it. "Really. You don't have to do this anymore."

They had been under enormous strain these past weeks. He wasn't surprised to see how heavily that lay on people, especially on his former housemates, who seemed to feel like they were responsible for everything. It was a feeling he could recognize well.

He'd never have thought it would be Seamus who succumbed under the melancholia. Looking back
on all the things Seamus had witnessed, maybe he should have.

The mediwitches alone couldn't help now. Harry wondered if anyone could. He knew Seamus wouldn't want to leave the Order, or the fight, but he didn't see any option. Staying here would kill him.

It was best if his friend went home and he had the perfect excuse to send him there. "I was wondering if you'd do something for me." He swallowed at the desperate hope in his friend's gaze. "We need a place outside Scotland in case this goes badly. Someone has to organize us a safe house. How does Ireland sound to you?"

Even when they had talked about this, ages ago, the inner circle of the Order had known such a place would never be needed as anything beyond a safe harbor for those who couldn't handle the war. If Voldemort won, they would all be dead and not needing such a stronghold.

Seamus blew his nose, thinking for a moment. He looked back at the kitten who was clambering up his chest to lick away some of the salty moisture from his face. "I... It sounds fine."

"Good. Professor McGonagall has already planned on something that might work for us. I want you to take over the project. Can you do that?" Harry realized Seamus might not be the only one who'd be sent there. If the war stretched out for long, others would need this kind of help as well.

There was a hesitant nod. "You think I could take Zlito with me?" Seamus hugged the kitten as if he was his safety blanket.

Feeling like his throat was swelling shut, Harry nodded. "Yes. I think it's a good idea to take Zlito with you."

Seamus' smile was almost too much to bear.

They went to look for McGonagall, finding her at Dumbledore's side as usual. Harry explained the situation to her in quiet tones while Dumbledore took Seamus to find some treats for little Zlito, keeping his gaze away from hers. He knew this wasn't easy for anyone.

It went smoothly from there on; McGonagall acted as briskly as always, working on schedules with Mundungus Fletcher who had been the one to suggest these back up plans years ago. Seamus would have to travel on his own, but there would be people to stay with him when he reached the house, people who would be ready to welcome others as well, who would be able to deal with those who would crack under the pressure of all the fighting or maybe afterwards when yet another generation would be haunted by night terrors.

Harry had the sinking feeling that they wouldn't have to wait for long.

He watched the proceedings quietly, managing a few words to Draco when he came to ask if he wanted a rain check on their training. With McGonagall ushering Seamus away from the hall, he shook his head, knowing he wasn't going to be able to concentrate on anything important right now anyway.

Behind him, some of the younger Order members were whispering quietly, pointing at the door. Harry could well hear the name 'Finnigan' muttered, but chose not to pay attention to whatever they were saying until someone commented louder, "Damn stupid coward!"

He squeezed his hands into fists.

"Yeah. I can't believe that git actually roomed with Potter for seven years. And he calls himself a
Gryffindor!" It was followed by snorts and muffled laughter.

Turning slowly around, Harry glared at the small group of young men and women, casting a look full of contempt at them. "Has any one of you actually seen a battle or what's left of a home after a Death Eater raid?"

One of the witches who had been giggling opened her mouth and then shut it again with a snap. Then she shook her head.

Harry hadn't thought so. "Then don't make comments about things you don't understand. I call Seamus a Gryffindor and a friend." He managed not to say out loud what he'd call these people.

Why didn't people see what it was all about? Harry knew that if he could believe he might spend one night without nightmares, instead of blaming himself forever, he'd be right there leaving with Seamus. The duty others had piled upon him held him here and he knew he couldn't live with himself if he simply left people to die.

He still wished he could just go and live in peace.

Now everyone in the small group were avoiding his angry gaze. "Sorry, sir. We didn't mean it like that."

Harry didn't even try to find anything to say; he turned around before the angry growl could escape.

He didn't know what bothered him the most, the way these people ridiculed Seamus or the way they treated him. He remembered seeing some of them in the Gryffindor common room when he'd been younger, most faces familiar from Hogwarts; a student passing by or a cheering, smiling spectator at the Quidditch pitch.

Now they called him sir.

Noticing Draco following him quietly, he headed straight to the training hall, not answering any of the greetings as he tried to find a quiet arena for a training match. He wasn't in the mood for a conversation, and it was a relief to see that Draco was still holding on to his anger as well.

Good. Now they were an even pair, both almost tingling with nervous energy.

People knew by now not to come and interrupt Harry when he was training, but there was a small crowd forming near the door, mostly older Order members who tried hard not to look like they were standing guard and making sure no one got hurt. Harry ignored them, keeping his attention on Draco and the curses flying between them, knowing that the narrow world where there was nothing but survival was the best place to stay right now.

He was almost glad he had lost to Draco in chess most of the times they had played, for otherwise the Slytherin would probably look angrier when he lost their every duel.

Now, Draco just seemed happy to be able to fling curses at him and try to dodge the ones he returned.

When they were finally too exhausted to really aim a wand, Harry shook Draco's hand with a weary smile on his face and then headed towards the showers. Sharing an easy silence, they went through their ablutions, almost like old teammates; it was sometimes hard to remember the rivalry there had been between the two Seekers, even with the competitive nature of their duels.

There were others in the small locker room changing their robes. Harry nodded at Dean and one of
the Ravenclaws, not really looking for anyone's company right now.

It was clear from the somber looks thrown at his way that the word about Seamus had already spread through the Headquarters like wild fire.

Harry took his time toweling his hair dry and adjusting his robes, needing a moment before going back to the hallways and people and the noise that seemed to get louder every day. He barely acknowledged Draco leaving, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts he didn't really want to inspect too closely.

"Harry."

Looking up, Harry saw Dean walking by. "Hi, Dean." It came out almost as a sigh.

Dean's shoulders were set, his back ramrod rigid. "I'll... see you tomorrow then."

"Aren't you coming to say goodbye to Seamus?" Harry suddenly wondered if anyone would accompany him to the station, fearing his friend would leave thinking no one cared anymore. He hated the way things had deteriorated into this, especially when he couldn't think of anything he could have done to keep Seamus from slipping away.

After a brief hesitation, Dean shook his head, his expression completely blank. "No. I have nothing to say to him." Only his voice betrayed his anger.

"Dean... It's not his fault. He's not running away." Harry wondered why it was so hard for everyone to see. Like it was easier to label Seamus as a coward than it was to admit that the horrors of war would indeed drive even the bravest of them insane.

Dean shrugged. "Funny. That's what it looks like to me." Without other words, he turned around.

Harry watched Dean walk away.

He wondered if some day Dean would regret his decision and cursed the war that was tearing friendships apart so easily. There was nothing he could do for Dean, his housemate would have to make his own mind and then live with his actions.

It was raining as he walked Seamus to the station, warm raindrops falling on them both, a few even landing on the kitten that was firmly tucked under Seamus' robe, peeking from the open collar with eyes wide and curious.

Harry found it oddly befitting.

They weren't alone, Minerva McGonagall walking slowly beside Seamus, speaking softly about the safe house that would never be used as such. She was acting as if she was still responsible for Seamus.

Maybe in her mind she still was.

Seeing that talking about the house couldn't pull Seamus out of his gloomy thoughts, McGonagall changed the topic to cats and taking care of them. Apparently that was the right choice; Seamus' expression became less wooden and he even asked a few questions.

Harry smiled at McGonagall. It was great she was here, using quiet words and familiar tones to keep the mood from turning awkward.
The train was already waiting, the sight a bit strange considering that Harry had never seen a train here unless it was the Hogwarts Express, and even that seemed to operate only twice a year.

There were also three very familiar people waiting at the platform.

Harry was glad Hermione didn't hold back like Lavender and Parvati so clearly did and just came to hug Seamus.

"I... I guess this is it, then." Seamus didn't even try to pretend reluctant to leave, relief shining in his gaze as he looked at the train.

The words seemed to jolt Parvati and Lavender out of their stupor and the two girls descended on Seamus, hugging him and telling him to take care of himself. Lavender was sniffling as she let go, accepting the handkerchief from Parvati with a slight nod.

Looking a bit uncomfortable, Seamus turned towards the train, hopping on the first step before anyone else could hug him.

"Wait up!"

Freezing on the step, Seamus turned around to see Ron and Neville run to the platform. His expression was incredulous.

"Phew!" Ron let out a panting sigh. "We thought we'd miss you!"

Seamus' face lit up, and for a moment he looked almost like he used to. "You guys..."

"We got you something for the journey!" Neville smirked, waving a huge bag full of chocolate frogs. "Don't drop them all, or you'll have to spend the whole trip hunting for frogs. Like... you know."

That brought a wobbly smile on Seamus' face, a reminder of frog hunts and evenings spent in the Gryffindor Tower giggling as if you really could get drunk on chocolate only. He grabbed the offered bag and squeezed it against his chest while Zlito did his best to crawl inside the bag to investigate. "You guys..." He didn't seem to be able to say anything else.

Neville clasped his hand on Seamus' shoulder and then stepped to the side when Ron did the same.

There were promises to owl and halted words of farewell and then the train whistled to signal its departure.

For just a fraction of a second, Seamus hesitated. Then he shoved the bag of chocolate frogs under his arm and climbed on board the train.

"Bye, Seamus!"

Echoing Neville's words, Ron called, "Bye! Owl us!" He waved his hand as the train started moving.

"Good bye Mr. Finnigan. And good luck," professor McGonagall said. Her smile was genuine, widening slightly as she watched her former student wave back and then nuzzle against the kitten.

Harry stood there, staring for as long as he could still see the train. He didn't know what to think, what to feel. After sharing his life for seven years with Seamus, he hated watching him leave, but at the same time he was relieved. This was one friend he wouldn't have to watch die.

Shivering, he pulled his robe tighter around himself, and then turned to leave.
He blocked out Neville and Ron's babbling and the occasional word from Hermione, lost in his own wistful thoughts. The way professor McGonagall looked at him as she turned towards Hogwarts made him shake his head slightly, as if she had actually asked if he wanted to join her for the short walk.

This wasn't worse than what he had expected, the losses and the pain hurting just as much as he'd always thought they would. He needed to deal with this right now, on his own, for he knew that if he crawled into Snape's rooms right now, feeling raw, he might never have enough strength to leave.

It didn't mean he wasn't tempted, but he forced himself to walk to their house, keeping his face expressionless, not wiping the raindrops off his cheeks as they landed there and then rolled down slowly like tears.

He kicked his shoes off and refused to look at Ron as he fumbled with his own clothes next to him in the hallway, as if he was feeling the tension on his skin as well.

Ignoring the worried look on Sirius' face, Harry continued to walk towards the stairs, waving Hermione away when she tried to say something to him. He couldn't deal with words right now.

He knew his friends just wanted to make him feel better, but he knew they couldn't. Selfish beyond anything he'd ever done, he refused to be consoled just to make everyone calm down. Though he knew things would be all right, it felt like the world was falling apart.

And nothing was really going to change that.

Part 10

The continuing raids were a good indication of the overall situation. The open war everyone had been expecting would probably never come. This was what Voldemort's people would do; terrorize their world and kill all they could.

Dozens of Clabberts were sold almost overnight as people fortified their houses. Some even installed Muggle type alarm systems, especially those who lived close to Muggles. All around the wizarding world, the air seemed to shimmer from the force of the wards.

Fear had become their constant companion; one could sense it in the very air they were breathing. No one could turn their back on the news and the rumors anymore.

Voldemort was back.

The Order was getting bigger with people arriving almost every day to join them and training became more important than ever. No one could sit back and watch; Hermione was already used to tutoring the others and teaching healing charms and Ron was perfectly capable of assisting in the dueling. Draco's skills came in most handy, and after a few very pointed glares from Harry, no one dared to make any comments about the seemingly unending stock of hexes and curses he knew.

In the middle of all the classes, there were meetings, but now they weren't simple speculation and planning on actions they might never need.

"Before we start the meeting," Arthur Weasley grinned at Harry, looking nothing like a self important Acting Minister for Magic should. "Happy birthday, Harry!"

Harry grinned back, flustering a little as everyone in the room cheered. It was a small crowd; the inner circle of the Order -- these days consisting an extra set of young Gryffindors as well as two
young Slytherins -- joined by the Heads of the Houses and Arthur Weasley who was accompanied by a few Aurors, and he felt almost like home in their company.

Most of the meetings didn't start with toasts -- butterbeer -- and cake and it was almost unreal to sit here and watch everyone smile and eat cake and know that as soon as the impromptu celebrations were over, they would talk about the war.

Licking the whipped cream from his spoon, Harry had to admit he liked this. There had already been a few songs and more congratulations than he could count, and the almost mania -like cheer on everyone was disconcerting to say the least. But sitting here with his family and friends wasn't bad.

Not bad at all.

It was easy to get down to business after everyone had finished with their cake -- except for Ron, who was discretely munching on his third slice -- and concentrate on today's topic. For once it wasn't about the Order and their plans for the future.

Harry looked at Arthur. "What exactly has the Ministry done with all the complaints and accusations towards known Death Eaters?" He knew for a fact that there had been lots of them these past few months.

People needed to trust the authorities, even in the Wizarding World, and no matter how the Ministry had wanted to stand clear from anything concerning Voldemort, they would have received dozens of owls carrying testimonies.


Only Flitwick bothered to try to look surprised, everyone else just nodded. They hadn't really had any illusions about this.

Still, Harry could almost hear an echo of McGonagall's voice in the room, the words 'the ministry will do nothing' as clear as if she'd actually repeated them again. He glanced at her, knowing all too well how it felt to tell people the truth and be told he was being ridiculous.

He was not going to let something like that happen to any of those who had suffered. Not again. "Then it's time you do something." It felt weird to speak like this to Mr. Weasley, but Harry couldn't hold his tongue simply because he liked and respected the man.

Arthur Weasley nodded, looking determined. "Yes, it is."

"We need to make absolutely sure people know what we're up against. If you'd hold a press conference..." Harry was glad to see the nod. "Good. Then there's the matter of crimes that have been committed against people. There are people who are responsible for torture and murder."

Shocked coughs and mutters filled the room, most likely due to the calm way Harry stated that to their new Minister, the man who had already witnessed such horrors.

"Yes."

Harry was quiet for a moment, but since no one else wanted to add to the tension so palpable already, he said quietly, "I want you to issue warrants for the arrest of the following people. Peter Pettigrew, for betraying the fidelius charm, contributing to the death of..." He choked for just a moment. "James and Lily Potter, framing Sirius Black and killing Cedric Diggory."

On the other side of the table, Remus grabbed Sirius' hand in a tight grip.
Arthur nodded. "I'll see to it." He cast a surprisingly stern look at his Aurors who were staring with their mouths open.

One of the Aurors grabbed his quill and started to scribble it down on the parchment in front of him.

"Also for the arrest of Lucius Malfoy, for kidnapping and assaulting professor McGonagall and for the attack on the Burrow resulting in two deaths." No matter how he tried, Harry couldn't bring himself to say names here.

There was frantic sound of scribbling.

No one said a word for a moment, then McGonagall stated coolly, "I do believe the Ministry has already taken my testimony on the matter."

"Yes, as they have taken mine as well." Sharing a look of perfect understanding, Arthur Weasley nodded at her.

Harry was glad no one had succumbed into the endless apologies and explanations.

There were other names, other horrors, and Harry listed all he'd heard. Some were old memories -- McNair, Crabbe sr. -- some more recent ones -- the younger Crabbe and Goyle and Parkinson -- and they were all familiar to most of the people in the room.

Next to the Acting Minister, the Auror was already on his fourth parchment, scribbling down names and descriptions as quickly as he could, trying not to miss any that Harry mentioned and groaning as the others started to call out names as well.

His hand stilled as Harry Potter stated out the last name.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle. Also known as Lord Voldemort or You-Know-Who."

There was an utter silence in the room.

Harry smiled a crooked little smile. "I doubt I have to list all the things he has done to people."

Surprisingly enough, the older people in the room smiled back at him, their feral expressions just as full of memories of pain and hatered as his was.

From his place between Snape and Blaize Zabini, Draco said, "We all know what he's done, but there are things he probably wants to keep a secret. Like his ancestry. Minister Weasley, you might want to mention the fact that Tom Riddle is a half-blood in that press conference of yours."

The importance of his words already showed on Blaise's face. "Voldemort isn't a pureblood? I'll be damned!" He grinned brightly. "Oh that's just too perfect!"

Arthur looked from the now laughing Slytherin to Draco Malfoy, knowing exactly what he was implying. "I will. Thank you, Mr. Malfoy."

It was clear that it wasn't the response Draco had expected. Harry smiled at the confusion and slight embarrassment that showed on Draco's face for a few seconds before the well practiced nonchalance returned.

He wished he could end the official part of the meeting with this and maybe have another bite of the cake, but there was still something he needed to say. "Once you have the warrants, you might want to show them to the press as well, but I don't think you should send Aurors to actually arrest anyone."
Especially if that means going to the mansions to fight the battle on their terms. Just let it be known that all these people are wanted, and leave it to that."

Even as Arthur Weasley nodded, there were a few baffled looks cast at Harry.

"I don't want to start the big battles." Harry didn't say the word 'yet'. "But this will hinder their movements and it'll also make sure our world sees these people as they are; criminals."

That caused even more baffled looks, as if people hadn't even thought about Voldemort and his Death Eaters as something as simple as that.

Harry wasn't really surprised.

The meeting broke up after that, the Aurors rushing back to the Ministry so that they could write down proper warrants with the necessary paperwork. The others stayed behind, finishing with what was left of the butterbeer and attacking the rest of the cake.

Such a quiet show of caring was better than any pompous speech or expensive gift.

Arabella Figg pulled Harry into a tight hug. "Happy birthday, Harry. And many more to come!" she whispered fiercely.

Harry smiled at her. "Thank you."

Fletcher offered him his hand and more well wishes as did professor Flitwick before he was unceremoniously pushed to the side as professor Sprout enfolded Harry in a tight heather scented hug.

Soon everyone flocked around Harry, either shaking hands with him or hugging him. It was easy to allow the touches with these people and not feel crowded or weirded. He hugged Hermione, laughed at the very evil look in Draco's eyes as he shook his hand again and muttered 'Harry'. He flustered and then smiled with wonder as McGonagall touched his arm briefly after congratulating him.

Dumbledore's benign smile and cryptic words about the importance of this day made Harry shiver a little, but the feeling of unease was forgotten soon as Ron wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

Pulling his robes back in order after the Weasley group hug, Harry came to stand before Snape.

"Happy birthday, Potter," Snape stated with a brief nod.

"What, no hug?" Harry asked, an evil glint in his eyes. "I'm hurt, Snape."

Leaning closer, Snape muttered, "I do not wish to make a spectacle of myself in front of a group of Weasleys who are staring at us right now, looking like they're expecting something."

That made Harry glance at Ron and his brothers who were indeed staring at them, Ron looking like he was tasting a slug in his mouth and George giving him a not so subtle thumbs up and a wink.

He groaned. "I should have guessed..."

"I assume you felt necessary to inform the Weasleys of our..." Snape hated the fact that he still couldn't think of a word to describe what was between him and Harry. The closest he could come up with was 'courting', and the mere idea made him scoff. "Thing."

Harry nodded. "Yeah." He wondered if he should apologize, but he didn't feel like he should apologize for being happy about what they had. "Sorry I didn't tell you earlier." That would have to
be enough for Snape.

"I see." Shaking his head a little, Snape offered Harry his hand. "If you want a hug, you will have to wait until we're in private. Say, in my rooms tomorrow after lunch?"

"Yeah. I'll be there." Harry held Snape's hand, brushing his thumb against one of the familiar ink stains. He let his touch linger longer than was really necessary, knowing Snape didn't really mind since he didn't yank his hand away. Tomorrow would be a quiet day anyway, and it had been ages since he'd just spent time with Snape.

Snape squeezed his hand softly before letting go. "Just be careful when you come to Hogwarts tomorrow. You know what day it is."

"Yeah." Harry knew he would be on his guard tonight as well, remembering all too well that Voldemort had plans for him. "I will be."

Being reminded of how Snape didn't even try pretend he wasn't concerned for his safety anymore made him feel warm inside, and even though his message had brought back memories of insanity, Harry was smiling softly as he finally stepped away from Snape.

As he turned to leave the room, he got another wink from George.

There would be more well wishers milling around the Headquarters, most used to the forbidding look he threw at anyone who came too close and simply waving at him and calling out their congratulations. He had told Ron firmly that he did not wish to spend his birthday in a crowd, pretending everything was all right, but would like to have dinner with his family and maybe all the Weasleys who might be able to join them.

Ron had looked a little disappointed, but even he couldn't really find the idea of a party appealing anymore. The joy of organizing one had died with Terry Boot.

Sighing, Harry walked across the hallway, his head already focusing on the work waiting for him today, patient enough to deal with their world today as he knew he could have time for himself tomorrow with Snape.

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**Part 11**

Harry shivered as he stepped into the familiar rooms in the dungeons, the temperature lower in here than it had been in the hallway. It almost made him groan as he felt the coldness hit him like a wave, realizing it wasn't physical.

He'd spent most of the morning grinning like a loon, just counting the hours to lunch so that he could go to see Snape, planning on a few clever remarks on hugging and then just crawling under Snape's robes and not letting go.

It had been such a great plan but he could already see that he wasn't going to be able to follow it after all.

What the hell had happened this time?

He didn't have to wonder long. Snape was pacing back and forth, looking about as friendly as an enraged dragon, only casting a disgusted glare at Harry and resuming the pacing without words.

So it was anger instead of pain and fear and Harry sighed with relief as he went to sit on the couch.
This was so much easier to deal with.

When he realized that Snape was simply going to walk around looking menacing, he cleared his throat. "What happened?" No need to start with pleasantries.

Snape stopped with his back turned at him, hands squeezed into fists. Then he turned around, his expression revealing nothing. "Albus... suggested that I should move out of Hogwarts." He sounded hollow.

"What?" Harry blurted out. He was on his feet before he could even think. "Albus is kicking you out?"

His thoughtless comment earned him a glare. "Yes."

Harry could only stare. Of course Snape's words made sense; Dumbledore had to think about the school and the students who would be arriving shortly. With all the Slytherins and others from proud pureblood families, Snape would be in danger. "So he really thinks people will send their children here this year?"

It was an appalling thought. They really were at war, and if there were any fights near Hogsmeade, everyone would be in danger, not just those who actually willingly took part in the battles. Even with exactly a month to the beginning of the school year, things would not change enough to make the place completely safe.

Not even if everything worked out as planned.

"I have no idea." It wasn't as if Snape had stayed there for a long discussion after Albus had asked him to find another place to stay. The message had been clear; he wasn't needed here anymore, so he had to leave. Kicked out of the place he'd called home for almost two decades like all those years meant nothing.

Going into hiding to save the teenagers had been completely different. Draco Malfoy had been his responsibility and he'd done his duty as always. This was not a temporary plan, this was permanent.

Harry thought for a moment before asking, "What are you going to do?" He had no idea what he would do if he was in the same situation; he'd probably walk away from the world that had never wanted him in the first place.

"I will move into Hogsmeade." Stating it out as if it was ridiculously obvious, Snape didn't bother to even think about the question of housing yet. With all the people moving into the village, there would be no appropriate place for him to stay, no rooms big enough for a small personal corner and an adequate space for brewing.

The thought was worse than anything. He wasn't useful as a spy and if he couldn't work with his potions either, he was indeed completely useless.

Dumbledore's casual dismissal smarted more than anything, even with the sympathy shining in the old wizard's eyes as he had told him it was time to leave.

"Okay." Harry nodded. "It's not fair, but I do understand his point. If you stay..."

"There will be open fighting inside the castle. Yes, Potter, I know that." The anger bubbling inside Snape was focused on Harry for just a brief moment before the man turned his gaze away.

Understanding all too well just how mad Snape had to be, Harry didn't let the furious glare touch
him. They both knew what it would be like if pureblood children were forced to take sides against their muggleborn housemates, and preventing that would be hard work. With someone like Snape there, acting as the Head of Slytherin... It would be impossible.

"Yeah. So... Hogsmeade? Good. We need you there." It came out quietly but firmly. "You're the best Potions master I know, and you also know the enemy; the Order needs you now more than the school does."

Harry wanted to add that he needed Snape, but didn't think that would count as a valid argument right now.

"Please! I'm the only Potions master you know." Exasperated, Snape turned to Harry again. The idiot was unbelievably bad with these assurances, even though they didn't sound exactly patronizing.

"That doesn't change the fact that you're more needed with the Order than you are here."

Snape wanted to argue that if only out of principle. He knew that they needed his work, but it didn't change the situation. He was going to have to leave this place, and he hated it. Hated changing the solid walls into a flimsy apartment or a room over the Three Broomsticks.

This was his home, his sanctuary. No one would bother him here and there was blessed silence surrounding him. He didn't want to be forced to meet with idiots all the time. He could have dealt it if there were only Order members living in Hogsmeade, but with multitudes of Aurors everywhere, life would undoubtedly be hell.

Nothing new there, Snape shrugged. He had survived worse.

The small gesture was a reluctant agreement, elegant in its simplicity. Inside, Snape was already considering the worst. Maybe he would find himself living next door to his former students. Merlin forbid it was someone like Longbottom.

"Do you have a place to stay yet?" Harry didn't dare to give voice to the hope building inside. "In Hogsmeade, I mean. Or are you going somewhere else?" He hadn't even thought of Snape owning a place somewhere else.

He blinked at that. An ancestral home of the Snape family? Could there be a place like that? Or maybe even an actual family waiting somewhere?

Snape stared at him as if he could read his every thought. "There is no place I could go. The Snape House was destroyed decades ago in one of the more foolish Muggle wars. This is... was my only home."

He managed to even say it matter of factly, as if he didn't care one way or the other.

"That's not true." It slipped away instantly. Harry didn't even have to think about what he was going to say. Actually, there was no way he could keep it unsaid. "You have a home with me."

This time Snape did glare. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. I have a house. You need a place to stay. I want to stay with you." Ticking the points off with his fingers, Harry tried to sound like he was actually arguing logically when all he was doing was grasping straws here.

Snape shook his head. "You already have the house full of people." He refused to comment the foolishness of Harry's other words. They were of no concern.
"I wouldn't say it's full of people. There's enough room for you, and I think we could set you a small potions laboratory in the basement." The more Harry thought of it, the better it sounded in his ears. "And you know there's no safer place to stay in Hogsmeade."

"No safer place for me to stay than in a house full of Gryffindors?" Snape couldn't believe he was actually arguing with Harry instead of telling him where to bury such a stupid idea. "Yes, that is very convincing, Potter. I can already see how comfortable it would be to share a house with your godfather."

Not letting the sneer discourage him, Harry shook his head. "He can live with it, and I think we could set you a small potions laboratory in the basement." The more Harry thought of it, the better it sounded in his ears. "And you know there's no safer place to stay in Hogsmeade."

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Not letting the sneer discourage him, Harry shook his head. "He can live with it, and I have faith that you'll manage as well." He was quiet for a moment before adding, "You can't stay here anymore, and I don't think I can deal with you living alone anywhere else."

Snape had been expecting some kind of an emotional outburst, but the unnaturally calm words hit him worse than any childish tantrum. "I do not need your protection!" He was still feeling too raw to moderate his voice and it came out louder than he'd thought.

"That is not the point and you know it," Harry said.

If only the idiot would fight him. Then it would be so easy to yell and throw him out of his rooms. "No."

Harry looked straight into Snape's eyes. "I'm asking you. Please." There was actually a pleading note in his voice.

"Don't be such an idiot! Your emotional attachments are nothing but a distraction you can't afford right now." Why hadn't Dumbledore taught the youngsters that ages ago?

That wasn't exactly the response Harry had expected. Blinking, he tried to get the point and couldn't. "Explain."

"When you value something or someone like that, they become a burden. You will spend too much focus on keeping them close, making sure you don't lose them." Snape sounded like he was explaining it to a child. Or a simpleton.

Harry couldn't say anything for a moment. They were back to this? Then he blurted out, "You already know I value you. No matter where you live, I still do. And it will be a hell of a lot easier not to worry when we're living under the same roof." He could see how his words were not actually helping and added, "You need a place to stay. I have one."

"Oh yes. An extra room for me to live right next to your godfather's? A cellar for me to work on my potions?" There was something much darker than simple sarcasm in Snape's voice and he turned his back on Harry, as if incapable of even looking at him anymore.

"No. I mean, yes to the cellar, but I was thinking more about... I have this big bed where you could sleep too."

Snape turned around in a blur of swirling black cloth.

Meeting the shocked black gaze without flinching, Harry muttered, "I know, I'm an idiot." His lips quirked up slightly at the way Snape nodded instinctively to confirm that. "I'm asking you to move in with me."

"No."
Harry hadn't thought it would be that easy. "Please. I'm asking you as a member of the Order. Think about your safety. Move in with me."

"No." Snape's resolve wasn't that easy to break.

"I... Don't do this Snape. Don't force me to make it an order." Seeing the cold amusement at that, Harry shook his head. "Don't laugh about it. If it's the only way to make sure you'll be safe, I will order you to move in with me. You are a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and you know damn well what I am."

Every word cut him like a knife, slicing through something precious. He hated himself for his words, but he had to make Snape understand how much was at stake here.

Snape's face lost all its color, his eyes burning black. "You do that, and I will never again share your bed or anything else with you." His tone was lifeless. "I will not be manipulated or used."

There was an awful silence in the room, both Harry and Snape staring at each other as if afraid that any further words or gestures would shatter everything.

"If I order you... Then at least you will be safe." Harry couldn't tear his gaze away from Snape's. "But it won't be fair to you. And I'm not Voldemort. Or Dumbledore."

Snape closed his eyes, unwilling to show even the smallest hint of the relief Harry's words caused.

"But I will ask you again. And again. And then I'm probably going to whine and beg and plead until you either throw me out of here or give in. And you know that if you throw me out, I'll just make a big scene in the hallway."

Swallowing convulsively before he could say anything, Snape nodded. "I have no doubts in your ability to act like an emotional idiot. That will not be necessary."

Harry didn't want to read too much on that, but asked anyway, "Please, Snape. Could you at least consider it? You can call it anything you want, a favor, a thing, a logical arrangement. Just... Is there any chance you could stand living with me again?"

Snape said nothing for a long time; he simply stared at the brave fool. He couldn't understand how none of his arguments had reached their intended target or swayed Harry. No matter what he said, Harry Potter was not going to give up his foolish notions of friendship and things and emotional attachments.

"For how long?"

The quiet, simple question almost made Harry gag. He burned with the need to let out the suffocating scream of pure rage working its way up to his throat while he also wanted nothing more than to curse Albus Dumbledore for doing this to Snape.

He didn't care if his words sounded like an accusation. "I'm offering you a home. You can't be kicked out of your own home, Snape. Not if I have anything to say about it." He managed to smile a little. "I don't know any fancy pureblood vows, but you could probably teach me one. Or you can have it in writing; my home is your home."

"No." Snape saw how it made Harry flinch and added quickly, "That will not be necessary."

This was insane, the completely outrageous Gryffindor emotionalism clearly becoming contagious; a disease driving all logic away. Snape shouldn't trust anyone anymore, not now that the one person in
the whole universe he would have died for had turned his back on him. But he believed in Harry's words without a doubt.

Foolish notions of forever and soft declarations.

"I must be out of my mind..." Shaking his head, he let go. "Yes, I do believe that there is a chance I might stand living with you again, Potter."

All his excuses were already torn to pieces; he didn't find solitude the same bliss it had been for years, he didn't hate sharing his life with someone else. There seemed to be no use in trying not to encourage Harry to harbor delusions about them, for Harry would probably continue being a complete idiot even without any sort of encouragement.

Harry let out a soft sound of utter happiness and walked over to Snape. Wrapping his arms around him, he held on, resting his head on Snape's shoulder.

The utter joy practically radiating from Harry made Snape almost flinch. How on earth could his acceptance make him this happy? It boggled the mind. The sex and the nights spent away from the madness their reality was now he could understand, but not something like this.

He refused to speculate on it and used the method he'd found most effective in a situation such as this; he simply held Harry close.

"You know... there's something people who share... things sometimes do after an argument." Harry's lips moved against Snape's throat, the words almost a mumble.

It wasn't that difficult to guess what he meant. "Yes, even I have heard of the concept of make up sex." Snape reveled in the way Harry didn't even try to play games. "Bedroom!"

"Okay."

Snape guided Harry across the room into the bedroom, pausing after every few steps to accept another kiss, or a soft caress. When Harry moved his hands to open his robes, he grabbed his hand, though. "No." Silencing any protests with a kiss, he pushed Harry onto the bed.

He was still burning inside; the remnants of the awful emptiness and rage just beneath the arousal, calling for him to rip off Harry's clothes and to just turn him on his belly and take him. This was still his home, and he was the master in his own bedroom; he should act accordingly.

Watching Harry sprawl on his bed, his mouth slightly open and green eyes staring at him under the mop of messy black hair, Snape stood there for a moment.

He could do anything he wanted.

With slow precision, he sank to his knees next to the bed. His hands moved to Harry's fly, and after a frantic scrambling towards the edge of the bed, Harry was right where he wanted him, his legs spread on either side of him.

"May I?" Hand still hovering over Harry's groin, Snape looked him in the eyes.

Harry let out a whimper. "You know you don't have to ask." He wanted anything Snape did. "Yeah. Go ahead."

Of course Snape knew by now that he didn't have to ask, but he liked the veneer of civility. He liked to have simple words to confirm the message given by gasps and groans and Harry squirming under
his touch.

He unzipped Harry's trousers, not even bothering to pull them off. Pushing his shorts down so that he could reach better, he simply grabbed his prick, stroking it into full hardness. It didn't take much; it was clear Harry was already eager and ready for anything.

"Snape..." Harry groaned, leaning back on his elbows. He wanted to touch Snape, wanted to have him naked here with him, but something in the dark gaze told him not to reach out. This was something Snape wanted to do, and he was going to let him do anything.

Since it sounded like an encouragement, Snape tightened his grip, sliding his hand up and down Harry's prick in a steady rhythm. His other hand was braced on Harry's hip, palm flat against the soft cloth of his tailored trousers.

He was still fully clothed, and felt no need to strip or have Harry remove his clothes.

Smelling Harry's arousal so acutely close to his face, he bit his lip. The temptation to lean in and swallow him to the root was almost overwhelming, but something kept him where he was, his lips a mere wand's length from Harry's leaking prick.

"Oooh.... Yeah..." Eyes wide, Harry stared straight into Snape's eyes, taking in the look of intense concentration completely focused on his prick. "Snape..."

Snape let his gaze sweep over Harry; his flushed face, his chest heaving with every breath. He enjoyed the words so clearly escaping Harry, every exalted sound encouraging him to move his hand faster until Harry moved his hips up to his touch.

Simple pleasure. Right this moment, he wanted to give this to Harry and ignored the erection straining against his own trousers. He could wait.

He could see how Harry reached out for him, the movement a clear invitation to join him in bed. There was innocent selflessness in the gesture that made Snape shake his head. "No." He could hardly recognize his own voice as he said, "I want to do this."

There was something liberating about kneeling here, staring at Harry as he climbed towards completion, not being distracted by his own need. It was his own choice, as it had been his choice to offer his body to Harry for the first time in this room; intimate, private things he could share if he wanted to. And right now he did.

"Snape..."

The sound of his name called out in passion never ceased to thrill him.

"Snape!" This time Harry's groan was a warning. "If you don't move, I'm gonna... Oh damn it! Yes! Snape!"

Snape knew exactly what Harry meant and was pleased by such consideration. But he was not going to move no matter what would happen.

"I'm... going to come... all over you..." Thrusting harder into Snape's grip, Harry sounded almost desperate as he ground out the words. "Snape..."

Nodding, Snape confirmed, "Yes, you are."

Those simple words made Harry tense, his shocked gaze burning into Snape's. Then he groaned,
coming in almost painful contortions all over Snape's face and chest.

Mind completely blank, Harry slumped on the bed, muttering, "Oh my fucking god..." He didn't care if his Muggle roots were showing with his words or if Snape would comment on his swearing. He was boneless, unable to move, knowing nothing but Snape's gentle touch still on his prick.

He could feel Snape lean closer to rest his head against his thigh and reached out with a trembling hand to touch his hair. There was something sticky sliding through his fingers, not simply the greasy strands of Snape's hair, and he just had to say it again, "Oh my god, Snape."

There were so many things he wanted to say right now, but couldn't form anything more coherent than that. And maybe it was enough.

When he could breathe more or less steadily, he sat up again, staring at Snape with wondrous joy. He didn't say anything, just slipped on the floor next to him and kissed him.

"You're all messy," he whispered, kissing Snape again. "And now I'm all messy too." He kind of liked messy, especially this kind.

Snape kissed him back with hunger that startled even him. "How true."

"So maybe we should take a shower and I can wash your hair and you can then shag me against the tiles." Harry smiled. "Masturbating in your shower was indeed fun, but I want more. Like shagging till I squeal."

It never ceased to amaze Snape how easy it was to feel amusement in a situation like this. "That should not take much effort on my part." Harry was always enthusiastic in bed, making happy and demanding noises.

"I like the sound of that," Harry said, his voice muffled as he pulled his shirt off. "Now take off your clothes and let's make some more happy memories from here."

Closing his eyes, Snape couldn't believe how accurately Harry could interpret his actions. "That would be acceptable." He couldn't wait to peel the rest of Harry's clothes off and then run his hands all over his naked body. Naked, wet body.

He didn't know where all the pain and anger had gone, but there was such satisfaction in being with Harry that he didn't even question their absence.

They managed to get messier before finally washing away all the traces of mutual passion, neither slipping in the slippery shower even though it had been close a few times. It gave Snape the opportunity to make scathing comments about foolish Gryffindors and Harry to respond with a grin, so both were quite satisfied with the whole thing.

After they got dressed, things turned less cordial.

"I have to go and see Dumbledore. Order business," Harry said curtly.

Snape knew he would have to go back to the Headmaster's office sooner or later as well. Preferably later.

He allowed Harry to leave first, knowing that he needed to see Albus more than he did; important Order business had to come before any personal needs.

With Harry, Snape's lighter mood seemed to disappear as well, leaving him to stare at the door for a
long time before turning to face the rest of the room. His living room, his home that was not really his anymore.

He glared at the potions cupboard, pushing foolish contemplations out of his mind. He had work to do and would have to concentrate on packing his most important belongings with care and not dwell on something he couldn't change. Moving with precision, he saw to his vials and ingredients, finishing with them and his most precious books and then leaving the rest to the house elves.

The corridors were empty as he walked to the Headmaster's office, a fact he was glad of. Forcing even the resemblance of a polite expression his colleagues might expect to see on his face would be far too hard. He had spent years schooling his face to show nothing but calmness and obedience, but there was no reason for him to hold a control over his anger right now.

"Phoenix!" he barked out and then let the staircase carry him up.

Dumbledore's door was already open, as if inviting anyone in. Snape sneered at that; such a nice illusion.

The ancient Headmasters in the paintings were all awake, babbling frantically about something. Snape could hear a familiar name whispered with outrage, and this time there was pride in the sneer. It seemed like Harry could be a complete Gryffindor even while dealing with Albus Dumbledore, saying things that weren't really accepted in a polite society.

"Ah, Severus," Dumbledore said quietly, looking up from the tabby cat curled on his lap. "Come on in." He gestured at the chair on the other side of the small table.

The room was back to its old self, comfortable couches and chairs here and there; the large table and the chairs surrounding it was gone.

Snape didn't bother to slam the door shut behind him, he walked to the appointed chair and sat down, raising an eyebrow at the empty cup already waiting for him there. He wondered if Albus had spent the whole day waiting for him to come back. He certainly hoped so.

Keeping his expression neutral, he watched the cat uncurl in Dumbledore's lap and then butt her head against the hand still raised to run over her back. Only his eyes showed his amusement.

The cat held her tail proudly high as she walked out of the Headmaster's office with dignity.

"Minerva."

She didn't look at him, but from the way her fur bristled, it was clear she heard him well. The door slammed shut behind her.

Snape could feel the mood shift immediately from slightly melancholy to expectant.

"Severus." Dumbledore leaned forward, grabbing the teapot as if it was a reflex by now. "I'm glad you decided to come back."

"Yes." Not about to offer anything, Snape watched as Dumbledore poured him tea.

He didn't know why he was here or what was the point of this conversation. Leaving the room earlier with angry words and glares should have made his opinion clear already.

"I..." Letting the soft syllable fade out and die, Dumbledore shook his head and took a sip from his cup.
There were dozens of things Snape could have said, but he chose to simply sit there, arms crossed over his chest and staring at the teacup he wasn't going to pick up from the table.

Grabbing a parchment from the thin air, Dumbledore muttered. "Here are several options if you need a safe place to stay in..." He didn't even bother to finish that, knowing his offer wouldn't be necessary.

Snape stared at the old wizard who had once given him everything he'd ever needed. There had always been a price to pay, but he'd been willing to hand over anything that was asked.

He remembered Harry once asking how he'd felt towards Dumbledore. It was one question he would never have a simple answer to. Mixed with gratitude and reverence bordering on worship was a world of hatred and suspicion. He could see clearly where Albus was going to.

Manipulative bastard? Definitely, but he was also an excellent strategist. And moments like these, Snape was forced to admit that he was just a man, like anyone else in the world.

"That will not be necessary." Shaking his head, he kept his voice level. He couldn't believe he was making this choice, hated the fact that Dumbledore was even giving him the chance. It would have been so much simpler if it had been an order. "I will be staying with Potter."

It was surprising how easy it was to say it after all.

Dumbledore didn't say anything, he only nodded. He looked old and weary, and the way he sank even deeper into his chair seemed like a gesture for comfort.

"Was there anything else?" No matter how he might have wanted to, Snape couldn't say it harshly. This was a farewell, and even if by some miracle he was one day invited to return to Hogwarts as a teacher, things would never be the same again.

"No," Dumbledore said quietly. He watched Snape get to his feet and walk to the door before adding with a strangely hesitant voice, "Severus... Faced with your choice, I believe I might have let Minerva die."

The words came as a complete surprise. Snape spun around in shock to see the one thing he never expected to witness; Albus Dumbledore was looking at him with naked desperation in his eyes. He wanted to take that desperation away, tell him that he wouldn't have, that he would have saved her and everything would have been all right.

Instead, he tilted his head slightly. Albus was right, he always was; he was a legend too and his personal myth was just as complicated and confining as Harry's could be. "I know."

This might have been a game, one more trick up the old wizard's sleeve. Albus had guided him into becoming the perfect spy, had pushed Harry to the unwanted position as the greatest hero in their world and it had all been a part of his plan, but somehow Snape couldn't believe this was as calculated.

"You may be a better man than I am." Dumbledore looked down as he said it.

A genuine smile spread to Snape's lips. He knew his conscious decision between doing Dumbledore's bidding and going to Harry Potter out of free will ended a bond he'd held on to for decades, but he still couldn't feel real regret or sadness. Albus' words were just another example of the very familiar flamboyance he had to suffer from more than one person these days. "Somehow I doubt that."
Without commenting on the first look of real shock on Albus' face he'd ever managed to cause with his words, Snape turned around and walked out of the Headmaster's office.

Part 12

"Harry! Back so early?" There was delight in Ron's voice as he watched Harry walk into the kitchen. He'd thought Harry would spend the whole day at Hogwarts and it was barely time for afternoon tea.

Harry let out a sigh and sat at the table, reaching for a scone without a thought. "Yeah." The vigorous activities after the lunch had made him hungry, and he was pretty sure that as soon as he said a word about Snape there would be no chance for him to eat. He'd probably have no appetite left either.

He accepted the cup of tea from Draco, but couldn't manage a smile.

Lowering the Witch Weekly -- he only read for the laughs and nothing more --, Sirius asked, "Everything all right then?"

Harry had no idea what to say to that. No, things were definitely not all right, but maybe this change would turn out to be just fine, if they got beyond the phase where he was mad at Dumbledore and everyone else yelled at him and doubted his sanity.

Looking around with a calm expression, he said, "There's something we need to talk about." He wondered if he was reaching with his optimism. It would probably turn into a real fight before he even finished telling the others about his plan.

Sirius looked suspicious, recognizing the tone. "I don't think I'm going to like this," he said to Remus, noticing how tense he was.

"No, you probably won't."

On the other side of the table, Ron put his cup down carefully. "What is it?"

"I had a meeting with Albus today. We agreed that it's time for everyone in the Order to concentrate on the fighting." Harry paused for a moment, wondering why he felt he needed to lie, and then realized that no matter how mad he kind of was at Albus, he didn't want to say things to humiliate Snape. "There'll be more people moving into Hogsmeade. Including Snape. It's not safe for him to stay in Hogwarts anymore."

He wasn't going to say a word about Slytherins turning on the Head of their House either. If his friends didn't figure out that on their own, it would remain a secret.

"No!" It came out even before Sirius had a chance to think about the whole thing. He didn't need time to think about this. "You are not moving out of this house! This is the safest place in Hogsmeade and I forbid you to leave because of that..." The firm touch of Remus' hand on his arm made him cut the sentence before he said something that would make Harry mad.

He was definitely grateful.

"You're thinking of leaving?" Ron couldn't believe it. "But... This is your house! You can't just leave." It would mean he'd have to move as well, because he was not going let Harry out of his sight.

Harry looked at Remus, seeing a hesitant look on his face. He hoped he was up to the explosion that
would surely follow his next words. "If I don't leave, the only option is for me to stay. And I'm not
going to stay anywhere without Snape."

They could have heard the faint tinkle of a Snitch's wings flutter in the silence that followed.

Ugly dark red color was spreading over Sirius' face. He was obviously trying very hard not to
scream. Or smash things. He definitely looked like he wanted to smash things right now. Ron didn't
look much better, squeezing his hands into fists.

After waiting for a moment, Harry said quietly, "I know most of you don't like Snape and I'm not
saying that he's overly thrilled by this idea either. But this really is the safest place I know."

He couldn't believe how sick this was making him feel. Having Snape over for the night weeks
ago had been relatively easy, since Sirius and Remus hadn't been home, but this would be different. He
was beginning to doubt his plan, wondering if they could ever coexist under the same roof.

To his total dismay, he realized he didn't care. He wanted this, so everyone should bloody well try!

"Harry!" Ron and Sirius both paused as they heard each other say the name with equal amount of
exasperation.

Ron motioned Sirius to go on. After all, he was Harry's godfather; he'd be able to make him listen.
Besides, Sirius hated Snape even more than he did, so he'd do his best to be persuasive.

Leaning back, Draco watched the Gryffindors fight over Snape. It was ridiculous. He could live with
people he'd once hated, what was so damn different with Snape?

"Harry..." Sirius made sure he didn't see Remus' expression, knowing that he'd feel either really
guilty or he'd start to yell if he did. Keeping his voice level was already a hardship, all the anger he
had inside was threatening to escape in frantic words. "He can survive. Look, he's survived this long.
I doubt he'd even want to live here. With all of us. Besides, there's no room for his potions here."

He was actually proud that he was able to argue those points rationally.

"Stop. You and I both know that's not true. The point isn't the room here, it's that you don't want me
to be with him."

Sirius nodded. "Yes. I don't want you anywhere near him, but..." He also didn't want to see the sad
look in Harry's eyes. It was even worse than suffering that disgusting man. "Just think about it,
Harry! Please. I don't want to live with that... man." That evil and revolting greasy git.

Next to him, Ron was nodding slowly. He could definitely get the point.

It was difficult for Harry to not yell at them. He knew Sirius would never drive him away, would
never make him choose between his love and someone else. What Sirius gave him was
unconditional. Getting him and Snape to get along would probably take decades. Even that was kind
of pushing the optimism too far.

He wanted to say lots of things, logical things about their cause, the fight. Staying together meant
being safer and they needed each other. He even wanted to bang his fist on the table and say that it
really was his house and he needed Snape here.

In the end he closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them again, there was nothing but
sadness in his gaze. "Sirius... I love you." He held up a hand to stall the immediate reply. "But you
have to understand that I also love..." Shocked, he paused before saying, "Snape." He hadn't meant
to just say it like that.

But he couldn't take it back.

This time they could have probably heard the Snitch's wings beating above the practice pitch in Hogwarts.

Not ready to face any implications of his words, Harry pushed his chair back. He knew he was running away again, but he couldn't handle sitting here any longer.

"Harry, wait!" Sirius' voice was choked, full of suppressed rage and fear. "I didn't..." He had no idea what he wanted to say, but he knew he couldn't let Harry walk away like this.

"I know." Looking a bit hesitant, Harry glanced at Ron. Then his gaze slid over Draco and Remus until it rested on Sirius again. "Just... Before you say anything else, think about where you live." He made a little gesture with his hand. "Think about where you sleep."

Feeling there would be no other coherent words coming out, he turned around and walked out of the room.

Sirius turned to Remus, shaking. "What... I..." He didn't think he understood what Harry had just said. Yes, he knew they were all aware of where he slept, and he knew painfully clearly where Ron and Malfoy slept most of their nights -- if that could be called sleeping.

"He meant we should think hard about where we sleep, and then think where he sleeps," Remus explained quietly. "He's alone, Sirius. He probably feels completely alone right now."

"But... He's not alone! He has us! All of us!" The long arc of Sirius' gesture even included Draco in.

Remus nodded. His words weren't however agreeing. "He has us. But it's not enough." He hated the way his words brought that desperate expression on Sirius' face. Moving without thinking, he grabbed Sirius' hand. "He loves us just as much as we love him, Sirius. But that kind of love isn't enough. He needs someone who's there just for him. A lover. He has chosen Severus Snape to be that, and there is nothing you or I or anyone can do to change that."

The glint in Sirius' eyes turned angry. He couldn't even remember a time when he hadn't detested the greasy Slytherin. "I hate that man!"

"I know. But that doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that Harry... loves him." There was bafflement in Remus' voice as well, but he tried to hide it.

It made no sense to him either, but he was willing to give the whole thing the benefit of the doubt. He knew Harry and trusted his judgement.

"He's making a mistake asking him to live here."

"Maybe, but we have to let him make his own mistakes." Remembering how that had been Sirius' favorite argument when they'd been teenagers, Remus leaned back on his chair.

That earned him a nasty look. "That was different. We never did anything as stupid as that." Sleeping with Snape and wanting to live with him? That was undoubtedly the most horrifying, disgusting, insane thing Sirius could think of.

"No. You found a way to become an Animagus to help your friend deal with being a werewolf. That's even worse, wouldn't you say?"
Sirius bristled with anger. "No. I wouldn't. He's... I bet he's using Harry somehow." The whole thought made his blood burn again.

"I don't think so." Even though he knew Sirius would never be able to see clearly when it was about Snape, Remus had to try.

Sirius grimaced as if he was tasting something foul. He looked around the table, taking in Ron's similar expression and the very calm look on Malfoy.

His gaze locked with the Slytherin. "You know Snape better than anyone here." It took a snake to really know one. He had nothing against Malfoy, especially after all he'd done for Harry, but he did know what he was like.

"Probably, yes." Draco nodded, even though he had to wonder if anyone really knew Snape.

"Is he just playing with Harry?" It was the question Sirius had wanted to ask for ages, but hadn't really wanted to hear the answer.

Draco grinned at the question, remembering how at the small cottage he had calculated his every expression when he was around Ron and wondered about the way Snape and Harry had been engaged in something he couldn't fathom. "No. He's definitely not playing with him."

"Then what is it?"

There was no real answer to that question. Draco wondered that himself. "I don't know. But I do know that he's not doing this to hurt Harry."

Sirius let out a sigh that sounded very much like a canine whine.

He hated this. He absolutely hated this!

Upstairs, Harry was pacing in his room, thoughts running aimlessly around his mind like headless chickens.

Had he really told everyone he loved Snape? Oh yeah, he had. It hadn't even required any thought; he'd simply opened his mouth and the words had poured out.

He let out a hysterical laughter.

The thing was, he didn't want to take it back. He wanted to live with Snape, have sex and things with him, annoy him by leaving socks all around the room and then watch him brew his potions. It wasn't a passing fancy; he wanted that for as long as he lived. What else could it be but love?

"I guess I really am an idiot." Saying that out loud somehow pushed the laughter away, as if it wasn't ridiculous after all.

Not a big revelation either, to be honest. So maybe he hadn't used that word before, it didn't mean that he hadn't known it was the perfect one to describe what he felt towards Snape.

Sighing, Harry stood in the middle of his room, wondering what to do next. He didn't want to go back downstairs and talk about Snape, he didn't want to keep pacing like this.

Ages ago, his only way to keep the dark thoughts at bay had been long walks through the corridors, searching through Hogwarts until he knew the castle better than any other student. He felt the restlessness grow in his body, familiar even after such a long absence, and his steps took him to his
wardrobe before he could even make a conscious decision.

He'd go out for a walk, just around the streets of Hogsmeade, nothing dangerous. The only way for the hero of the Order to do that without gaining a few followers and a lot of attention was to wear his Invisibility Cloak.

Pushing his new clothes to the side, Harry grasped for the cloak and then frowned when he couldn't find it. He tried again, rummaging through the wardrobe, feeling a rush of panic rise as he still couldn't find what he was looking for.

"Damn it," he muttered, going through the drawers on the left side of the cupboard, knowing there was no way he would have crammed the cloak there with his underwear and socks but refusing to think he had lost it.

His Invisibility Cloak was the only real reminder he had of his father, that and the few photos he had of him and his mother and he couldn't have misplaced something so precious to him.

Harry sat hard on the floor, cursing out loud. After everything, this seemed too much, and it was somehow easier to be upset about this than the rest of his problems.

He knew that no one in the house would have taken his cloak without asking, but it was still gone. Trying to remember when he'd last seen it, he couldn't think of anything after the day they'd moved in here and he'd unpacked his clothes.

A faint memory of finding the wardrobe open even though he'd been sure he had closed the door surfaced, and he had a very unpleasant feeling between his shoulder blades. Had someone been able to sneak through their wards after all? And for what; the cloak?

He couldn't really believe that himself.

Maybe he should ask Ron just in case he'd borrowed it without having the time to ask. There was probably a reasonable explanation for all this, and he would find it just as soon as he felt like getting up and walking back downstairs to his family.

He closed his eyes, unable to make his body move.

He couldn't really face anyone -- that being mainly Sirius -- right now.

Even though they'd had arguments before, it had always been over something small; a slip to allow him to go to Hogsmeade, the sometimes reckless way he approached danger.

What Sirius said mattered. His opinion had always meant more to Harry than anyone else's, but this time he wouldn't let it sway him.

He was going to live with Snape. Maybe here, maybe somewhere else, but he was not going to let this chance slip away.

The fights were becoming more open, more ruthless, and deep inside Harry knew these smaller raids couldn't last forever. Sooner or later, there would have to be a choice between reacting and actually attacking, and that would very likely be one of the last decisions he made.

Unlike months ago, the thought of dying didn't open up the vast emptiness inside. This time Harry acknowledged it as a probability and moved on. If there was a chance he was going to die, he wasn't going to waste time on guilt or trying to make everyone happy.
He wanted to do this one thing for himself; it had felt like that from the beginning, his one selfish act while still being the self sacrificing hero their world wanted him to be.

Fine. But he was not going to do this without Snape.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Harry had to swallow before he could call out. "Come on in." He wondered who it would be; probably either Remus or Ron, coming to keep him company.

"Harry." Opening the door a little and peeking into the room, Sirius blinked as he couldn't see anyone. Then he noticed Harry sitting on the floor in front of the wardrobe.

He stepped into the room quietly and closed the door behind him,

With a few steps he was next to Harry, and not knowing what else to do, he sat down right beside him.

"I'm sorry."

Both smiled a little as they managed to say that at the same time. Sirius shook his head, the smile disappearing from his lips. "No, I'm sorry." He didn't explain it further.

"Yeah." Relaxing a little, Harry nodded. "I know." It would have been easier if he could be angry at Sirius, but no matter how annoying the stubborn hatred his godfather cherished was, he still couldn't be angry at Sirius.

"Good." Sirius took the words as a permission and leaned his shoulder against Harry's, enjoying the silence for a moment.

Before walking up here, he'd had a few more words with Remus and the others. Some spoken quietly, most growled from between clenched teeth so that he wouldn't scream. When Hermione had arrived from her meeting, they had gone through the whole thing again.

He was definitely tired of all the logic now.

Listening to her and Remus talk had forced him to look at the whole thing from a different angle, especially when Hermione had said she didn't mind Snape moving in with them. Her tone had been relaxed, unlike the barely concealed revulsion and grudging pity she still showed for Draco Malfoy.

He still didn't like the idea; to be quite honest, he hated it with burning passion. But it didn't really matter what he thought, as long as Harry was happy.

It was clear that right now, he wasn't.

Sirius looked at Harry. "You really want to live with that man?" He tried to keep the disgust out of his voice, but the way Harry flinched told him that he hadn't really been successful.

"Yes. I want to live with him," Harry said. He knew he shouldn't want it this much, since everything he'd ever wanted had turned into ashes. There would be more shouting and anger and outrage, but he added anyway, "I don't want to live without him."

It was worse than what Sirius had feared. He recognized that expression; it reminded him of that night three years ago when he had crawled to Remus’ house, expecting to be thrown out. There had been too many unsaid things between them then, too many years of suspicion and loneliness. He'd
been certain Remus wouldn't want him there, not the way they'd been so long ago.

Finding that the old love hadn't really disappeared anywhere had been a miracle. The embrace he'd been enfolded in hadn't taken all the pain and misery away, but it had been a new beginning. His chance of a redemption.

How could he deny such happiness from Harry? What kind of a man was he if he insisted on making Harry look so sad and lonely?

"Then... you should live with him." Hating the whole concept, Sirius was barely able to squeeze the words out. But no matter how much he loathed Snape, he loved Harry more. "This is your home, and if you want to share it with Snape, I'm not going to try to stop you."

Harry let out a relieved sigh and turned to hug his godfather. He knew exactly how hard this was to Sirius. "Thank you!"

"Don't mention it."

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**Part 13**

The atmosphere in the dungeons was exactly as freezing as it had been yesterday when Harry had come down here, but this time he didn't have to wonder why.

He knew that it didn't matter that Snape had accepted his offer rather graciously -- after all the arguing --, things wouldn't be exactly easy today when leaving this place behind became reality.

No words of consolation would be appreciated, and to be honest, Harry didn't have any phrases to offer. He would miss the dungeons as well, finding the windowless rooms a sanctuary of sorts, and could only imagine how difficult this was for Snape.

He waited patiently as Snape checked his possessions again and then made sure he wasn't in the way as Snape stormed out of the room with an angry look on his face.

With a glance around the room now empty of all personal items, Harry took a step towards the door. Then he turned to look at the chair he'd slept in those nights when he'd first come into the dungeons and pulled out his wand. His shrinking charm wasn't as good as Snape's potion, but the chair shrunk enough to be carried out comfortably.

He didn't say anything and simply followed Snape out of the dungeons.

They were quiet until half way to Hogsmeade. Then Snape broke the silence by asking, "I assume your godfather will be moving out then."

"No. I managed to convince Sirius that this is the best thing to do right now." Harry had been expecting the question as well as the very comical look of shock that followed his answer.

Snape was certain he had heard wrong. Reasoning with Black? That was as feasible as teaching a flubberworm to tap dance. "I hope you used simple words and short sentences." He hadn't known Harry would have the patience for that.

"Behave!" The chiding word escaped before Harry could think about what he was saying, but even with the glare, he did not take it back.

If Harry really expected him to stop hating the mutt, he was definitely not in touch with reality.
Snape muttered, "I will certainly not hold my tongue in his presence." Or anyone else's. It was bad enough to agree on this, to leave his home and accept something that felt awfully lot like charity.

Harry didn't say anything. He just raised an eyebrow. It was an infuriating expression, especially since Snape suspected that the idiot had adopted it from him.

Snape's eyes shone with open malice. "Then you want me to join you and your friends in coddling your less than sane godfather." The look he cast at Harry was a very strange one.

"Not really." Unwilling to take the bait, even though he was definitely going to make Snape pay for that comment later on, Harry shook his head slightly. "You can be as evil as you want to be. As long as you don't do him any real harm." He made sure he didn't smile as he looked at Snape. "I trust you."

Hearing the dark words Snape muttered at that, he turned his head away and grinned. Sometimes it was almost unbelievable what a few words could do. Snape was definitely not going to go easy on Sirius, but wouldn't really hurt him either.

One day -- far in the future -- he would ask the two men just exactly how much they enjoyed their mutual enmity. Both would probably try to hex him for his assumption, but he wasn't completely blind. It was obvious how happy a well aimed barb could make them.

Like when he was out walking with Draco, Harry noticed people casting weird looks at him and his companion. He chose not to acknowledge any of the staring, keeping his attention on Snape instead, still amused by the grumbling.

They were going home; such a weird thought, especially since he'd already lived in the house for ages. Now it would really feel like a home with everyone he cared for gathering under the same roof, and the mere thought made him grin like an idiot.

A fact Snape commented on with dry sarcasm.

Holding the door open for Snape, Harry let him enter first and then stepped in as well, belatedly wondering if their entrance would startle someone inside. He didn't want to think that either Ron or Sirius would actually be waiting for them, but one could never really be sure with those two.

"Harry. Professor Snape." Smiling politely, Draco stepped out of the kitchen, holding a steaming cup in his hand.

Snape inclined his head slightly. "Mr. Malfoy." He cast a look around. "I'm surprised there's no welcoming committee waiting."

"I believe most people here are awfully busy, sir. Planning classes and strategy as well as sulking in their rooms."

That made Harry laugh out loud. "Well, sulking is better than most of the things I could have imagined."

"Indeed." Snape nodded.

Draco agreed on that, knowing all too well how both Black and Weasley could throw tantrums at the mere thought of Snape. Of course there would probably be yelling and glaring and more sulking later on. "So true." After sharing a knowing look with Harry, he muttered, "It's good to see you, sir." Not waiting for a reply, he continued on his way to the living room.
Glad to see that at least Draco could behave normally, Harry grinned at him and then ushered Snape upstairs before Sirius could come out of the room he shared with Remus and make things worse. He was a realist, after all.

He hesitated as he reached the small hallway, realizing that he'd just assumed Snape would indeed want to share a room with him. It was actually probable that Snape would want as much privacy as possible. How stupid of him to ignore that. "Um... I didn't actually prepare a room for you, but if you want to have your own place, it's all right."

Snape rolled his eyes. Did Harry really think he could convince anyone with that rather sad expression on his face? Probably. Delusional Gryffindor. "That will not be necessary." He wouldn't be able to keep the room as his own private area anyway.

"I meant what I said earlier." Harry didn't make a move to guide Snape to his bedroom. "This will be your home, but I won't order you to sleep with me. I'm not like..." Realizing he'd better not finish the sentence the way it was echoing inside his mind, he said lamely, "that."

"I see." Hearing both what was said and what was kept silent, Snape nodded. He hadn't really thought Harry would abuse his position like that. "Are you going to stand here all day or can we put my belongings into your room now?"

Harry grinned. "Our room." Saying it out loud made his stomach flutter. He didn't even mind the glare. His and Snape's room.

"I assume you also have the room down in the cellar for a work space for me." Seeing the nod, Snape let out a slightly pleased snort. That would be his own private area and it would be enough.

He didn't mind Harry's presence, but old habits died hard. Spending all time joined at the hip like some people seemed to prefer would never do with Snape.

"Here we are..." Harry muttered as he opened the door and gestured Snape to enter. He couldn't believe how insanely giddy he was feeling, but even though it was kind of embarrassing, he relished the feeling.

Snape looked around the room, his lips twitching slightly as he took in the green drapes and the clearly enlarged bed, both things different from his previous visit. He could see that the room had been thoroughly cleaned recently, the smell of various cleaning potions still faint in the air.

Casting a knowing look at Harry, he chose not to say anything about the faint fluster or the foolish grin on his lips. He should have known Harry would make some kind of a silly gesture and had as usual gone overboard with it. At least there were no Slytherin crests anywhere. "Lovely decor."

"You like it?" There was honest anticipation in Harry's voice.

"It's adequate." As long as Harry didn't insist on using red and gold on every surface, Snape was fine. "And I noticed you've cleaned as well. How unusual."

That made Harry glare. "I am not messy!" At least not compared to Ron. He knew how to hang his robes in the closet and not throw them on the floor.

Snape didn't look convinced. He stared for a moment before saying, "Since it seems I will not be rid of you, I will have to take your word on it." Seeing the ridiculous smile that spread to Harry's lips, he added, "However if your housekeeping proves to be as exemplary as your studying, we may have to discuss about our living arrangements again on a later date."
He wasn't surprised by the way Harry stepped closer to him to give him a fierce hug.

"Now, I assume you have cleared some space for my belongings." Enlarging the trunk with his clothes, he looked around.

"Yeah." Harry gestured with his hand at the wardrobe. "Lots of space in there!"

Snape cast an exasperated look at him. "Gryffindors!" He didn't even comment on Harry's exuberance, finding the unadulterated joy amusing instead of annoying, and went to hang his robes in the wardrobe.

Harry still couldn't really believe this. Watching Snape unpack his trunk was making him almost light headed with relief and happiness. It was nice, really nice, and he was planning on savoring the feeling as long as it lasted.

"Do you have any plans for today?"

Jolting out of his thoughts, Harry looked up at Snape's question. "Not really. Don't need to go anywhere today, now do I?" It would have to be a pretty big emergency to pull him out of here. "Maybe we could..." He was certain Snape wouldn't agree on spending the whole day in bed, so he finished it lamely, "Er... I could show you the house."

"That is acceptable." Snape didn't bother to remind him he'd already seen the house. "Anything else?"

"Well, it's almost lunch time, so I was thinking... Lunch?" Grinning like a fool, Harry reveled in the exasperation in Snape's gaze. He was really too euphoric to even try to control himself right now.

Snape seemed to realize that as well, as he muttered a few words so quietly that they couldn't be heard before sighing, "That is also acceptable."

"And then later I was thinking..." Sex. Lots and lots of it. Maybe in the bathroom with the door locked and a few silencing charms protecting them, or in his bed, that nice and soft and wonderfully large bed he would never again sleep in alone.

This time Snape didn't even try to hide the sneer. "I know exactly what you are thinking of, Potter." He'd known this would happen and the only surprise was the fact that Harry hadn't suggested they spent the day in bed. Not that he would have agreed to that, at least without a few token objections.

Harry smiled. "And?"

"We should have lunch first."

There were sounds coming from the dining room when they finally went downstairs, and Harry felt a moment of utter panic as he realized that yes, Snape really was living with them now, and that the next few minutes would probably be an utter disaster.

Sighing, Harry cast a look at Snape. "You do know that..." He didn't know what to say, really, knowing that Sirius and the others were waiting just behind the door, and that he couldn't really tell Snape not to react to anything anyone said to him.

"Yes, I do." There was evident disgust and resignation on Snape's face.

Harry chose not to say anything, he simply pushed the door open and stepped into the dining room first, hoping that no one would hex him.
It was clear there had been some kind of discussion about the eating arrangements. Harry smiled a little as he saw Sirius sitting between Remus and Hermione, noticing also the empty seats that would place him and Snape between Remus and Draco. He refused to comment on the preemptive strike, glad that Snape went only with a raised eyebrow and a brief nod at Draco.

"Severus." Remus inclined his head politely. "Hope you found your new quarters suitable."

Taking the seat next to Draco, Snape cast a brief look at Sirius and then said, "Yes. They are adequate."

It was fairly obvious to everyone who was looking at Harry that Snape wasn't exactly talking about the empty room upstairs. Remus was just glad Sirius was keeping his gaze on the table. "Good. Juice?"

"Yes, please." Harry reached out for a glass.

"Severus?"

Nodding, Snape took the offered glass. "Thank you."

Ron was already used to the polite words, but Sirius glanced up, waiting for Snape to say something scathing.

When it seemed like the Slytherin was content on sipping his juice, Sirius returned his attention back to the table. He had given his word to Remus; he was going to keep it and sit here and try not to kill anyone.

No matter how difficult it might be.

The house elves chose that moment to come in. Banging the door open, Eppy wobbled in, carrying a tray while Bobbler hovered behind her holding a large kettle.

Setting the table looked as painstakingly exhausting as always, but all the Gryffindors knew better than to even offer their help. It would not be appreciated.

Eppy was making soft annoyed sounds as she placed the cups on the table, casting a glare at each man as she passed them by. When she saw Snape sitting next to Harry, she froze and her ears lifted in surprise. For a moment it almost looked as if she was pleased to see him again. Then she went on muttering from under her breath as she finished with the plates and cups and gestured Bobbler to put the kettle down on the table.

No one said a word as Snape cast a glance at Hermione, obviously expecting her to serve herself first. She smiled hesitantly, muttering, "Hello, professor," before reaching out for the ladle.

"Miss Granger," Snape answered just as softly.

The men attacked the food with various show of appetite, everyone concentrating on eating -- or pushing the food around the plate. Draco was the only one to behave normally, neither glaring or beaming at Snape.

Ron mouthed to Hermione, "Awkward!"

She rolled her eyes at him, but couldn't really disagree. This was definitely weird.

For a while the only sound in the room was spoons clicking against porcelain.
Harry was glad to see there was not going to be a scene. From the way it looked, Sirius wasn't even going to acknowledge Snape's presence in the room, and even though it was a bit annoying, Draco had been right; sulking was much better than most of the things he could think of.

He had the weird notion that if they managed to survive this first lunchtime, they could probably survive all living together.

"Pass me the juice, please."

The cold but polite tones coming from Snape startled everyone, and both Hermione and Remus reached out for the pitcher that was resting right in front of Sirius. Their clumsy attempts to grab the pitcher made it teeter dangerously, and only Sirius' reflexes prevented a disaster.

Sirius curled his hand tighter around the pitcher and then slowly looked up.

Snape stared right back at him.

"Snape."

"Black."

The two of them kept staring at each other.

"Help!" Ron mouthed at Hermione, wondering if he should prepare for an all out name calling or just crawl under the table. It looked awfully like there would be a food fight any moment now, or at least an expensive glassware hurtling towards Snape's head.

Crawling under the table sounded better every moment.

Remus reached out calmly and took the pitcher from Sirius and then poured Snape more juice.

"Thank you." Breaking the eye contact with Black, Snape nodded at Remus and then resumed his eating. He pointedly ignored the way Black was still staring at him.

After years of eating in the Great Hall he was used to dining while people were staring daggers at his direction.

Harry looked from Sirius to Snape, relaxing when Sirius lowered his gaze a moment later and continued pushing his food around his plate. This was going better than he had dared to dream. No one had yelled or cursed or thrown things.

That would probably come later.

As soon as Snape seemed to be finished with his meal, Harry decided it was time to go before anyone could say anything that would lead into a fight. "That was excellent as always."

Eppy, who was slowly gathering dishes away, huffed at that.

"Anyway, I think we should continue our tour." Harry looked pointedly at Snape. "Would you like to see the rooms in the cellar now?" It sounded more like a command than a suggestion.

"Of course," Snape murmured. He was perfectly willing to leave insulting Black until a later date. This was more important than amusing himself with foolish Gryffindors.

Sirius raised his gaze again, his expression full of disgust. "Going to play with your chemistry set again, Snape?" he sneered, as if it was impossible for him to keep his silence anymore.
It was better to continue with the open hostility than to think about Harry showing Snape the house that was going to be his home. Dear Merlin! He hoped Snape was going to live in the spare room upstairs.

He had no idea what to do if Snape was staying somewhere else.

The answering sneer on Snape's face was just as malicious. "Yes, Black, I am. What about you? Chase any brooms lately?"

Harry rolled his eyes, ignoring the barely hidden amusement on Hermione's face. "Very clever. Now let's go." He shooed Snape to the right direction, muttering quietly to himself.

He was a bit surprised to have Snape walk down to the cellar without protests or even an offhand remark about Sirius and idiotic Gryffindors.

Choosing to concentrate on his new laboratory, Snape allowed himself to be guided down a set of stairs, keeping an eye on every detail in the rooms below ground level.

The first room was inadequate for any real work, but would probably serve well as a storage. He could already picture various jars and bottles here and there, all he needed was a few shelves and maybe a cupboard or two.

Nodding to himself, he walked to the smaller room, approving of the place immediately. The ventilation system needed a slight improving, but that would be easy to fix. Everything else was suitable; the lighting was good with the small window near the ceiling even letting in natural light, and the table at the far side of the room was of a perfect height.

Harry smiled as he saw the obvious enthusiasm. Trying not to sound wistful, he asked, "So do you want to try out the room now?" He knew for a fact that Snape had brought all his equipment with him, and would undoubtedly want to start working immediately.

Oh well. Maybe he would be allowed to help somehow, like by carrying things around.

"Maybe later." Turning his attention away from his new domain, Snape let a smirk spread to his lips and then gestured at the door. "I do believe we already have other plans for the day."

Part 14

Getting dressed again after hours of blissful nakedness seemed wrong somehow, but Harry had to agree that they actually needed to eat at some point.

He wondered if the others would leave them be if they never emerged from their room again, and then decided it wasn't worth risking. Spending most of the day in bed with Snape was one thing. Having Sirius die of a heart attack was another.

Snape finished his ablutions first, adamant on going downstairs when he was ready instead of waiting for Harry.

This was his life now, and no matter how most of his hours spent in this house would undoubtedly be spent in the small rooms in the cellar or in the large bed in Harry's -- he was still wary of calling it theirs unlike Harry who seemed to revel in the thought -- bedroom, he was not about to back away from any battles.

He was not going to let Harry steer him away from those either.
Draco Malfoy was the first person he encountered downstairs, and he idly wondered if the boy had been standing guard, waiting for him.

"Professor Snape." There was the barest hint of a smirk on Draco's lips. "Dinner isn't served yet. Would you care to join us in the living room?" He made a gesture towards the door.

Accepting the offer with a nod, Snape followed Malfoy, listening to the effortless small talk half heartedly while looking at the small group of people who were trying to look as if they hadn't been waiting for anyone.

He was surprised to see Black in his human form. Usually the mutt seemed to prefer looking like the shaggy beast he truly was when he was feeling more unbalanced than usual.

Snape nodded curtly at everyone, ignoring Weasley's half-grimace and the way Black growled at him.

He simply sat on the couch.

Black and Lupin had been in the middle of a discussion, and since Snape was only going to sit here and wait, they went on with it, soon turning the whole thing into an amicable argument.

At least the other Gryffindors seemed to be able to sit relatively quietly, Weasley fiddling with chess pieces and trying not to look at anyone, and Granger reading a book.

Snape didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't really this cozy scene.

The whole day had been full of small surprises, leaving him rather restless. Even though the thought of being able to organize his new working place soon and the reality of spending most of the day in bed with a very eager Harry Potter were pleasant, he was still waiting for things to turn ugly. Whenever it looked like something was too good to be true, it usually was.

At least Lupin's comments were keeping Black too busy to turn his attention on him. Snape had the feeling that would change soon enough.

And Merlin, those two could still bicker! It was as if he was transported back in time to the Great Hall to suffer through yet another of the foolish arguments. He hoped they would actually stop their childishness before dinner was served, since he for one wasn't going to suffer through this as he ate.

Watching over first years wasn't as annoying as this.

Sirius looked up just in time to see Snape's exasperated look, and it was enough to break his tirade. Why on earth should he nag at Remus when he could have a real fight with Snape?

Especially now that Harry wasn't down here to disapprove.

He glowered at Snape and growled, "What?"

Looking slowly from Black to Lupin and back again, Snape said, "I see you two are still quarreling like an old married couple." He waited for the inevitable explosion.

Which never came.

Divided between his promise to both Harry and Remus and the very urgent need to punch that sneering look out of Snape's ugly face, Sirius curled his hand into a fist. The git would indeed look much better with that unnaturally large nose of his smashed into bloody pulp.
He took a deep breath, fingernails scraping his palm as he squeezed his hand tighter into a fist, but he managed to hold still.

"That is a fairly accurate assessment of the situation, yes." Gaze gleaming with mirth, Remus looked from Sirius to Snape, his hand touching Sirius' arm slightly.

The first time he'd ever heard that jibe had been at school, and it had made both him and his friend act awkwardly towards each other for weeks, both fearing they were revealing too much. Now it didn't make him want to hide anymore; it was more like a compliment than an insult.

Snape turned his attention to Lupin, malicious amusement clear on his face. "Indeed?" Not really a question. The mutt and his werewolf were not exactly what he would call discreet. "My deepest condolences."

"What? No other comments or jokes about us?" Sirius was waiting for the predictable nasty words, and was stunned when there were none.

(that would be rather hypocritical right now, wouldn't it Black?" Snape asked snidely, finding his own words annoying as soon as they left his lips, and glared at Black as if it was all his fault.

Sirius glared right back, wanting nothing more than to jump up and strangle Snape for all the things he'd just said and more importantly for the things he'd barely hinted at.

The way Remus cleared his throat distracted him for just a moment, but it was enough to remind him just exactly why he wasn't supposed to use violence towards the slimy Slytherin. Too bad the reason was exactly the same that made him so mad in the first place.

He wasn't going to do anything that would make Harry unhappy. Keeping his gaze on Remus' eyes, he repeated that until the urge to hit Snape dissipated just a little.

Snape pointedly ignored the exchange of looks.

There were more sounds coming from the kitchen, accompanied by delicious scents that made Crookshanks uncurl at the windowsill and stretch himself.

The cat jumped to the floor and padded quietly to the door, rubbing his cheek against the doorframe as if it would somehow allow him to enter. When the door stayed shut, he let out a disappointed sound, and then headed to Hermione, where he enjoyed the pat on his head before making a tour around the room, sniffing at everyone.

Keeping an eye on the cat, Snape raised an eyebrow at the way Draco Malfoy seemed to be uncomfortable with the way the creature kept staring at him.

Snape on the other hand sat and watched the cat make his round.

"Crookshanks..." Hermione called out as the ginger cat went to rub his whole body against Snape's legs, leaving tufts of hair on the black trousers.

Snape simply stared at the cat, who seemed to be content making another brush against him. "I see your kneazle is showing all the proper Gryffindor traits as well." Mainly complete disregard on the glare and stubbornly flaunting his affections.

"He's only half-kneazle," Hermione corrected, as if she was unable to let it pass. "And thank you, sir." Her expression was solemn, but there was laughter in her eyes, as if she knew perfectly well that it wasn't a compliment.
The way Snape sneered at that was definitely not unexpected.

"You should be careful, Crookshanks." Turning his attention to the cat, Sirius warned, "Snape there might want to cut you into a potion."

"Thank you for yet another example of your wit, Black. Any second year should know that the only part of a kneazle you can use in a potion is its hair." Snape brushed some of it off his pants, staring at Sirius pointedly.

Sirius glared at that.

There were footsteps coming from the hallway, and then Harry pushed the door open. Most of the people in the room turned to stare at him, with only Snape still concentrating on Crookshanks who was rubbing his face against his shoes.

"Hi, Harry," Ron said, as if making sure there would be no awkward silence was the most important thing in the world.

Sirius barely noticed the way Remus' hand had tightened on his arm. All he could concentrate was the way Harry's hair seemed wet, like after a shower, and he really didn't want to think about why Harry would need a shower before dinner. He also didn't want to think about what he'd been doing all day and with whom.

But even he couldn't miss noticing the way Harry's gaze went immediately to Snape even as he answered Ron's greeting, and how the heartwrenchingly familiar smile appeared on his lips the moment he saw the git.

It was the one thing that kept him sitting still until dinner was served.

Dinner was almost a repetition of the lunchtime awkwardness, with the exception that even Sirius seemed to have found his appetite again.

"Would you like some more juice, professor?" Hermione asked, noticing Snape's glass was empty. She didn't want to witness another glaring match.

"Thank you, Miss. Granger." Snape nodded at her politely and reached out with his glass, ignoring the way both Black and Weasley stared at him. He noticed that Remus Lupin was having a hard time not showing his amusement, and that even young Malfoy was hiding a smirk.

He decided not to ask what it was all about. These idiots would undoubtedly tell him sooner or later anyway.

Hermione smiled at him and poured him the juice. "You're welcome, professor. And please. It's Hermione." With all the glaring and the tension, she wanted to show the man some support.

The blank stare Snape aimed at her spoke volumes.

"Er... Or Miss. Granger. Whatever you prefer, sir." Wondering if she'd overstepped her bounds, Hermione turned her attention back to her food.

That was the extent of small talk during the dinner.

Finishing with his food, Harry took the offered cup of tea and leaned back on his chair. He was feeling better than in ages, the day off from the constant worrying about the war as good an idea as spending most of the day in bed with Snape.
Tomorrow would be back to business; there would be lots of paperwork waiting as well as the inevitable meetings and he would have to concentrate on that again.

Sighing, he stared at his tea a while longer and then looked up. "Okay. I'm glad we've all come to decide on the awkward silence instead of the yelling and name calling and cursing."

"Harry..." Looking concerned, Remus tried to think of a way to dissolve the tension, but there was nothing to really say.

"I don't mind the silence. It's better than some things I could name." The expression on Harry's face told he'd already named most of them. "I just want to be sure we can actually talk about things and not just explode and start fighting when it gets too awkward."

Sirius looked at Harry, knowing his words were mostly aimed at him, but what on earth could he say? That he wanted Snape out of their lives? That should be obvious by now, but saying it out loud would change nothing.

"I think we can manage."

No one seemed surprised when it was Remus who said the words and even sounded like he meant them.

Casting a brief look at Sirius and then at Snape, he added, "We're all adults here, so I think..." His voice trailed off when Sirius gazed at him with disbelief and Snape simply raised an eyebrow. "We'll manage if we concentrate on the here and now."

Sirius didn't think that concentrating on Snape living here and making Harry grin goofily was any better than concentrating on the past, but Remus had a point. "Okay."

There was a brief pause until Snape nodded. "I agree. Dwelling on things past won't change anything." His voice was cold, though, saying clearly he was still not forgetting what had happened years ago.

It was clear he wasn't finished, and Remus cocked his head slightly. "But?"

"There is something I must insist on." Ignoring the glare thrown at him by Black, Snape kept looking at Remus, a hint of caution creeping into his gaze.

Since there didn't seem to be any malice in the way Snape looked at him, Remus managed a smile. "Let me guess. You want me to stay in our room during the full moon with wards on the door?" He didn't even need to see Snape's nod to know he'd guessed correctly.

He wasn't surprised by the whole thing. What Sirius had done years ago had almost destroyed him and killed Snape; it wasn't something either would exactly forget.

The way Snape was sitting there, waiting for him to go on was however astonishing. They had never discussed the matter beyond a few angry retorts from Snape every time he handed him his Wolfsbane, which was a gesture of the man's professionalism and definitely not of his forgiveness.

Before he could say anything else, Sirius growled, "You have no right to ask that!" He'd known it would come to this.

"Yes, he does." Remus' tone was gentle, a striking contrast to Sirius' rage. He didn't want to say more or point out that Sirius had made it damn clear Snape would have the right to ask that by creating the whole issue in the first place.
There were so many things about the past they could fight about, and Remus knew there were questions he would probably want to ask later on, things that even now nagged at him. But this would lead nowhere. "He does have the right to ask."

Sirius was holding on to the tabletop, knuckles turning white. He was trying to calm his breathing, face red and eyes blazing with rage. Hearing the quiet words that held so many memories but no recrimination, he seemed to deflate, losing most of his rage under the pain. "Remus..."

"It's all right." Touching Sirius' hand gently, Remus smiled. "Let it be."

Watching the exchange in silence, Snape was shocked by how quickly Black seemed to agree with Lupin and the almost desperate need for approval so evident in him. His memory of the man was somewhat different, the arrogance oozing from Black had been the most notable trait in him when they had all still been students at Hogwarts, and he'd not seen anything in the Order meetings that would dispel that memory. He realized that his words about Black being less than sane had been more correct than he could have guessed.

Nevertheless, it wasn't Black's mental state that made him murmur at Lupin, "I would appreciate it."

"Of course." Still holding Sirius' hand, Remus nodded. He would raise the wards, just as he would let Snape watch him drink the *Wolfsbane* if he wanted to. Not willing to mention his one time lapse three years ago in front of Sirius and the children, Remus hoped Snape wouldn't either.

Acknowledging the somber tone even more than the words, Snape raised his tea cup. "Thank you." Seeing Black's eyes widen at the simple courtesy never ceased to amuse him.

He ignored the way most of the other Gryffindors seemed to be beaming at him and continued drinking his tea.

There were no other comments, and when everyone had finished with their meal, no one seemed to want to stay in the living room for a quiet conversation.

But there was less of the awkward tension Harry had mentioned.

Snape didn't say anything about the dinner as he shut the bedroom door behind him, not commenting on the weird scene in the hallway with Weasley glaring at Malfoy followed by frantic scrambling into one of the other bedrooms either.

He was going to miss the peace and quiet of his dungeons, but maybe living with these people wouldn't be as bad as he'd thought.

Especially if they gave him privacy when he worked.

Taking off his robes, Snape cast a look at Harry who was very pointedly folding his own clothes on the chair he'd taken from the dungeons. It was a domestic sight of sorts, one that reminded Snape of something that had been said earlier.

He didn't think he should comment on the scene with Lupin and Black, but curiosity drove him to ask about the thing Granger had brought up. "Would you prefer calling me Severus from now on?" Offering the use of his first name did seem logical.

Harry dropped his sock on the floor, gawking with mild shock at the non sequitur. "You want me to call you Severus?" The name felt strange on his lips. He wasn't certain he really wanted to call Snape
that.

He didn't know why. Maybe because all these years, he'd got used to the man and his name and changing that perception would tell people things had changed. Even though he didn't mind everyone knowing what was between him and Snape, he didn't want to sound as if he was somehow seeing Snape in a completely different light.

"Not necessarily." There were only a few people who called Snape by his first name, mostly his colleagues, and even they seemed to choke on it from time to time. "It doesn't really matter to me."

"Okay. Do you want to call me Harry?"

Snape thought for a moment. Did he? He already thought of the twerp as Harry anyway. "Whatever you prefer." He had no opinion on the matter.

"I think I'd like to call you... Snape. If that's all right with you." Harry liked the name. It suited Snape, and he was probably the only person in the whole world who said it with fondness. Usually it was almost like a curse.

Nodding, Snape lifted the covers and sat on the bed. "It is my name." As long as Harry didn't call him with any of the nauseating nicknames the Gryffindors seemed to like -- the four idiots from his school years taking it to the extreme -- he didn't really care.

"Snape. Okay. And you can call me Harry if you want to." Most of the people already called him that anyway. "Or Potter." Harry knew Snape would probably just call him idiot.

It was nice to crawl into bed, feeling exhausted and shagged out. Harry didn't mention the dinner, knowing that awkward didn't begin to describe it, but also feeling that it could have gone so much worse.

No one had been hexed, no one had left the house in anger. That was something.

Snuggling against Snape in the dark, muttering the usual "Good night," Harry thought that this moment alone was worth all the awkwardness.

Part 15

There were a few gloomy stares aimed at both Snape and Harry the next morning as they walked to the Headquarters together, but no one said a thing.

It grated on Harry, making his skin crawl. There had been no comments about the way Snape was so obviously staying with him and his family, but somehow the silence was worse than anything.

If there were words, he could respond to them somehow; even though he didn't really believe in explaining himself, he could make it absolutely clear that he knew what he was doing.

Now there was just the oppressive silence and surprised looks following them into the meeting hall, the stares intensifying as Snape took his place next to Draco Malfoy until the tension was almost suffocating.

Harry sighed, and took the empty seat next to Snape.

Soon it seemed like people had already began to discuss something far more important than professor Snape's possible new quarters.
"So, when exactly will the final battle be?" asked Sprout.

The enthusiastic nods coming from all around the table chilled Harry, because he knew there could be no answer. You could make plans and have perfect strategies, and still there was no telling when a battle would be the last one. All they could really plan was the first big battle and hope there wouldn't be another one.

Arabella Figg scoffed. "Who cares when? I'm more concerned in where. The Death Eaters seem to be completely happy with rampaging all around the country, burning a house here and another one there."

Excited babbling followed her words as everyone felt the need to voice their theories or more questions.

"Don't be stupid, Arabella," Hooch's comment could be heard even above all the noise, her voice that was perfectly suited for coaching Quidditch players echoing in the room without the aid of a sonorus. "Where do you think it will be?"

Ignoring the way Sirius smirked at the prospect of having the two ladies start a real fight, Harry cleared his throat.

"Of course! Hogwarts! Oh, that was silly of me!" Sprout fussed, looking slightly embarrassed while she tried to diffuse the situation. "Sorry about that."

People smiled at her, no one even trying to challenge what she had just said.

Arabella Figg glared at Hooch.

"Yes, Hogwarts," Harry muttered before anyone could say anything they might -- or might not -- regret later. He knew his words would sound like an affirmation and was glad he wouldn't have to form any other lies.

He once again wished it would be as simple as that; the final battle, the war fought between him and Voldemort only, the hero conquering the bad guy in time for everyone to go home for tea.

He pushed that firmly out of his mind.

"So what can we do about it?" Sprout was still talking breathlessly, as if trying to ask anything to keep the conversation flowing so that the women on either side of her couldn't continue bickering.

"We need to talk about what will happen when the Death Eaters attack Hogwarts," Harry said, ignoring the bad taste the sentence left in his mouth. It wasn't at all certain that the Death Eaters would come, at least any time soon, especially if things went on like this.

Voldemort's people attacked, killing people and starting fires all over their world. The Order and the Aurors hurried there to put out the fires and then bury the dead. As long as it was as simple as that, Voldemort wouldn't have any reason to risk all he had on a full blown attack.

Sitting back, Harry gestured at people to talk about the situation amongst themselves, encouraging them to voice any and all ideas they had. It wouldn't change most of the plans they had already made, but maybe someone would say something they hadn't thought about yet.

He tuned out the buzz of people all talking at the same time, knowing that it would be a waste of energy trying to concentrate on everything that was said now. Some of the ideas would be undoubtedly ridiculous.
But there would be good ideas, solid plans, and most of all, enthusiasm to face the enemy.

Harry didn't know if he could really feel good about it. He knew the realities better than most people in this room.

They had already beaten Voldemort in a way; they'd robbed him of his dream victory. Harry had known that the morning after his birthday, when he had been alive and well and definitely not bound somewhere in the cellars of the Malfoy Mansion waiting to be executed.

Yet they still had a long way to go, especially if their plans failed and there would indeed be no great battle where Voldemort would bring his followers to meet the army following Fawkes' banner.

It was a gloomy thought, one that Harry had always tried to banish before. The mere idea of having to fight in small skirmishes for decades was enough to ruin his day, but he couldn't just ignore the fact that it might actually come true.

Why would Voldemort risk a battle when they were so equal in strength and he had nothing to really worry about? Both sides had a solid leader and people willing to fight. Of course they also had mindless fanatics -- Harry only had to look at where Moody and his fellow Aurors sat to remember that. They had people with courage and skills; excellent in Potions and Charms, but so did Voldemort. Old seasoned wizards and those who had just recently left school, ones who would probably tuck tail and run.

Those who would fight till the end.

Harry swallowed. Yes, there would be deaths, people he knew, people who were even now here in this room with him. Voldemort's people did have one thing they didn't; they had the Dark Magic and the willingness to use the Unforgivables. They had been trained to kill, unlike his people.

It was obvious the old school Aurors could kill. Some of the teachers might resort to the ultimate violence as well, especially if they were protecting the school and former students. Harry knew that there were others, like the Weasleys, who had already lost too much to simply settle with ordinary charms.

But the truth was, most of the others would try to fight an honest fight, no matter how hard they'd tried to teach everyone to survive, and that would be the reason they lost.

Trying to shrug off the uncomfortable emotion, Harry tried to think about the qualities they had and Voldemort's didn't. He was stunned by how hard it was to think of anything that would be of use.

Honesty and reason and sanity were great qualities, but wouldn't help them in a fight. Not when the enemy were going to cheat and use madness against them.

At least people seemed to be eager to form a plan, the noise level still rising in the room. Such a far cry from those early meetings where everyone sat quiet and waited for the orders or then milled around, trying to look like they weren't absolutely terrified by all this.

There was Snape muttering quietly with Draco and Blaise, both younger Slytherins listening avidly, Blaise nodding every once in a while. Remus and Hermione were clearly having some ideas, both leaning closer to each other and talking while Sirius watched them with a benign expression on his face. Some of the Hogwarts staff were arguing about something, with Hooch and Figg staring at each other angrily.

Harry decided not to ask what that was all about.
He could see Ron frown where he was sitting next to Hermione and clearly finding some flaw in whatever she was saying. The expression was familiar, usually accompanied by a very clever move on the chess board.

That had been a surprise, one Harry wasn't going to share with his friend. Ron could actually see both the big picture and the finer details if he concentrated on them instead of being pig headed about something else. The strategies Remus was now scribbling down on a piece of parchment weren't unlike ones used in wizarding chess.

Still not saying a word, Harry kept looking around the small room. Everyone was talking out loud, some of the younger members of the Order were also gesturing with their hands. There were some good ideas, coming unavoidably from the few Muggleborn, who had broader horizon than the ones raised in the wizarding world. Harry understood the strategic value of a surprise. Fighting with Muggle strategies would certainly be that.

But it wasn't enough.

Harry looked away from Ron, resting his gaze on Draco Malfoy for a moment, still amazed to see the calm expression on his face. He saw Dumbledore and McGonagall whisper to each other, saw acceptance in the eyes of Arthur Weasley as he listened to a younger witch, whose eyes shone with zeal and innocence.

Wherever he looked, he could see good people, dedicated people. But that wasn't going to be enough if they didn't make sure they were all going to be able to deal with their plans.

In a short while, the small discussions exhausted around the table, and everyone turned back to stare at Harry. For once, he didn't mind the expectant looks; there were plans, old plans that had existed for some time now, and it was about time for them to finally discuss them and then continue training so that they could actually do what they had planned.

"All right then. We need to make sure everyone knows what to do in battle. We shouldn't let Voldemort's people inside Hogwarts, but they can do enough damage from the outside. There's a lot to cover; the lake, the Forbidden Forest, the grounds..." Harry waited for his words to sink in.

The horror so evident on the faces of most of the professors were the truest indicator that this was indeed their worst nightmare.

Harry didn't give them time to really panic. "Let's start from the beginning. Albus. What will you do if the Dark Lord invades the school grounds?"

Everyone turned to the Headmaster.

There was a fierce glint in Dumbledore's eyes. "I will stay at the courtyard and guard Hogwarts. That is my task. I do believe the house elves are more than happy to help me with it." His smile was knowing.

"Yes, the house elves will help, as will the ghosts." Not bothering to acknowledge the curious looks everyone cast at her at the comment, McGonagall added, "I will stay as well." She looked at Dumbledore as if there would be objections.

Dumbledore stared at her for a moment before nodding slightly. "I would be most delighted to have you there by my side."

Harry refused to let his control slip and roll his eyes like Snape had a moment ago. He was rather proud of that. "Good. What about the rest of us?"
It was easy from then on. People seemed to realize the importance of team work, and in no time, there were basic teams set to guard over all the important places surrounding Hogwarts. There would have to be more, small teams going to deal with Voldemort's operations elsewhere, but this was not the time to discuss that. This was also not the group of people that needed to be involved in that conversation; secrecy had become a second nature to Harry, but he could see so clearly how it was the only way in a situation like this.

He had already known that Dumbledore would not leave the school and that as the deputy Headmistress, McGonagall would stay as well, guarding Hogwarts till the end. If Hagrid came back in time, he and others would cover the grounds where his hut had stood, if not, that would be the job for some of the younger Aurors. Those with more experience like Bill Weasley and Moody and the rest of the survivors from the first Voldemort war would lead others.

"And what will you do, Harry?" Eyes gleaming with excitement, Ron turned to look at his friend.


There was a confused silence that was broken by Draco Malfoy's soft, "We're going to play Quidditch?"

A few younger Aurors snorted with laughter at that, casting disbelieving looks at the Slytherin who was suggesting something as stupid as Quidditch at the moment like this.

Harry on the other hand smiled even wider. "Yeah. We're going to play Quidditch." Considering his skills, it was either flying or challenging Voldemort into a chocolate eating contest. Somehow he didn't see the latter plausible, no matter how insane the Dark Lord was.

After a moment of disbelieving shock, realization dawned on some faces. Harry could see it on George's face a moment before Charlie caught on and let a satisfied grin bloom. Oliver Wood actually let out a gleeful little 'yes' and high fived Angelina who was sitting close by.

Harry tried to remember all the stories he'd ever heard in the locker rooms or the pitch, and with every story there were more names he could connect to the faces all around him.

It was Madam Hooch who finally said it out loud and ended the weird looks most people were casting at the former Quidditch players. "You're talking about a wizarding air force?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm talking about." That was absolutely the place where Harry wanted to be when it came time to act; high in the sky with a broom underneath him, a wand in his hand and people he trusted by his side.

Some of them were probably out of condition and some had left that part of their lives behind, but they could all still do it. Flying was in their blood.

George was saying something to Charlie, repeating 'WAF' so often that Harry was certain there would probably be T-shirts with that coming up next. He ignored that, concentrating on the way Charlie looked at him and nodded with gratitude plain on his face.

Harry didn't know if it was anything to be grateful for; even with a bum leg, Charlie could fly and fight. Otherwise he might have not been able to fight at all.

Such thoughts were stupid, and Harry knew it. There was no force on earth that would keep the Weasleys from the battle; they would crawl on broken glass to face the Death Eaters.

Hooch was beaming happily. "I think that's an excellent idea!"
Those she had once guided in the art of flying were nodding all around the room.

Hours and hours of training helped now. There were no silly questions or complaining; people actually managed to get into groups with designated group leaders. This wasn't about meaningless classes or training for curses most had never heard of.

Harry let his people work, content to watch them move around the room and find the team that would most likely need their expertise. He noticed that some people were gathering together in silence and nodded at Remus who was quietly standing between Sirius and Snape.

Their work would be different, but no less dangerous than standing on a battlefield facing the enemy.

"I must say you're rather good at this," came the soft words nearby.

Harry almost jumped. He turned to face Arthur Weasley who was standing next to him with a familiar look in his eyes. "Well at least now I know where Bill got the habit of sneaking up behind people... And yeah, I guess I must be."

"You're hating every moment of it, right?"

When had Mr. Weasley got so perceptive? Harry didn't know, but right now he was rather glad for it. "Yeah." He didn't even have to ask if the feeling was mutual; it was clear that Acting Minister Weasley wasn't exactly rejoicing in his new status either. "But someone has to do this."

Arthur looked around, and when he saw no one was close enough to hear his words, he muttered, "Will this do any good?"

This time the amazement showed on Harry's face, and there was a lot of respect mixed with it. "Yes. I believe that it will. I can't really tell you..." There was an apologetic shrug. "But yeah. This will make all the difference in the world."

"But there are other things as well?"

Harry agreed, "Yes, there are other things as well." Their plans were far from simple, but right now, the wizarding world had to concentrate on this.

Arthur was quiet for a moment, looking at his sons who were all gathering together and talking enthusiastically, especially Charlie, who had been rather quiet about the battles until now. "You will tell me if you need me and the Ministry to do something, won't you Harry?" He turned to Harry, seeing in the young wizard's expression that he wouldn't have to wait for it.

There was already something important he could do.

"Let's hear it then!" It was the one way Arthur could really thank this man who was the best friend of his youngest son and who was giving him and his family a chance to avenge Fred's death. "What do you need?"

Looking into Arthur Weasley's eyes, Harry sighed. It would come to this; their world had always known that one day there would be a battle raging outside Hogwarts, the school grounds filled with witches and wizards trying to kill each other and dodging those who had already fallen, the wounded and those who were dying. There had always been whispers, as if the legend of the Great Harry Potter had already been written in the minds of the people Voldemort would come, for that was what evil Dark Lords did, and Harry Potter would stand tall and resist, for that was what heroes did, and no one ever questioned that.
"I need to talk with you about one of the warrants you made," Harry said quietly. He knew all too well that he could simply tell Arthur what he wanted to be done, but right now, he couldn't bear with another half truth.

"Yes?"

Glad of how calmly Arthur Weasley was standing there and waiting for him to explain, Harry mused out loud, "We gather here in Hogsmeade, but I think everyone sees Hogwarts as the center of our world."

"That sounds about right." Amazingly, there was an amused glint in Arthur's eyes. "We all expect Voldemort to march here. No one's talking about the battle at the Ministry or anything like that."

Harry nodded. "Yes. And everyone knows about Voldemort's main strongholds."

The amusement disappeared from Arthur's gaze in a second. "Like the Malfoy Mansion." His expression clearly stated that he would be perfectly willing to go and tear the place down stone by stone, with his bare hands if necessary.

"Yes, like the Mansion," Harry agreed. "But I can't remember ever hearing anyone saying anything about Tom Riddle's old home. Not even after you issued the warrants on his arrest; specifically on him as Tom Marvolo Riddle and not just as Lord Voldemort."

There was a short silence as Arthur stared at him with an incredulous expression on his face, amazingly looking exactly like Ron after he'd walked in on Harry touching Snape's arm. The incomprehension slowly melted, leaving steely resolve behind. "The Riddle house?"

Harry nodded again, knowing he didn't need to explain his plan further. "The Riddle house."

Part 16

It didn't take long for the rumors to spread. Like a charmed magical fire they raged over Hogsmeade within a day.

People passing by Harry's house were staring now, as if the house had grown itself ears and a tail. Of course such transformation wasn't unheard of, but this time the horrid fascination was most likely due to its new inhabitant.

Snape's presence in Hogsmeade was familiar, but seeing him around all the time was clearly a shock to most of the people. To the members of the Order it was mostly a cause for some curiosity, but there were those who seemed to be almost offended by the way he was now living with their leader.

There were also the rather nasty articles in the Daily Prophet about the man.

Harry knew it was a mistake to pay any attention to the papers now, but he couldn't help wondering, especially when Sirius kept casting worried looks at him. The way Snape had simply disappeared into his new laboratory without saying a word after breakfast made him worry even more.

It was nothing new, really; rumors about Snape moving out of Hogwarts and speculations about his new home followed by pages about the First Voldemort War, accounting the well known fact that Snape had indeed been a Death Eater.

'Reliable sources' handing over quotes that would make people wild, hints about Death Eater atrocities that had never really been printed before. Columns after columns full of the abominable
ways Voldemort's people disregarded all decency.

Harry hated the whole thing, mostly bothered by the repetition of the old belief that you never really stopped being a Death Eater.

Sure, people had a right -- and a good reason -- to doubt and comment on Snape's past, but ignoring the present was simply idiotic. He had been a Death Eater, but he sure as hell wasn't one anymore. Hadn't been one for a long time.

Refusing to call his actions sulking, Harry spent most of the day casting angry looks around and then retiring earlier than usual, needing some time home alone.

These days, they didn't even bother to pretend that walking around alone was an option, and Harry was glad that it was Remus' turn to babysit him. At least Remus didn't seem to have the need to say anything as he walked him home, settling with casting a few contemplating looks at him every once in a while.

Since the door leading to the cellar was firmly shut, Harry didn't go downstairs to see if he could spend time with Snape, thinking he might want some time alone as well. Instead, he spent a moment making himself some tea and then glaring at the Daily Prophet someone had left on the living room table.

He was just glad no one had been stupid enough to actually comment on anything they had printed.

Even though Harry knew it was a bad idea, he picked the paper up and browsed through it, flipping through the pages almost negligently. The stories about his own past had never intrigued him at all, but this was different; he needed to know what they were saying about Snape so that he could be prepared for any and all remarks people might make.

He set his jaw and started reading.

Disgusted after the first few lines, Harry crumpled the paper into a ball and tossed it to the other side of the room, barely resisting incinerating the whole thing.

The hell with it! He wasn't going to waste any time reading that crap.

It was the same thing over and over again, and there was nothing anyone could say that Harry hadn't heard before.

"Are they writing about Severus again?" Remus asked as he stepped fully into the room from the doorway where he'd been standing in silence and watching. He'd noticed the dark frown on Harry's face all day long, and thought this might be an excellent time for a little talk.

With Sirius in the house, it would be impossible to even try this.

"Yes. About his past." It was disgusting. Why was everyone so keen on labeling people? Most of the people in this house seemed to have a description following their name; the werewolf, the former prisoner of Azkaban, the Slytherin, the former Death eater. The Boy Who Lived. Harry was sick and tired of it.

Remus sat down on the couch. "About him being a Death Eater." This was something he'd been thinking about for a long time, almost since he'd first heard about Harry seeing Severus, but there had never been a proper time to bring it up before.

Glaring, Harry muttered, "Yes." A former Death Eater. Why couldn't people get that in their heads?
"You do know that they're simply stating a fact. It's not as if they're making things up." At least they weren't this time. Remus looked at Harry earnestly, needing to see if he'd really thought about it.

Of course Harry knew that. "I know." It wouldn't have an impact on Snape if it was simply a lie. "But they shouldn't write about it now."

In his opinion, the reporters should never write another article about Snape's past. It didn't change anything and only complicated everything.

"Maybe so, but to many, his past as a Death Eater won't change even if he does good deeds for us now."

The only reply Remus got was an infuriated glare. Harry’s angry expression warned him not to go into this now.

"Have you ever really talked about it with him, Harry?" Gaze sharp, Remus stared at him. He was as stubborn as any other Gryffindor and wouldn't let go this easily.

Harry shook his head. "No. And I don't intend to." He was not about to re-open the age old wounds. Life was harsh as it was, people were judging so many things by what had happened years ago. He wasn't going to add to that.

"Maybe you should." Noticing how Harry was prepared for a retort, Remus added, "I'm not saying this to drive you away from him. I just think that maybe you and he should talk about his past."

There was a short silence. Harry's lips were pursed into a thin line, his face reddening. Finally he nodded curtly. "Fine. I will talk to him about it. Right after I ask Sirius to tell me everything about that time when he lured Snape into the Shrieking Shack. Including what happened afterwards."

Remus' jaw fell open. He couldn't say a word, could hardly even breathe. Had Harry really said that? How could he? He loved Sirius almost as much as Remus did.

"I can't think of any reason for such a conversation except to really hurt him. It would destroy Sirius." Harry sounded slightly disgusted, and all of the emotion was aimed at himself. "We both know what happened. I can even guess why it happened. So there's no need to go digging into it."

Still shocked by the matter of fact way Harry had just used that as an example, Remus stammered, "But it's not the same thing!" No one had died and Sirius hadn't meant to really even hurt anyone, he'd just been young and stupid.

Harry nodded. "No it's not the same thing. But at the same time it is." He was really glad there was no possibility of Ron or Sirius barging in unnoticed; this was painful enough as it was. "I know exactly what Snape used to do. He was a Death Eater!" He let the reality of that statement wash over him, the disgust and horror clear in his eyes. "Do you honestly believe I don't know what that means?"

Even though this wasn't the first time Remus saw Harry this weary and suddenly older than he was, he could still only stare.

"The Death Eaters kill people. Muggles. Wizards. They use curses and knives and poisons and bare hands. They work alone and in groups. Torture, maim and rape before they kill. Do you think I left something out?"

"No." It was a whisper. Remus shook his head slightly, unable to meet Harry's gaze. He had been taunted and scorned for decades over his curse, but he had never felt this small before.
"There is nothing for me and Snape to talk about. I know. How the hell could I not know? I've fought against those bastards for years." Harry bit his lip as he remembered all the times he'd encountered the masked Death Eaters, all so ready and willing to take his life.

He could never forget what the Death Eaters were like, but he didn't see Snape as one of them. Death Eaters felt no guilt or remorse and they exalted in every sick perversion their master told them to indulge in. The fact that Snape didn't flaunt his pain didn't mean he didn't feel it.

"Harry..." Remus swallowed. "I..."

Harry didn't let go. "Do you really think I should ask him about his past? Tear all that open and for what? To prove to you that I do know what I'm doing? To somehow feel better when I hear him tell me that he was one of the nicer Death Eaters who just bowed down to Voldemort and then went to bed when all the others stayed and had an orgy?"

He snapped his mouth shut before he could say anything more. Snape wouldn't want anyone else to know about the nightmares or the scars. He probably preferred thinking Harry hadn't noticed them either, or that he hadn't made some educated guesses about their origin.

"Do you think he would say that?" There was something in Harry's voice Remus didn't recognize, and he couldn't help wondering if he was somehow lying to himself after all.

A chuckle escaped Harry before he could shake his head. "No. Snape would never lie to me. He would tell the truth, no matter how horrible or painful. He wouldn't lie." Of that he was certain. Snape would not tell him simply what he wanted to hear, he would be brutally honest.

Remus was shocked once again. "And you honestly don't want to ask Snape if he never..."

"If he never what?" This wasn't what Harry wanted. He didn't want to be angry at Remus or anyone he loved, but he could feel the anger tingle through his body. "If he never what, Remus?"

"If he never really enjoyed it."

The silence was deafening. Harry stared at Remus, feeling all anger drain away from him. He wanted to let go and sit down on the floor, but couldn't. All he could think of were the words.

Enjoy it? He wanted to say no, scream it out so loud the windows shook with the force of his voice. But he couldn't. Because deep inside he knew that it was possible that Snape had.

It was a rush; the power that coursed through you when you cast the *Avada Kedavra* was horrifying. Maybe it was why it was so unforgivable. It was not the only curse that would kill, but it was the one that could make killing enjoyable.

"Have you ever used the killing curse on anyone?" Harry was certain Remus hadn't, and the slight shake of head confirmed it easily. He already knew Sirius hadn't. The one time he had killed had not been by using magic.

Instead of saying anything about how addictive the rush of power could become, he said quietly, "I don't have to ask Snape if he ever enjoyed killing or torturing innocents."

He didn't say anything about the sex, even though he couldn't help thinking about it for just a moment, knowing all too well that even impersonal fucking could sometimes be a relief, at least physically. Sleeping through the ranks of Death Eaters was probably just like Harry's sleeping with his schoolmates when any warm bed was enough for the night; something that had happened and wouldn't need to be discussed. Ever.
Especially with the memory of Snape's rage towards the mere comment about sexual violence, that had been more telling than any words could possibly be.

"Because I already know." Harry stared at Remus, his voice steady. "I know that while being sober and not under any mind altering charm, he's never truly enjoyed what he did as a Death Eater."

"How can you be certain of that?"

Both Harry and Remus turned to stare at the doorway in horror.

Snape looked even paler than he usually did, his arms crossed across his chest as if he was cradling himself. His eyes showed nothing of what he was thinking.

Cursing himself quietly, Harry wondered what had made him forget that the firmly closed door leading to the cellar and the faint smell of burning herbs in the air meant that Snape was indeed in the house, brewing.

"I... I know," Harry said, knowing it wouldn't be enough by the slight sneer that his words caused. "If you had, you would never have left them."

That made Snape nod. "Correct." He was pleased -- not to mention astonished -- by the logic Harry was showing instead of using intuition or that good old Gryffindor trust. "With one exception, of course." This time the trusting gleam in Harry's gaze didn't even manage to irritate him. It was somehow warming. How disgusting! "I did enjoy working with potions. The laboratory in the Malfoy Mansion was considerably better stocked than my... Than the one in Hogwarts."

He chose not to say anything about the unpleasant atmosphere or the poor ventilation system. They hadn't been enough to ruin the experience.

Especially when he had been working on potions he'd never even dreamed of brewing, both the ones considered too malevolent and simply too difficult for someone his age.

Harry smiled slightly at that. He should have expected Snape to be meticulously honest. "I can imagine." Young Snape being all ecstatic to be able to work with things he'd only read of, showing off his skills to the others.

Ignoring the smile, Snape looked at Remus. "Anything else you want to know, Lupin?" His tone indicated there had better not be any more questions.

"No." It had been a foolish thing to expect of Harry in the first place. Remus had known that the moment Harry had mentioned the Shrieking Shack. Thinking about the nasty things other people did was always easier than to focus on what truly awful things your loved ones had done. He should have remembered that.

Snape seemed to settle for that. Without any words, he turned around and walked away. A few moments later his footsteps could be heard in the staircase leading upstairs.

"I..." Seeing that Harry was about to follow Snape, Remus stammered, "I'm sorry." His concern had been genuine, but he had clearly put his nose into a matter that didn't really concern him.

"Don't be." Harry knew that Remus hadn't said any of the things out of malice. "It's all right."

That wasn't good enough. Remus shook his head. "No, it's not. I was out of line. Please convey my apologies to Severus as well." He hoped he hadn't destroyed anything that Harry held dear, honest enough to admit to himself that his questions hadn't stemmed from worry alone.
Harry stopped, casting a piercing look at Remus at the sound of genuine guilt behind his words. He wondered if Remus could really hear it himself, as if the echo of something he'd once said was still there to be heard even after decades from that night Sirius' prank had gone too far.

He didn't know. It wasn't his place to ask.

Nodding slightly, he turned and hurried upstairs.

As Harry stepped into his room, he looked warily around him, half expecting to see Snape's trunk packed already. The scene downstairs had been completely unpleasant, and he wouldn't have been surprised to see Snape try to run away from this house.

It was a relief to see the man standing by the window.

"Are you all right?" He could read the tension in Snape's body. "I'm sorry about what you had to hear, and Remus sent his apologies as well."

Snape didn't acknowledge the apologies in any way. "Mr. Potter..."

"No!" This was beyond the worst possibility Harry had allowed himself to consider. "Don't do this, Snape." There was only one reason why the man would address him like that, and Harry knew he wasn't going to like what came out next.

As if he hadn't been interrupted, Snape went on, "I don't believe this arrangement will work after all." With everyone's eyes on him once again and with even someone like Remus Lupin questioning him, there was no other option. He couldn't stay here.

"If this won't work, we'll think of something else. Move somewhere." Keeping his voice level, Harry refused to look away. He'd fight for this if he had to, with Sirius and Ron and Remus, even with Snape himself. He wasn't going to let go. "I want to live with you."

Snape snorted. "Don't be stupid. You have a big house with people you undoubtedly call a family."

There was no real scorn in his voice. He knew this was one of the subjects that would lead to real pain, so he toned down the sarcasm. "Are you honestly suggesting you'd leave all that behind to..."

He wasn't sure how to put it. To be with him? To have someone to hold? Something undoubtedly Gryffindor anyway.

Images of the cottage assaulted Harry. He wondered what it would be like to live somewhere alone with Snape, dealing with all the small everyday things together, calling the place home and falling asleep next to him in their bed every evening. It sounded wonderful.

Even with this new insight, he still sounded surprised as he said, "Yes."

Snape had expected there to be a silence, or maybe a very awkward silence followed by another foray into sexual acrobatics. Having Harry grab his wand and cast a *cruciatus* wouldn't have been as shocking as this soft admission.

Somehow the torture of the curse would have been easier to bear than the hollow feeling brought by Harry's insane belief in him.

"You do know that everything Lupin said was true." There was no sign of life in Snape's eyes.

"Yeah." Harry nodded. His voice was quiet as he added, "I've seen it all in my nightmares." Whatever the connection between him and Voldemort was now, it had once been strong enough to
show him at least the shadow of what he and his Death Eaters did.

He didn't know how anyone could hide from the truth. The Death Eaters were monsters; not the kinds of you read about in a book, but the reality behind every fantasy villain. They weren't men reduced to their baser needs like those bitten by a werewolf, they weren't the undead. They were simply men.

Snape squeezed his hand into a fist so hard he half feared his fingers would crack from the pressure. "I never have nightmares." He could tell by the flash he saw in Harry's eyes that he was going to protest and raised his other hand to still any foolish words. "I only have memories."

Looking into Harry's eyes, he wondered if Harry would ever understand everything behind his simple words, and then almost choked as he realized he didn't need to explain anything. Harry did know, understood his meaning perfectly, and still wanted him to stay.

He shook his head. "No."

Harry managed not to curse out loud. Just how many times would they have to go through this? "I already told you once I want to live with you. If you choose not to believe me, I think I'll just have to tell you again. Until you do believe me."

"You can't possibly mean that." It was unbelievable, because Harry sounded so earnest, his words echoing once again with the notion of sharing everything with him.

"Of course I mean it! I want to live with you." Harry was beginning to realize this was going to get really tedious fast.

Snape simply stared.

"You once said you don't want to hear me beg." Harry kept his gaze on Snape's, refusing to back off. "But I'm getting really close to the point now. Please."

The simple words seemed to be more effective than anything. "Stop that!"

"I'll stop when you stop fighting me about this! I want to live with you, no matter what the others say, no matter what you did when you were younger."

Snape let out a disbelieving snort.

Not even that could make Harry really mad. "Do you really believe I'm just saying that? Come on, Snape! If it's about staying here, we can move. I mean it."

That was the point. Snape couldn't fathom what would drive Harry to even contemplate such a thing.

"Becoming dependant on someone is not healthy, Potter. When you start thinking that a person is the most important thing in your world, you'll lose yourself. If you don't believe me," now there was a glare, "ask Remus Lupin. I'm certain he'll be happy to tell you how much he enjoyed his life alone without..." There was a definite pause full of all the unsaid nasty comments before Snape settled with, "Your godfather."

Harry let out a suffering sigh. Was Snape being intentionally dense or was this just something he honestly didn't understand? He was beginning to wonder if it was the latter.

"I'm not talking about a biological imperative like the werewolf mating habits. I'm not trying to force you into anything. All I'm saying is that I like living with you. It's nice to..." How to explain it?
Especially since he wasn't completely sure what he meant. After a long silence, he finished the sentence lamely, "You know. Be with you."

Snape shook his head, forcing the words out before he could convince himself of their stupidity, "I do not understand that." He didn't find Harry's presence in his life unpleasant, but he honestly couldn't understand how Harry would be so insistent on making him stay.

"I know, but it's not something you can explain." Harry smiled a little. "You know, Gryffindor emotionalism and all that." He didn't know how to say it better; the way Snape seemed to balk at every emotional scene made him keep that one word unsaid. For now.

Sighing, Snape shook his head, but his body was slowly relaxing. "Oh, that." How on earth had he imagined he could ever win a logical argument with someone who didn't obviously believe in logic? "I see."

Harry asked quietly, "So will you stay with me?"

"Yes." It escaped Snape before he could swallow it down. He wanted to be angry about the whole thing, hate himself for falling so easily into the trap laid by the pleading gaze now shining with happiness, but couldn't. He was well aware that he had just agreed to much more than simply not leaving.

"Thank you."

Snape didn't want to hear Harry thanking him, the relief in the idiot's voice reminding him of desperate begging somehow.

He made a small gesture, elegant even with the helplessness showing in it, and Harry walked straight into his arms, holding him as if he was afraid he would still want to run away from him. Snape didn't want to talk, didn't want to do anything but simply stand here and feel Harry against him.

It was somehow better than anything, and if a hint of the rage and fear Lupin's words had caused still lingered, Snape ignored it, concentrating on the way Harry's hands moved down his back and how his lips were moving up his throat, nibbling and kissing and whispering something so softly he almost couldn't hear what he was saying.

The almost reverent whisper of his name was familiar, as were the touches and the smell of Harry's shampoo tickling his nose. Snape leaned his head to the side, a graceful gesture devoid of submission, simply a way to give Harry more access, and the whispers turned into an almost suffocated sob.

"Mine!"

Snape froze at that, ignoring the way the sound was frighteningly similar to a feral beast's and concentrated on the word that could still make him shiver with utter terror.

He slowly pushed Harry away. "I am not anyone's property, Potter."

Harry blinked at the icy cold tone, rather shocked as he realized he had actually said it out loud. "No, you're not." He reached out for Snape again, letting his hand drop at the look on Snape's face.

"Even if I stay with you," Snape said, noticing the way Harry flinched as he stressed the 'if', "I do not belong to you."

The concept had always filled him with defiance, even when he had voluntarily held out his arm and
entered in a servitude worse than any slavery. He was his own master now, and would never bow down to anyone, no matter what delusions they might have.

He expected to see anger in Harry's eyes, so the sadness so evident in the green gaze was just as surprising as the quiet apology.

"I'm sorry."

Harry even sounded like he meant it.

"I don't mean you belong to me," Harry added. "I... want you to belong here with me."

Covering the slight shock and the underlying panic well, Snape nodded, as if the words actually meant something to him. Standing still, he allowed Harry to reach out and touch him again, but he was unable to melt into the caresses, feeling the nervous tension in Harry's body as well.

He didn't know what it meant when Harry didn't even try to hide the awkwardness in his kisses. There were no other words, and Harry's lips were almost hesitant on his skin, touching softly, gently. Staring at the wall on the other side of the room, Snape tried to figure out what it meant, knowing that if he simply let this happen, they would fall into bed and shag and there would still be a hint of doubt somewhere deep inside of him, gnawing at him until it became impossible to ignore.

There was a soft kiss on his throat, and then Harry's teeth nipped at his skin, sucking softly but strong enough to leave a mark.

It was the gentlest marking Snape had ever experienced.

Before he could comment on it, Harry whispered, "I'm sorry I seem possessive. I don't mean it the way you think... I don't want to own you. But I want you to be... Mine."

That was utter nonsense, but Snape wasn't surprised. "You're contradicting your own words." That wasn't a surprise either.

"I know." Harry's lips against his skin formed a trembling smile. "You could accept it as one of the things."

Snape sighed. The elusiveness of all the things between them was already annoying him, and he didn't like feeling that Harry could neatly hide all sorts of unpleasantries behind the notion of things. "That makes absolutely no sense."

He was already willing to share so many things with Potter, even enjoying most of them. This blatant show of ownership was wrong, showing him how foolish he was to let his shields down and allow someone to take a hold on him.

Harry stepped back, looking him straight in the eyes. "It makes perfect sense to me." Leaning in, he planted a chaste kiss on Snape's lips, and whispered softly, "Mine."

"Yours?" Feeling his spine stiffen, Snape raised his hands and wrapped his arms around his chest again, neatly blocking Harry's access to his body. He glared at Harry, his voice full of scorn. "Yours?"

"Yes."

"Idiot!" Snape didn't think he could tolerate such utter stupidity from anyone, and the fact that he was simply standing here and not either storming out or hexing Harry was probably the evidence of his
superb self control.

"Yes." Nodding slightly, Harry kept his gaze on Snape's, forcing himself not to touch him. "But I'm your idiot."

It dawned on Snape that this had nothing to do with ownership after all. Harry's idiotic words weren't a prelude to a violent claiming of someone's body or an attempt to ensnare their whole being, mind and soul.

When the realization finally hit, he moved without a thought, grasping Harry's shoulders in an almost bruising grip and instead of shoving him even farther away, he simply spun around with him and pressed him against the wall.

He could see worry in Harry's eyes, but there was no trace of real fear or terror. Those intense emotions had disappeared a while back, right after Snape had said he would stay, and though Snape was slowly starting to accept what it really meant, the thought still filled him with awe.

"I may yet die out of shock, but I do believe you're absolutely right." Snape confirmed the words with a glare and then slowly leaned in to claim Harry's lips with his own. "Exactly what I've always wanted." The sarcasm in his voice made him feel more secure about this. "My own idiot."

Harry arched into his touch.

"Not a very subtle idiot, but an idiot nevertheless." It still didn't make much sense, but Snape never expected that from a Gryffindor anyway. It was somehow enough to hear the foolish notion of belonging and accept it as a part of whatever they shared when it was clear that Harry's words had nothing to do with domination and control.

Things became a blur after that, with Harry trying to pull Snape's robes off while Snape tried to move them across the room to the bed. There was black cloth everywhere, trailing a path from the window, and the bedsprings complained loudly as Snape managed to finally land them both on the bed, half naked.

Harry insisted on kissing every bit of skin he revealed, and Snape let him, holding onto the sheets as Harry slithered down his body.

Content on letting Harry remove his clothing, Snape watched the expression of delight spread to Harry's face as he finally managed to get him naked. He didn't reciprocate, but simply said, "Take off your clothes," making Harry fluster and then scramble out of his trousers.

Their movements were almost frantic, uncoordinated. Snape enjoyed every single groan Harry let out, recognizing his name between the incomprehensible sounds of pleasure, and would have been content with anything.

"Inside me!" Harry growled, and it wasn't a plea but a command. "Now!"

Snape had the familiar jar open before he even registered the words. The way Harry was spreading his legs and pulling him closer was eloquent enough.

Harry's mouth was open, his breath coming in harsh grasps as Snape entered him. He needed this, needed to feel Snape as close to him as possibly and know that he was not going away. The touches and the kisses and Snape's gaze on him were more assuring than any words he could think of right now.

Wrapping his legs tighter around Snape's back, Harry urged him on, knowing he couldn't last much
longer.

The moment seemed to stretch on forever, the almost painful pleasure throbbing through him, seeking for a release that was just beyond his grasp. Harry squeezed Snape's arms harder, his hand slipping on the sweat slick skin, and buried his face in Snape's neck.

But it wasn't before Snape saw the hunger and the desperation on Harry's face, and maybe it was lunacy to drag it out in the open again, but Snape had to know. It wasn't about Harry and his motives anymore, it was about that place inside that had almost reveled in the thought of being wanted like that, wanted for himself and not for being useful.

"Say it!"

Moving so fast he almost hit his nose on Snape's chin, Harry looked up. For a fraction of a second he searched the black gaze for something, and then growled out, "Mine!"

Snape slammed into him as a response, making him howl the word out again. Holding onto Snape with cramping fingers, Harry gasped it out over and over again as his whole world narrowed down to this one glorious moment, his body straining against Snape's.

The dark gaze never moved away from his. Snape kept staring at him even as he shuddered and then went boneless on top of him.

Harry smiled a completely happy smile, knowing that even the exasperated look and the snort wouldn't be enough to lessen it. If anything, they just made him feel warmer inside.

He'd never dared to ask for anything special, knowing that things never went the way he wished, but right now, right here, he had everything he could ever want. He had a feeling that they wouldn't have to talk about emotional attachments again, his message finally loud and clear and spelled out in a way that even a stubborn Slytherin would understand it.

Letting out a sigh, Snape leaned back against the pillows. He knew that even though it was too early to actually retire for the evening, sooner or later Harry would do his leech imitation again.

He simply pulled Harry against him.

He could feel Harry make a content little sound, still shocked by the way he could make this young idiot happy. Pulling the covers up, he cocooned them both into a warm shelter.

Harry made another one of those satisfied sounds deep in his throat and lay his head on Snape's shoulder.

There was a moment of silence, not enough to lull Harry into a drowsy stupor, but almost. His eyelids were drooping slightly, and he snuggled closer to Snape, wondering if he could ever feel better than this.

Probably not.

Snape's hand came to rest on his chest, a casual caress that made him snuggle even closer.

"Idiot." Unlike usual, it was muttered softly against his hair, the familiar word slightly slurred by a yawn.

He'd been wrong; it was possible to feel even better. Deciding not to say anything, quite certain he wouldn't be able to squeeze anything intelligent out of his throat anyway, Harry kissed Snape's
shoulder. He would be perfectly happy to simply stay here in silence until they either fell asleep or decided to go downstairs for dinner.

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**Part 17**

Snape wasn't certain he actually liked the early mornings.

He was used to them after years of waking up around dawn to get ready for classes, but he had never really thought about mornings in the context of liking them.

That was becoming a habit these days: thinking about insanities and impossibilities, or even taking them for granted. He sometimes envied Harry for the way he seemed to be able to grasp huge issues and make them sound so damn easy, as if life wasn't really as complicated as it had always seemed to him.

The rather sad truth was that he was beginning to realize he did in fact like mornings, especially those that could be started with an armful of sleepy Harry Potter, followed by a cup of hot, strong tea.

Just as he didn't exactly mind the fleeting touches that had always been a show for others; touches of ownership, of power over him.

Knowing there would be a hand touching on his shoulder as soon as Harry came downstairs, Snape settled with his cup of tea, enjoying the silence of the morning, all too well aware that it would not last for long.

It would be a busy day today, a fact that he didn't really wish to contemplate right now when there were still hours and hours before the full moon would rise above Hogsmeade. He was simply going to deal with the things as they came, starting with the Wolfsbane that was already slowly brewing in the cellar.

Not allowing any of his inner turmoil show on his face, he grabbed his tea and then pointedly ignored the first Gryffindor -- that being Weasley -- barging into the kitchen. He was sure the boy would be glad if he didn't force him to use any of his limited vocabulary so early in the morning, simply nodding at the monosyllabic grunt that escaped the redhead before he headed to the far side of the table.

This was so familiar by now that the tension in the room was rather low, with Weasley hiding behind the Daily Prophet, devouring his breakfast and drinking the overly sweetened sludge he undoubtedly called tea. Snape still expected there to be awkward looks or some stammering comments, but Weasley didn't offer him any.

At least the boy was honest with his discomfort.

Sooner or later others would arrive, with Granger usually smiling even as she laid her eyes on Snape and Lupin and Black following closely after her as if they really had to operate as one unit even inside their own home.

Snape had to wonder if it was a precaution; if Lupin felt it necessary to actually stay close by the mutt so that there would be no off chance of an argument between them. Such a waste of time. No matter how Snape might want to see how many comments would drive Black to do something drastic, he had promised Harry not to goad the man into a real fight.

Today, Snape didn't even look up from his cup after the first glance at the Gryffindor duo. He had
nothing to say to Lupin.

He could almost feel Black's insane gaze focus on him, as if the man was just waiting for him to start berating Lupin again. He could wait for that as long as he wanted, Snape was definitely not going to waste his time on things he had already commented on dozens of times during the years.

They had agreed not to address the past again, and a part of Snape agreed fully on that. But he was not going to forget the things that had happened, unable to really let go, never mind forgive.

He could tell that no one in the room really believed he wasn't going to throw a tantrum, his lips curling into a slight sneer as he thought of how satisfying it would be to smash things or say a few scathing words about the stupidity so evident on some people, all present company included.

Yet it was almost as satisfying to sit here and let them worry.

When the door creaked open, he didn't even need to look up to know that Harry had just stepped into the room. The tension spiked before slowly dissipating, the Gryffindors greeting Harry with obvious enthusiasm, young Malfoy nodding and calling out Harry's name as if it was some sort of a private joke between those two.

A hand brushed against Snape's back, the touch brief but certain, and this time Snape did look up to see the goofy smile on Harry's face. Once again he could tell with absolute certainty that from this idiot, the touch was just as it seemed, and not a not so subtle show of superiority in front of others.

"Morning, Snape."

"Good morning, Potter," Snape said quietly, reaching out for the teapot. "Tea?" He could once again feel Black's gaze on him.

Harry sat on his customary place next to him and nodded. "Yeah, thanks."

Pouring the tea, Snape already looked for the plate full of sausages, knowing Harry would probably ask for them next.

It made him think about liking things again, and making sure Harry actually ate breakfast was definitely on the list. He knew such thoughts were more dangerous than any, but there seemed to be no way of stopping them. At least liking was something he could clearly define, a personal preference he chose out of free will, unlike things that simply seemed to happen whether he really thought about them or not.

He could hear a saucer rattle on the other side of the table as Weasley set his cup down, and knew that there was probably that gawking expression on the boy's face again. No surprise there, and he could bet that Weasley wasn't the only one watching.

Snape refused to look around the table to actually confirm that.

Some evenings, he caught Black staring at him and Harry like he wasn't fervently thinking Avada Kedavra at him and was instead trying to figure out something he was unable to grasp. Snape never showed he actually noticed the stares, just like he pretended not to hear anything the mutt was saying to Lupin when he thought there was no one around to hear his raving.

Years of sneaking in the shadows made it impossible for Snape to trust any given situation, much less a person, suspicion keeping him alive. But even in the middle of all the looks and the rants, Black seemed to be honest in both his hate towards him and his devotion towards Harry.
Harry did seem to bring forth such emotions in people, just like it seemed impossible for most people not to at least resent Snape. It was almost satisfying to have that one constant thing in his life, Snape noted, though he knew all too well that Harry didn't share his view on the matter.

He was simply content to be left in peace. Delusions of fortune and glory were long gone, and his priorities were changed; the things that he had now were enough. He had his own laboratory, where he could brew what was necessary as well as things he genuinely enjoyed. There was the fight against Voldemort, real action he could take alongside others to stop the madman. He had his own personal idiot, who seemed to insist on sharing things beyond simple physical relief with him and consider it a permanent arrangement.

He couldn't even really say that he hated living in a house full of Gryffindors, living with a possessive idiot whose eyes shone with joy every damn time he looked at him. No matter how ridiculous the arguments amongst the people in this house got, or how he tried to find any reason not to trust Harry, Snape honestly could not hate any part of his life right now.

It was absolutely infuriating.

He finished his breakfast in silence, barely listening to the endless bantering between Lupin and Black that was somewhat strained this morning. Thinking about the reason for such tension drove his appetite away.

"Are you coming to the headquarters today?" Harry asked as he saw Snape push his plate away.

"There are things I have to work on in my laboratory," Snape muttered, his grasp around the cup tightening a bit as he didn't turn to look at Lupin. They both knew why he would spend the day brewing, and considering the sorrowful way Lupin had been staring at him for days now, Snape wanted nothing less than to actually talk to the werewolf.

Harry kept his voice quiet as he said, "Okay. I'll see you this evening then." He made it somehow sound as if everything was quite normal.

No matter how he tried not to, Snape couldn't help feeling grateful for that. He put his tea cup on the saucer so hard it rattled the spoon, and then pushed back his chair, leaving the room with his robes billowing ominously.

They could hear the door down the hall slam shut after him.

Even Sirius didn't say anything to that.

Remus leaned closer to Harry, muttering quietly, "I don't think I need to tell you that tonight will be hard on Severus." Seeing the nod, he added, "Sirius isn't happy about it, but he will make sure the wards on our door hold."

"I know." It was clear that Sirius was still feeling guilty. He would never do anything to make Snape feel more comfortable, but he'd rather chew off a limb than hurt Remus again. Harry knew that.

"We'll cast a silencing charm too, so that everyone can sleep." Now there was a smile on Remus' face. He could still remember hearing his own howling echo in the small room the last full moon.

Harry nodded at that, not bothering to say that he would cast wards and charms upstairs as well. It wasn't that he didn't trust Remus. He was simply going to do everything in his power to make Snape feel safe.

In the end, only Ron and Draco accompanied Harry to the headquarters. Hermione opted to stay
home, casting meaningful looks at both Sirius and Remus.

Harry hoped her presence would somehow lessen the tension. He doubted Snape would surface from his work even for lunch, but at least now he wasn't left alone in the house with people he loathed.

The day was tedious, full of small meetings that didn't seem to accomplish anything. Harry wasn't the only one who was feeling edgy; most of the former Quidditch players milled around the meeting hall, looking anxious to start doing things.

Ron didn't know why they weren't doing things already, but Harry probably had a good reason for sitting on his hands and waiting. For a moment he wondered if he should ask and if Harry would actually tell him if he did ask, but it didn't seem like the right moment.

He decided to act normal, even though it wasn't really easy to decipher what was 'normal' these days. Today, he decided, normal was even weirder than usual. People seemed to know that something was going on, but those who didn't know what it was were smart enough not to ask questions, and those who clearly did know, chose not to say anything.

It was kind of like that back home, with the nervous silence almost suffocating. Ron was a bit surprised to see that Snape was still locked in his lab, not attending to dinner, but he wasn't complaining. Things looked bad enough without the git, with Remus casting furtive looks at the window and Sirius casting furtive looks at Remus.

Ron was relieved when Eppy finally came to collect the dishes, signaling that it was all right to get up and leave. No one said anything when Sirius walked Remus to their room without saying anything, the door slamming shut after them almost drowning out the sound of the lock being turned.

Almost immediately after that, there was the sound of footsteps and then Snape appeared from the cellar, looking tense and more annoyed than usually.

He refused to look at anyone, heading straight upstairs.

It was clear that Harry wanted to follow him, but for some reason he just stood there undecided for a moment before walking into the living room. He didn't even notice Ron following him until Ron sat on the chair opposite to his.

Only then Harry looked up, looking tired and didn't even try to squeeze a smile on his face.

"Trouble in paradise?" Ron's voice was flippant. He'd seen Harry moody after meetings, but had never seen him like this. Maybe some good natured ribbing would make him feel better, even if making jokes about his life with Snape was pretty icky.

Harry froze for a moment. Then he turned to glare at his best friend, his gaze as cold as ice. "Don't! Just... Don't talk about something you don't understand." With a sneer even Snape would be proud of, he got to his feet.

"Whoa! Hey, wait a minute." Stunned by the response, Ron stood up as well. "I didn't mean it like that."

The honest panic in his voice seemed to make Harry deflate somehow. He sank back into his chair, the cool mask leaving his face. "It's full moon tonight."

"Okay." Ron still didn't get it. The last time there had been a full moon, Harry had gone to Snape for Wolfsbane potion and that had been it. He didn't understand what was the big thing here. Even
Hermione had been all right sleeping downstairs with a werewolf practically on the other side of the wall. It was just Remus, they trusted him. "What's the problem then?"

Harry sighed. "Remember when Snape tried to keep us safe from Remus that night..." He didn't know how to really call it; the night everything had gone wrong, when he had almost died, when Sirius and Buckbeak had almost died.

Seeing Ron nod, Harry didn't go on immediately, his mind still caught up in the memory. He had never really thought about what Snape had done that night. It didn't matter if he'd frozen or if he'd actually planned on acting the way he had, he had still stood between them and the werewolf, protecting the Gryffindor trio.

"That wasn't the first time he saw a werewolf." What a simple way to describe the one truly incomprehensible act he knew Sirius had done. "Remember what Remus told us? That Sirius kind of..." Almost tried to kill Snape once. Harry snapped his mouth shut, not knowing how to say it out loud.

Ron almost made a quip about Snape being afraid of werewolves. Fortunately he could read the look in Harry's eyes correctly and remained quiet. An image of Aragog the huge spider Hagrid had raised staying downstairs assaulted him and he decided that there was nothing funny in someone not being comfortable around werewolves after all. "Oh."

"Yeah."

There was really nothing Ron could say after that. Thinking about Snape being afraid was somehow wrong; as if that made the git all too human.

He decided not to concentrate on Snape and fear; he was perfectly happy to just sit here with Harry. It was still weird to think about Harry actually caring about Snape -- not to mention slightly nauseating -- but that wasn't really Ron's business. His business as Harry's friend was to be here, and it was easy to just sit here and snuggle against a very fluffy cushion in the chair and think of nothing.

He sat there with his friend until it became clear that Harry was ready to go to bed, walking quietly behind him upstairs and pretending he wasn't disappointed to see Malfoy's door shut for the night. Not disappointed at all.

Harry had a moment of utter panic as he stepped into his bedroom and saw no one there. Stepping back into the hallway, he listened carefully, relaxing only when he heard the water running in the bathroom.

This gave him more time to think, even though he wasn't sure he really wanted any more time with his thoughts. He'd spent the whole day trying to figure out how tonight would go, and he was no closer to finding any answers than he was this morning.

If there even were any answers for him to find. Somehow he doubted there were.

When Snape came from the bathroom, dressed in black from neck to toe with his still wet hair glistening in the faint light, Harry went to take care of his evening routines. He spent a long time in front of the mirror, just staring at himself.

He wondered if Snape ever did the same and if he did, what did he see.

Realizing that he was procrastinating, he sighed and then walked back to the bedroom. Outside, the sunlight was still slowly disappearing, but very soon, the moon would rise and he wanted to be ready
Harry glanced at Snape as he locked the door and then cast a few wards on it, but didn't say anything. He was pretty sure he didn't have to explain what he was doing.

The glare he got for his actions was murderous anyway. "I do not need to be coddled, Potter!" Snape continued undressing as if there was nothing in the world worrying him. "The Wolfsbane and the wards downstairs are sufficient enough."

No matter how annoyed his words sounded, there was clearly doubt in Snape's eyes, as if he would have certainly cast those wards himself had Harry not taken care of it first.

"I know." Harry knew better than to comment further. He might get away with being emotional and possessive any other night, but it was clear no such things would be tolerated tonight.

He could never really comprehend what things had been like when Sirius and Snape had been no older than he was right now, and even if he did, it was certainly not his place to judge either of them. Sirius still carried anger and guilt with him, while Snape was definitely trying not to show an ounce of the fear lurking behind his sneer.

Getting ready to bed, he put his wand on the nightstand, already seeing Snape slide his own under his pillow.

He wanted to reassure Snape somehow, maybe telling that the only way Remus could ever get to him was through Harry, and that Sirius would do anything to prevent that. Such words would be an insult, though, and instead of making things worse with fumbling platitudes, Harry simply went to bed.

Turning the lights off, he crawled under the covers, wrapping an arm around Snape's chest and molding himself against his back. He planted a kiss on Snape's cheek before settling down. "Good night, Snape."

The answering words were quiet, but calm. "Good night."

Neither man pretended they would sleep well.

Harry kept his eyes closed even in the pitch black, straining to hear even the faintest sound of howling even though he knew that there would only be the silence. He was certain Snape was doing the same; the tense body against his was a clear sign that Snape was anticipating the worst.

Forcing himself to relax even more, Harry breathed as evenly as he possibly could, trying to keep on the illusion of it being just another night. Snape wouldn't want to talk about it and any show of obvious comforting would be scoffed.

That didn't mean that Harry was going to ignore the fact that Snape was probably more terrified than he would ever show anyone. He just held Snape and pretended he was asleep until weariness won and he finally drifted off for real. Waking up, he didn't move for a long time, for once being the one who was wrapped in strong arms as Snape held onto him like a lifeline even in his sleep.

He knew the moment Snape woke up, feeling the body against him tense instantly. Wondering if he should pretend he was still asleep, Harry simply lay there, watching as Snape lifted his head a little and cast a look at the window.

Snape blinked in the brightness of the rising sun and then relaxed. Only then did he look at Harry. "Good morning, Potter." He didn't even try to hide the slight relief so evident in his expression.
"Morning, Snape," Harry muttered, and pulled Snape into a kiss.

He felt like laughing, feeling the nervous tension from the night before dissipate in the morning light. The full moon had set and everything was all right, and though he knew that Snape might take laughing the wrong way, he grinned like an idiot when Snape simply rolled on top of him with a rather malevolent glint in his eyes.

This was better than any dream. Not only had Snape stayed, he was acting like this was what he'd expected, an early morning spent driving him mad in bed. The rest of the world with meetings and breakfast and werewolves was somewhere far away and nothing existed here except Snape and him.

Since he'd been awake since dawn, Harry was a bit stunned when he realized that even with all the morning's activities, he and Snape were the first ones to be up and about. Suddenly starving, he headed towards the kitchen even as Snape took a detour in his laboratory before joining him for breakfast.

Eppy was busy pouring tea as the door opened, and she huffed a little, her ears twitching as she saw Remus Lupin enter the room. No one said anything as he walked slowly towards the table leaning heavily against Sirius' shoulder.

"Harry," Sirius nodded in passing before helping Remus to sit down.

Casting a worried look on Remus, Harry muttered, "Morning." He wasn't sure, but Remus looked more tired than hurt, unlike after some full moons when he could barely walk. "Remus?"

"Hello, Harry." Shooing Sirius away, Remus looked at Harry, a wan smile appearing on his lips. It was enough to show Harry that everything was indeed all right. "You look well."

Letting out a weak bark of laughter, Remus shook his head. "Rough night." As if realizing his words might not go well with everyone, he reached out for Sirius' hand and then cast a faintly apologizing smile at the fourth man in the room.

Snape didn't say anything, his face devoid of any real expression. He simply handed Remus a small cup of steaming concoction he'd prepared earlier.

The tired werewolf took the cup and emptied it without words before Sirius could do more than mutter his name under his breath. There was a look of surprise on Remus' face as the warmth from the drink coursed through him, driving most of the groggy feeling away. "Thank you, Severus."

"You're welcome." Turning back to his breakfast, Snape dismissed the gratitude curtly.

Harry smiled so hard his whole face ached.

There was a short silence as Eppy poured more tea. Sirius continued glaring at Snape, waiting for a quip or a comment, hating the fact that he was once again showing off with his damn potions, hating the faint smell of sex that had greeted him as he'd opened their door earlier this morning. Most of all hating the fact that despite the potion, Remus still looked exhausted and there was nothing he could do about it.

Clenching his jaw so hard his teeth were grinding, Sirius kept staring at Snape for a moment longer and then grabbed the newspaper from the table. He needed to do something with his hands and was choosing the lesser of the two evils.

He really should have known better.
"Merlin!" He could only stare at the front page, his hands shaking. Then he lowered the paper to gape at Harry, not wanting to believe neither what he'd just read nor the hard, knowing look in Harry's eyes. "Harry?"

"Sirius, what is it?" Already feeling stronger, Remus put his cup down and leaned closer to Sirius. "Sirius?"

Sirius shook his head, as if unable to form words. He simply held the paper up, showing the front page for everyone to see.

It was less garish than most of the headlines they'd seen recently, which wasn't surprising, for once it had nothing to do with Harry's life or former Death Eaters. The picture beneath the text wasn't moving, the black and white photograph as dead as the landscape it portrayed.

It wasn't a homestead with innocents murdered, it was the ruins of a house, with a body of a giant snake curled in front of where the door had once been.

The picture made Harry hiss from between his teeth, as if sibilant words of both shock and satisfaction wanted to escape and then coil around him like a magical serpent.

"Merlin!" Remus echoed Sirius. He couldn't believe what he was reading. "'Riddle House destroyed in the Ministry's night-time raid. Voldemort's vicious viper vanquished.'"

"You know that really sounds stupid," Harry muttered. What the hell was it with reporters anyway?

Not paying any attention to the words, Snape leaned closer in, squinting a little. "They killed Nagini?" Turning to look at Harry, he asked, "You do know what happens next, don't you?" He could already see the answer in Harry's eyes.

Sirius put the paper down with a slam. "Did you know about this, Harry? Did you know what the Ministry would do?" There was disbelief in his voice.

"Did you tell Arthur to send troops to Riddle house?" Remus couldn't keep the words in.

He didn't really need to see Harry nod to know it was true.

"Yeah, I did."

Snape looked from one Gryffindor to another, not quite grasping the reason for all the horror he could detect in his old classmates. Then he snorted. Of course; they expected Harry to be better somehow. He had to wonder what they had thought the secret Order meetings had all been about, for they certainly seemed like they had never thought of this before. "He won't simply sit back and allow this. He'll take it as a personal insult and do rash things, irrational things. And he will seek revenge."

"That he will do anyway. But maybe now..." Harry shrugged. It was silly superstition in a way, but he couldn't say it out loud.

He wasn't really glad about what had happened, felt no exuberance over any of it. All these months of secret plans and weeks of training had led to this, and he just wanted it to be over already.

But it was time, and soon Voldemort would have no choice; he would have to play his part in this insane spectacle, just as Harry had for years.

Snape nodded, knowing all the unsaid things and agreeing with Harry completely. "I know."

Pushing the paper out of his way, he grabbed the tea pot and didn't even ask Harry if he wanted
some; he poured him a cup, ignoring the way Eppy glared from the other side of the room.

Unable to think of anything to say, Remus and Sirius stared at them, both wondering just when exactly had things spun out of control.

The strange uncomfortable silence stretched as the men ate their breakfast, fading a bit as the others joined them, but never really disappearing completely.

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**Part 18**

The air almost seemed to tingle with excitement as everyone around the Headquarters kept talking about the Ministry's raid at the Riddle House, speculating about what this would really mean.

Harry didn't comment on any of the speculations, glad that people were finally seeing the big picture on their own.

Sadly, the excitement didn't last for long. Soon, there were more reports on distant villages being pillaged, the Dark Mark shining on the nightly sky and showing that yet another family had been lost.

Flitwick put the sentiment into words. "They're killing us!"

No one in the room could argue with him, for it was the truth. No matter how they had trained and planned, the Death Eaters were still out there, destroying their world. It was slow, a homestead at the time, and such warfare could take years with the casualties including more innocent bystanders than Aurors or the members of the Order.

Sitting here, talking about strategies was beginning to make everyone frustrated.

"I don't think Voldemort wants that final battle," Bill Weasley said quietly. "And why would he? Things are going so well for him and he will accomplish everything he wants without a full attack."

There were agreeing murmurs at his words, the younger Order members looking grim. It was beginning to sound like nothing they could do would really make a difference.

Harry nodded. "A real battle could go either way. Voldemort is evil, but he isn't stupid." Which was a pity, really.

He wasn't surprised when no one suggested making the first move. Their world had always been so good at waiting, sitting still, holding its breath as the enemy marched around destroying places and people and doing nothing until they absolutely had to.

They were the good guys, so they would do what good guys did and wait.

"So... What do we do next?" Ron asked, fidgeting a little in his seat.

"Things have to change!" Frustration was evident in the small gestures Hooch made. "We can't just sit on our arses and wait!"

Titters of laughter erupted from all around the room, but when the laughter died, there were agreeing words and nods replacing the amusement. They really had to do something and everyone knew that Voldemort's people wouldn't stop until they were stopped.

When it was clear that Harry wouldn't say anything, there was a short silence followed by hesitant
suggestions. Like so many times in the past, people were bouncing ideas as if this was an early Order meeting where everything was fresh and new and all kinds of things were possible.

Harry simply listened, waiting for the first person to finally realize what was really going on. He didn't want to say it first, didn't want to reduce everyone else into a pawn he would order around.

Surprisingly enough, there was talk about the Malfoy Mansion, suggestions about marching there and destroying the place coming from the Weasleys. Some people wanted to concentrate on the smuggling operation and get rid of the threat the dark creatures posed.

If only Voldemort tried to fight them in the open, or challenge Harry into a duel. That would make everything so much easier.

Near Harry, Ron was locked in a heated conversation with Malfoy. Sometimes he was so annoyed by the git, he just wanted to smack him around, but since that would probably lead to other activities better kept in the bedroom, he settled to muttering insults instead.

Draco seemed to be enjoying the argument as well, his scathing remarks asking for more angry retorts. It was almost a game now, and this time both knew exactly what they were playing.

"Stop being such damn idiots!" Hermione was tired of listening to the bickering, never really being able to escape it, not here and not at home. "If you insist on picking a fight, at least..." Her mouth fell open.

Harry closed his eyes, swallowing hard. He should have known she would be the one to see it, the one to say it out loud, and now that there was no chance to back away from this anymore, he was both relieved and terrified.

"Harry? I..." Frowning as she tried to organize her thoughts, Hermione looked at the head of the table, not really stunned when she saw the hard expression on his face. "We are going to pick a fight, right?"

Shushing each other, people turned to listen what was going on.

"The Death Eaters are scattered all around and we can't really attack their stronghold like that. But if they were all in the same place..." muttered Moody, delighted by the idea of having Death Eaters in one place so that he wouldn't have to go and search for them.

"Yes." Harry didn't have to say anything else.

Now it wasn't even about guessing, it was about having the nerve to actually say it out loud. Hermione was still staring at Harry, unable to contain her amazement. "We need to bring the fight here. To our turf, to Hogwarts."

It was the only strategy that made sense, and she knew she was right even before Harry nodded.

There was something inherently wrong with the concept of actually inviting the fight to their doorstep, but slowly people all around the room seemed to warm up to it.

Harry cast a look at Dumbledore, knowing it was indeed time. "That sounds like a plan. Then we can control the fight, as much as it can be controlled." Reversing Voldemort's plans, making him react for once.

It was almost laughable how easily people started to grasp the strategies after that, calling out things they could do, things that had already been set in motion.
Even the Weasleys had to agree that launching a major attack on the Mansion would be foolish, but then Draco Malfoy commented with a slightly annoyed voice that the Malfoy Mansion wasn't the only ancient stronghold; there were other places they could target.

"The Goyles have a castle, and the Buldstrodes have a few estates near by," Snape said.

No one was really surprised to see the two Slytherins nod at each other, but the idea of actually attacking someone's home seemed wrong to most of the people.

Of course it might send Voldemort's people to defend their homes, or more likely drive the Dark Lord to do something rash in fear of losing his troops. Strategically it was sound, but it was still distasteful.

Harry's quiet, "This is war, people. We can't always do what's nice and right in order to save thousands," settled that issue quite firmly.

It didn't wipe out the pensive expression from Draco Malfoy's face, though.

There were other things, plans that were less worrying. Arthur Weasley suggested they evacuated most of the Ministry offices and bring everyone to Hogwarts. Dumbledore mentioned Hagrid and offered to call in the reserves from Beauxbatons sooner than planned.

"So essentially we make a lot of noise and make it look like we have a plan for something big and Voldemort can't do anything but react?"

The Aurors seemed to like the idea a lot.

Moody smiled, his scarred face almost beaming. "Voldemort is paranoid about everything. He can't let this go!"

Considering Moody's need for constant vigilance, his comment was hilarious. No one laughed at him, though. Everyone was too busy nodding and agreeing with him.

It didn't take long for most of the people commit to the whole thing, and after assigning those in charge of all the operations, the room cleared of enthusiastic Order members and Aurors as they went to find their place in the whole thing.

The inner circle of the Order didn't move, neither did any of the Weasleys.

As the door closed behind Moody, Hermione said quietly. "Of course we could also make sure the Death Eaters can't move around by issuing warrants for their arrest. And maybe we could destroy Voldemort's old home and kill his pet snake and see if that makes him do something stupid."

That certainly made Harry flinch, but he'd been expecting it. He'd always known Hermione wasn't stupid. "That does sound like it might goad them into a fight, yeah."

"Why?"

Flitwick leaned closer to Sprout who shushed him and kept her eyes on the two Gryffindors, her expression baffled, with awful realization slowly dawning.

Harry smiled a sad little smile. "Are you asking me why we're doing this or why we're doing it like this?"

"I get the strategy. What I don't get is all the secrecy. You've been planning this for a long time,
haven't you?" Hermione's 'you' was aimed at Dumbledore as well.

"Yes, we have." Harry could see the others nod as well, both Dumbledore and McGonagall casting looks at their colleagues and Figg and Fletcher simply agreeing.

Even though Sirius and Remus hadn't attended to all the secret meetings, they were nodding as well; they had been aware of most of the plans, even though the very calm and cold way Harry was actually guiding them all in this fight came as a surprise anyway.

Harry let all pretense drop and for once didn't moderate his words as he looked at his friend. "If our great leader Harry Potter suggested we actually go and kill Death Eaters and attack their homes and told everyone that we have planned a strategy for ages when the Ministry did nothing... What would happen?"

They both knew what would have happened, and he could already see it in Hermione's eyes.

"Chaos. Or then everyone would have argued the whole thing until we got nothing done," Hermione said quietly.

"Yeah." Those would have been the easy things. "Or maybe everyone would have just followed and done exactly what I told them to do." Harry made his disgust at the prospect show on his face.

"So now it's a joint decision instead of you telling us what to do." It still didn't seem to make sense. "Why?"

Harry smiled, the twist of his lips cynical. "Absolute power corrupts. I don't want to be put in the position where everyone lets me lead and no one uses their own brain."

That seemed to satisfy Hermione, her frown slowly melting into an understanding expression. "Oh. So now we won't be trading a Dark Lord for a..."

"Yeah." Harry didn't really care what term they would invent for the monster he could so easily become.

He met Snape's gaze for just a moment.

Arthur Weasley leaned back on his chair and said, "Well I for one am glad that someone decided to make plans about vanquishing Voldemort." He looked slightly uncomfortable as if he found it strange to criticize Fudge and his organization now that the man was dead and he was leading the Ministry.

It was quite easy to agree with him, even though Hermione was still looking pensive.

"All right. Can anyone think of anything else we can do to make sure Voldemort will commit all his forces to attacking Hogwarts?" Harry asked.

Snape had been watching Black with a strange expression on his face. Seeing the mutt in his canine form from time to time these past few days had made him think about something, but he wasn't certain he should make the suggestion after all.

When no one had anything to offer, he looked at Harry, his gaze unreadable. "There is one thing that might get his attention." He hesitated for just a second. "You could start a rumor that you're trying to become an Animagus."

His words were met by a puzzled silence.
Harry swallowed hard, his expression pained, but nodded anyway. "I think that would work."

"I don't see why that would frighten Voldemort." Hermione looked from Harry to Snape, clearly needing more information. There had never been any sign that the Death Eaters would be concerned with Animagi, unless you counted Sirius and professor McGonagall.

Keeping his gaze firmly away from his godfather, Harry muttered, "Trust me, it will." This was one of the moments he actually wanted someone to take his word for it.

Of course hoping that Hermione wouldn't be curious about something was completely useless. "Why?" She looked expectant, leaning forward. "How can you tell?"

Harry felt like he was under Ministry interrogation, the questioning looks compelling him to say something just as strongly as Veritaserum would. He couldn't think of anything convincing to say, figuring that his friends and family wouldn't believe any lies and he couldn't tell the truth.

"Voldemort has always feared our hero here will become a magical Animagus." Snape's cold voice cut through the silence. "Since it's extremely rare and dangerous to even attempt becoming one, he will probably believe Potter to be foolish enough to try."

Turning towards Snape, Harry felt almost boneless with relief. He should have known Snape would be able to think of something plausible. A completely ridiculous thought of actually trying something as stupid as becoming a magical Animagus flashed through his mind, followed by an insane mental image of turning into a Blast-Ended Skrewt.

"And just exactly how would you know that?" Annoyed by the whole subject, Sirius glared at Snape. He didn't like the way the git was making comments about something that important to him.

Snape didn't say anything; he simply raised an eyebrow.

The words Sirius muttered at that were not really audible, but they were all too easy to interpret anyway.

People knew by now that the issue of Snape's past wasn't something they should approach, but no one was delusional enough to forget it.

Harry smiled at Snape, his expression more gentle than amused. He'd already known Snape would keep his word, and he also knew exactly what it cost him to do so.

"Er... Harry?" Bill Weasley coughed, looking slightly embarrassed. "I wonder if..." He looked at Snape and bit his lip.

"What is it?"

Bill cleared his throat again. "Wouldn't your relationship with professor Snape also aggravate Voldemort?"

There was a startled silence.

Sprout looked at Harry, baffled. "What relationship?" Glancing at Flitwick, glad to see he was just as confused as she was, she didn't notice the tension rising in the room.

"No." Harry shook his head firmly.

Now the silence was strained, a strange mixture of embarrassment and anger.
"The relationship between Snape and I is personal," Harry said, not turning his gaze away from Bill. He didn't dare to look at Snape. "I'm not going to use that as a weapon."

"What relationship?" Sprout whispered again.

"I do believe Voldemort's people already know I have moved in with Potter," Snape stated calmly, as if it was quite normal for him to talk about his relationship with Harry. "The way they see our... personal association is not important."

Blinking, Sprout started, "I don't understand, what..."

"Oh for Merlin's sake, Pomona! You're not that thick!" McGonagall glared at her colleague.

"I... Oh. Oh!" Flustered, Sprout turned to Snape. "Oh I must apologize, Severus. I didn't realize... How silly of me!"

Snape refused to comment on that, even though his expression suggested there were plenty of things he wanted to say. Sitting ramrod straight, he waited for more questions and shocked comments, and was surprised when there were none.

"This is the one thing I refuse to discuss about in public." Relieved to see that Snape wasn't going to hex anyone, him included, Harry added, "I'm entitled to have something private, something that isn't anyone else's business, and this is it. I am not going to use my relationship with Snape as a means to an end."

It was so easy to say it out loud, the word rolling on his tongue as if it was the most natural thing ever. His relationship with Snape. Noticing that Snape hadn't seemed to find the term repulsive or offending, he finally turned to look at him.

Snape was looking at him just like he always did when he was doing something extremely Gryffindor, and the expression brought a silly smile on Harry's lips.

The soft growl escaping Sirius was drowned under hesitant mutters of congratulations.

Since it was clear that the subject was closed, no one lingered with their well wishes, except for professor McGonagall who saw it prudent to touch Snape's shoulder and smile at him before leaving the room. Arthur Weasley was whispering to his sons, clearly questioning Ron about it all and making him squirm with every question.

Harry didn't really care.

No matter how Snape had stated he didn't mind living with him, Harry had dreaded this, knowing that sooner or later people would find out. It was a pressure he could have lived without, but at least now there wouldn't be foolish questions within the inner circle.

He wasn't naive enough to believe it would stay between the people who were still quietly leaving the room, but the way even Sprout had nodded solemnly at his words of privacy might keep it from becoming a general discussion immediately. With luck, it'd take at least a few days for the whispers to start.

Before Harry could go to Snape, Hermione intercepted him. "We need to talk."

Even with her being just a friend, those words made Harry shiver. "Okay." He had no idea of what this was about, but considering Hermione's genuinely angry expression, this would not be fun.
"You're hiding something."

That made Harry blink. He'd half thought it was about Snape. "Huh?"

"You and Snape and Dumbledore. Don't bother to deny it, I could see it when we were talking about the Animagus thing." Hermione had been watching her friend and knew there were things he was keeping a secret. There had been occasions when she'd let him keep his silence, but this wasn't one of those occasions. "I want you to tell me what it is."

Harry saw the determination and sighed, knowing he couldn't stop Hermione from asking questions.

Even with the room already empty, he pulled out his wand to cast a silencing charm around them. Then he gestured for Hermione to sit down, taking a chair next to her.

The sudden casting had made Hermione flinch, but now she was leaning forward, looking eager to hear what Harry had to say.

"Before I tell you, you must promise you'll never say a word about this to anyone. Not even Ron."

Not that Harry didn't trust him. He just didn't want him to start acting strangely around anyone.

Hermione nodded. "I promise."

Knowing that she would keep her word no matter what, Harry sighed, "When we came from the cottage, I made Dumbledore tell me the real reason behind Voldemort's obsession in me. And my family."

That was the last thing Hermione had expected to hear. She opened her mouth to say something, but decided against it before any words came out. Instead, she nodded, encouraging him to go on.

Harry kept the explanation simple, knowing that Hermione had actually listened in the History of Magic classes and could probably give hours long lectures about the circle of the year and Wild Magic. He told her about the way Prongs could easily play the role of the King Stag, how Voldemort had fixated on the symbolism.

During his monologue, Hermione sat there in silence, listening. Her mind was already working on the matter. She had to admit that while it sounded ludicrous, it did make more sense than some of the things she'd encountered in the wizarding world.

"All right." Frowning a little, she tilted her head to the side. Obviously trying to find some kind of a flaw in Harry's logic.

The expression was familiar from school. It made Harry smile a little, reminding him of how life used to be so simple back at Hogwarts.

Hermione ignored the smile. "I understand the logic behind Voldemort's actions. It does fit rather well. Your father's Animagus form, your birthdate. There are indeed people who do believe in the Wild Magic. Did you know that they say the Forbidden Forest is one of the places it's still strong?"

"No." Harry had to admit he didn't. It was probably told in 'Hogwarts the History', so no wonder he didn't know.

"Of course not." Now there was a hint of amusement in Hermione's eyes. "Anyway, I don't understand why you have to keep it a secret. I mean, I know some people would idolize you even more because of it, but otherwise..."
How funny Harry had never even thought about that. "It's not that. Nothing that simple." He put a hand on Hermione's arm to silence her. "Do you know how my father and the others became Animagi?"

"To be with Remus when he turned into a werewolf. Before the Wolfsbane was invented." Her reply was prompt, as if she was answering to a question in the class.

Harry nodded. "Yes. When my father, Sirius and... Pettigrew found out about Remus, they tried to figure out a way to help him. They did find a way. Sirius found a way." He looked Hermione straight in the eye.

Comprehension dawned on her immediately and she closed her eyes for a moment. When she looked at him again, there was sadness in her eyes. "Becoming an Animagus was Sirius' idea, and if your father hadn't become a stag... Harry, if Sirius ever finds out it will kill him!"

"I know. That's what I told Albus and Snape. He can never know about this." Glad that she'd understood what he was after, Harry let out a relieved sigh.

No matter how weirded this whole thing made him, he could never ignore the fact that at least one person would believe it without hesitations. Sirius would not survive such a blow, whether or not the theory was ever proven right.

Hermione looked contemplative, staring into distance. When she finally spoke, her voice was full of wonder. "I'm not surprised Voldemort is so afraid of you. Do you have any idea of how much symbolism there is in your life? Things that pureblood wizards living on this island would recognize immediately. I'm not talking just about your birth and your father, but later on. Fostered by others, finding out who you are, being mentored by a wise old wizard..."

"Yeah, well at least I pulled the sword out of a hat and not the stone." Astonishingly, Harry smiled at that. "It's not that easy, Hermione. When you look back on anyone's life you can see whatever symbolism you want to see." Not that he was an expert, really, but since the press interpreted his life the way they saw fit, why not others as well?

He couldn't believe he was a mystical savior of the world. Certainly if he was, he'd be someone stronger and braver. He'd have some real secret powers that had nothing to do with being very good at flying and being able to eat more Chocolate Frogs without barfing than any other Gryffindor in a decade.

The old stories were all entertaining, but they had nothing to do with him. He was just him. Harry Potter. Nothing special, really.

"Harry... Why not simply challenge him into a duel?" Hermione had heard the suggestions for that, knowing all too well that Harry had heard them too and ignored them.

Smiling crookedly, Harry said, "Maybe if I'd challenged him years ago... unofficially, of course. But by the time I was old enough to actually stand a chance against him, or really challenge him, this had already become bigger than just him against me."

Nodding, Hermione mused, "You might want to say something about it to people, though. They're wondering about it."

"I'll think about it." It sounded like Harry was not going to say more about the subject.

"Okay." Even though she sounded a bit skeptical, Hermione dropped the matter. There was already something far more important in her mind. "Harry, does Snape know about all this? I mean about
Sirius," she asked hesitantly, with a strange look in her eyes.

"Yes," Harry said. He remembered how shocked he'd been back then, begging him not to say anything about this to his godfather. "I asked him never to say anything about it."

Remembering the haughty expression Snape had used to make everyone remember about his past as a Death Eater to explain why he would know about the whole thing affecting Voldemort, Hermione smiled happily. She didn't really need to know more; if Snape was willing to do that -- and not for Sirius' sake, she could bet -- he was all right. "Okay."

Harry hadn't expected it to be this easy. "Are we cool with this?"

"Yes, Harry." Hermione nodded. "We're cool with this."

Part 19

It was a busy evening. Harry was slowly going through his plans for tomorrow, contemplating things he hadn't thought about since the last Quidditch practice he'd led ages ago.

Somehow it helped that he was thinking of it as practice, even though he didn't forget for one moment that what would come was no game. Scratching a few things down helped as well, even though he wouldn't take any notes with him to the pitch tomorrow.

Sighing, he put the parchment away. It was no real use.

They would have to do a lot of improvisation anyway; to really become an efficient squad, they needed months to practice, and Harry knew that even in the best -- or worst -- circumstances there would be no no more than a few weeks until they faced the enemy. Like most things in life, this wasn't exactly what it looked like.

He had to admit that this part of the plans was better than most. Standing on the ground and waiting sounded wrong. At least in the air he would be free to go and find the proper fight.

The thought made him sigh again.

Sirius cast him an anxious glance from the other side of the living room, worrying his lower lip between his teeth to keep silent. He hadn't seen Harry this moody in ages.

He'd kept an even closer eye on Harry lately, mostly because of Snape. He didn't really understand any of what was going on between those two, especially the fact that Harry was fond of the git. Trying to be fair, he'd listened to everything Harry had said, and after a while he'd wondered if he'd been wrong somehow and there really was a softer, nicer side to Snape.

Glaring at the man sitting on a chair not far from Harry and drinking his tea calmly, Sirius had to conclude that he'd been absolutely right all along. Snape was a cold bastard who made evil comments about things, clearly enjoying the way his words made people -- usually either Sirius himself or Ron Weasley -- splutter. He was barely civil with most of them, spent a lot of his time locked in that laboratory of his and whenever he was forced to join them here in the evenings, he just sat there like a dark judgmental specter.

After the full moon, Sirius had changed into Snuffles on purpose early in the evenings, padding softly to the stairs and sat there, focusing on the sounds and smells coming from upstairs.

He hadn't told about it to even Remus, knowing he wouldn't approve.
He had so many questions about Harry and the bastard, but listening as hard as he could, he still
didn't have any real answers. Snape didn't seem to behave any differently when he was alone with
Harry. He'd never heard the man laugh or use kind words and the curt comments he did hear made
Snuffles growl quietly.

The real difference had been in Harry. His godson had talked a lot, though most times the only reply
he got was a snort or a grunt, and he sounded mellow. He smelled different as well, Snuffles' nose
twitching as his mind connected Harry’s scent with happiness instead of misery.

It made no sense, and Sirius hated that. For if that greasy bastard made Harry happy, he couldn't hate
him as completely as he wanted to and couldn't do anything to drive him away.

Shaking his head slightly, Sirius kept watching Snape.

"Merlin! These people are idiots!" Ron exclaimed, his voice breaking the tense silence.

Snape raised an eyebrow, muttering, "How surprising."

Ignoring the softly uttered words, Ron burst into laughter, the special edition of the Prophet shaking
in his grip. "They're having a poll on what kind of an animal Harry will turn into when he becomes
an Animagus!"

That certainly caught Harry's attention. "Oh?" It hadn't taken much time for the papers to start
commenting on the whole thing.

"Yeah." Ron smirked. "Right now the odds are on a black panther as the non magical and a unicorn
as the magical Animagus." He let out a very undignified snort at that.

Even though the things the press wrote about him rarely managed to amuse him, Harry had to
laugh at that. "What? Damn, that is stupid. A black panther? Here? In Scotland? Why the hell would
anyone want to turn into a black panther anyway? And a unicorn?"

"I think that at least in theory, you'd have to be a virgin to become a unicorn Animagus," Draco said
calmly.

Even Remus' coughing fit didn't distract Sirius from seeing the evil smirk that flashed on Snape's
face.

Since the comment made Harry laugh even harder, Sirius chose only to bite his lip again.

"I think they have something about that in... Fuck." Ron dropped the paper on his lap and looked at
Harry. "Um..."

The tension was back as was the silence, as Harry looked back at his friend. After a moment, he
asked, "They're writing about me and..." He cast a brief look at Snape.

"Yeah." Ron nodded. He'd only read half way through the paragraph, and though it didn't exactly
say it, it was quite clear to read between the lines. The snake was out of the bag. Or whatever he was
supposed to be staying in before Bill had stupidly outed it. "You want to read it?"

Harry shook his head firmly. "No."

"You do know that people will talk about it. There will be other articles." Remus doubted people
would be stupid enough to ask Harry about it, but it would be the talk of their world until something
more interesting came along.
"I know." Twisting in his chair again, not even noticing when the parchments he'd been holding scattered on the floor, Harry looked at Snape. "I'm sorry."

They hadn't talked about it. What was there to say anyway? Sooner or later someone outside their little family would have found out about them anyway, and it had always been clear that it would end up in the papers. At least there weren't headlines screaming about the Boy Who Lived and his Death Eater lover.

Not yet anyway.

Snape sneered. "Not everything is your fault, Potter." The familiar words left his lips easily, and worked as intended; he could see Harry relax slightly.

Accepting the words as the extent of which Snape was willing to address this in front of the others -- rather surprised he had not stormed out -- Harry turned to collect the parchments from the floor, ignoring the way the others kept staring at him. He didn't know what they expected to happen next.

Whatever it was, they would have to be disappointed.

Harry put the stack of parchments on the floor and then resolutely grabbed his broom from where it rested against the wall. He pulled the small table closer to place the broom servicing kit there, and then focused his attention on cleaning his broom.

A few minutes later Ron cleared his throat and asked Remus to play chess with him, phrasing the question carefully, using the term 'a worthy opponent' with honesty. The tension seemed to dissipate again as the two turned towards the board, giving Sirius something to focus on instead of just glaring at Snape.

Harry was grateful for the peace and quiet.

He could have done this upstairs in his room, but it was good to sit here and work in silence, running his hands through the twigs. Such a familiar thing from ages past, when the whole team had sometimes gathered in the common room to work on their brooms before an important game.

The fact that Draco went to collect his own broom and kit soon after Ron and Remus had made their opening moves wasn't at all surprising. Harry greeted him with a nod as he saw him hesitate at the doorway and then gestured at the table as an invitation.

They didn't talk, both working on their own broom like any professional would, never trusting anyone with the one thing that kept them soaring through the air. Still, it felt right to do this together.

Harry set to remove any loose twigs.

He didn't really look up from his broom until it was in a perfect working shape again, barely noticing when Snape left the room to walk to his laboratory.

Putting away his broom servicing kit, Harry eyed his Firebolt critically. He could have got himself another broom if he wanted, either buying one or accepting one of the offers from broom manufacturers, but he felt comfortable with his Firebolt. He knew its movements by heart.

This would have to do. The handle was shining and there were no loose twigs.

"Potter."

Startling, Harry looked up, blinking as he saw Snape offer him a vial. "What is it?" There was only
curiosity in his voice.

"Protection against curses. Put two drops on the handle." As usual, Snape showed him the amount of drops with his fingers -- holding them in another direction than Ron did whenever he made the gesture -- to make sure Harry got it right.

Harry took the vial gently and then dropped two fat gel like drops on the broom handle. The result was spectacular; silver sparks spread across the handle, encasing the broom in swirls of brightness. It burned intensely for a moment and then seemed to vanish inside the broom, leaving only a soft tingle behind.

Handing the vial back, Harry did nothing to hide the happy smile. "Thank you." It was accompanied by a soft touch on Snape's arm.

Dark amusement and a hint of embarrassment warred on Snape's face, finally turning into the familiar closed up expression as he turned to give the vial to Draco, not bothering to repeat his instructions. It was quite clear to him that the boy would manage.

"I should have enough of this for your people in a day or two," Snape said quietly, not looking at anyone else as he marched out of the room again.

Harry shook his head in amazement.

For a long time now, he'd suspected that there were lots of things Snape didn't understand about him. Most of the notions about sharing things came to mind. Now it was slowly dawning that there were things he would probably never understand about Snape either.

The man had never looked uncomfortable in public with him; not when Bill Weasley had so quietly announced their relationship to everyone, not when there had been even more whispers and stares.

Yet he was clearly annoyed by his small gesture of making certain he -- and Draco -- would be safe.

It made Harry feel warm inside, unable to do anything but to hold his broom and smile at Draco who was putting his broom servicing kit away and trying not to laugh at him.

On the other side of the room, Remus leaned back on his chair and declared, "Check."

Harry's dreams that night were filled with flying; not the reenactment of a Quidditch game they had played years ago, but the feeling of weightlessness and soaring through the air. Waking up well rested, he went quickly through his morning routines before gathering his flying robes from the wardrobe and heading for breakfast.

It was definitely odd to finish dressing in the hallway, pulling on the thicker flying robes when it was so hot outside, but here he was, standing side by side with Draco Malfoy, waiting for him to fasten his robes so they could finally leave.

"Is it just me, or is this completely ridiculous?" Draco asked, rotating his shoulder so that the robes fell in place correctly.

Harry couldn't help smirking as if he was going to comment on Draco's quite familiar outfit, but he simply said, "No, it's definitely not just you." It was different from the times they had managed to sneak out to play one on one Quidditch, flying for the fun of it.

"Good." Draco nodded. "Whenever you're ready."
Others were already waiting, lingering on the street outside their house as if unable to walk the short way to Hogwarts on their own. It was probably only natural; they'd done this in practices as well, everyone waiting until the whole team was ready before going to the pitch.

That was probably the reason for the easy way they formed lines and marched down the road, chattering quietly amongst themselves. Flying would have been easier, but transportation was a single effort while a game needed everyone to play together.

Harry wasn't surprised to see Madam Hooch standing in the middle of the pitch. She walked to the assembled group, greeting everyone with a nod and a few words. They had all started out here, most having their first flying lessons under her guidance and it was almost like coming home.

Finishing with the nods, she went to stand next to Oliver Wood, taking her place there in the group unselfconsciously.

That was definitely unnerving.

Harry shrugged. Somehow this all felt unreal, as if the normalcy of the situation was wrong and they should have a crowd here waiting for them, holding banners and shouting encouragements. Just like Hooch should be up in the air, the familiar whistle hanging around her neck as she kept an eye on the teams, ready to call out any possible foul.

Letting go of the memories, Harry stepped away from the others, his movements clearly indicating he was prepared to take command. The way everyone perked up also showed that no one was going to challenge his place as their leader.

"Everyone ready?"

There were the usual nods and a few comments about being a bit rusty with the flying thing. Harry could tell by the relaxed looks and smiles that everyone was prepared for this, the words mostly just pre-game quips. Or maybe pre-game nerves.

"Before we begin... You all know why we're here, right?" He wasn't certain they had all been present at the meeting, but even if they had been, he still had to ask.

George summarized everyone's agreements by calling out, "Wizarding air force!"

His brother cuffed him at the side of his head, but laughed with the others nevertheless. There was an almost proud look on Charlie's face that disappeared immediately when George turned to glare at him.

"Yes, even though not really if you are thinking about an air force Muggle style." Harry could see that most of his troops had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. "We will fly and help people on the ground."

Seeing the approving nods, Harry waited for someone -- anyone -- to challenge his rather inane explanation, but no one said a word. There were a few suspicious glances thrown at him, but nothing more.

He sighed, dropping the matter. They'd have enough to do without him brooding over something that, in the end, was rather insignificant. Without further ado, he cast a charm, forming a pulsating field of energy over the pitch. They never used things like that in practices, but there would be no time to look after everyone when they started training with the curses, especially not on something as simple as falling.
"That'll make sure no one gets killed." There was no sign of a smile on his face; this was not a laughing matter. "Has everyone cast proper wards on your brooms?"

There were nods and a few affirmative words coming from everyone, just as he'd expected. These people were no idiots, and even though a normal Quidditch practice would probably go without curses, a player who didn't take care of his broom didn't get to play for long.

"Professor Snape is brewing a curse repelling potion for us, for the brooms. You will get it tomorrow."

There were a few nods and nervous tittering from some, and Harry kept his expression stony as he stared at everyone who thought him mentioning Snape was funny.

The following silence was highly satisfying.

Seeing everyone stand here so attentive didn't make something shrivel inside Harry like he'd feared. This was so unlike the meetings where everyone expected him to be able to lead and guide with impossible expectations; this was something he knew how to do.

No different from the training sessions where he took his team through carefully planned flying.

"All right, people. Spread out and mount your brooms." His mind was already shifting to the familiar gear, his voice certain as any Quidditch captain's. Funny how it didn't really matter that this wasn't about getting ready to defeat another team on the pitch.

Of course if this were a simple Quidditch practice, there would be a familiar team standing in front of him, all wearing the Gryffindor colors. Now there was a mismatched group of people on the field, larger in number than any real Quidditch team, with only adults attending, wearing well worn flying robes of all hue.

Draco Malfoy was standing next to him, wearing green robes and a smug expression, his broom already in place. Madam Hooch kept smirking at Harry when she took her place on his other side, as if she actually enjoyed the role of a simple student instead of being the one herding youngsters on their first flying lesson.

The attentive way everyone was looking at Harry was a clear reminder that this once he wasn't going to have to spell things out for his troops. Everyone here was a professional, and even though some might be a bit rusty with the finer points of flying, especially over the Quidditch pitch, no one needed to be told the basics.

"All right then! Let's do some warm ups." Gesturing with his hand, Harry mounted his broom. He wasn't surprised to have the old Gryffindor team take their familiar places behind him, Oliver and Angelina tailing those who had come after their time on the team, easily adapting to the situation.

The rest of the people followed the Gryffindors, casting amused looks at each other.

For the first time, Harry was glad Ron had never made it to the Quidditch team, though it had been close a few times and not qualifying had always hit his friend hard. It would be hard enough to lead this tight band of people already, but with Ron here, it would be near impossible.

The thought brought a familiar wave of anxiety over him, and he glanced to his left, expecting to see George hovering there, on his usual place.

When he could only see Madam Hooch kicking herself up in the air, he frowned.
A strange thought hit him, and swallowing hard, he turned to look over his other shoulder, already knowing what he'd see. The sight of the redhead on his broom with a bemused expression on his face still almost knocked Harry off his Firebolt even though his feet were still firmly planted on the ground.

"Are you all right?" he asked without really thinking. He couldn't help it; seeing George in Fred's old position hit him harder than anything.

George blinked a few times and then nodded. "Yeah. I'm fine."

Unable to really say anything to that, Harry kicked off the ground. Then the worry was diminished by the familiar thrill of flying.

He took the group out for an easy flight around the Quidditch pitch, making sure everyone was comfortable with flying so close to each other. The second round was faster, their route not a simple circle but loops and fains around the towers.

Hovering in the air as the others continued on their way around the pitch, Harry kept an eye on his people, assessing their skills and style with a sharp eye. They had always taken the House Cup matches seriously, but it was clear that everyone knew this was more important than that; the players who were out of sync with the others wouldn't lose them a prize, they would lose their lives.

It was very easy to see exactly what position each member of his new team had played, even with those who hadn't been playing for years. The Seekers were mostly ignoring the others, their eyes instinctively scanning the area for the Snitch. Chasers and Beaters flew closer to each other, adjusting to the rhythm of the flying as if it was a second nature by now, ready to react to the Quaffles and keep their Seekers safe. Most of the Keepers went to defensive maneuvers though there were no goals to protect.

Harry catalogued every move, knowing that they would have to hone their strategy so that everyone could do what they already did the best.

He knew the strengths and weaknesses of his old team better than anyone, except maybe for Oliver Wood, and was also familiar with the others he'd played against. Guiding people like Madam Hooch or Oliver himself -- who had always been something akin to a hero to him -- felt weird, but Harry knew perfectly well that they would have to treat this like a game on one respect; their team could only have one captain.

The fact that it would be him didn't seem to surprise anyone.

He watched the group fly by again, responding to the few waves and Draco's grin. It was easy to see that most of the older people had kept playing even after Hogwarts, either in small local teams or some even nationally. Oliver and Angelina soared across the sky with incredible grace, neither showing any regrets for leaving their teams behind to defend their whole world.

Harry's proud smile didn't disappear even when he saw George flying right behind them. The movements were achingly familiar as Harry watched George swoop down and turn left before making a loop and swinging to right, two slightly different styles melding into one. There was perfect balance in the movements that were exact mirror images to each other, unlike earlier when it had at times seemed as if the two brothers were forever leaning towards each other.

Harry swooped down after them, taking his place slightly above the others. This felt right, and he didn't really care if they never found out what had happened and if George was crazy or not. It was
clear that George believed that Fred was right there with him, and Harry didn't need mediwizards to prove him right.

He was going to go with his gut and believe it anyway.

Feeling insanely good, he muttered a *sonorus*, holding his wand easily even as he flew a bit higher, and then said, "Chasers! Make groups of three, people you know and are comfortable working with." He waited for a moment as his people tried to make the asked formations. When they seemed to be in place, he added, "We'll start with the Hawkshead Attacking Formation and then go to the Parkin's Pincer. Ready? Go!"

The Keepers and the other Seekers flew to the side, hovering in the air easily as the Chasers swooped down in groups of three, any hesitation forgotten at the familiar instructions.

Harry kept them working hard until midday, and then everyone went to have lunch before returning back to the pitch. He ignored the bustle in the Three Broomsticks, concentrating on the pieces of parchment where he was scribbling down ideas and strategy, keeping it firmly in mind that this time the objective wasn't going to be goals and finding the Snitch.
Holding the towel loosely in his hand, Ron looked into the mirror and grinned. His hair was standing on end. At least his reflection was simply there, a mirror image of him instead of another Ron Weasley moving around and commenting on how ridiculous he looked.

He dropped the towel on the floor and then ran his fingers through his messy hair, barely managing to smooth the wild strands. Not exactly presentable, but good enough for going to bed.

Whichever bed he chose to go to.

The fear of encountering a darker glare than usual made him tidy the bathroom a bit; mop the wet floor with the towel before putting the towel into the hamper, pick up his clothes, that sort of thing. He tried to find the idea of Snape actually showering funny, but it only managed to give him the creeps. Snape naked anywhere was a fodder for nightmares.

It almost made him choose to go to bed alone. Almost.

Padding across the hallway, Ron glanced at the firmly shut door on the right and shuddered a little. No matter how hard he tried to get used to Snape's presence in the house, it was probably something he'd always find totally unnatural. But it wasn't really his problem. As long as the git spent most of his time in the cellar, he was kind of all right with it. In a weird and disgusting way.

He had bigger things to worry about. The training wasn't about showing off and making silly jokes anymore, it all felt so real these days, now that the fighting seemed to be right around the corner. No one could hide from the reality anymore.

The worry and all the things they went through every day made him so tired, but not tired enough to just crawl under the blankets and sleep through the whole night. With everything else, there was constant tension, and his body reacted to it seemingly automatically, almost thrumming with all the nervous excitement.

As usual, there was a good remedy for that.

It would be good to do something that would take his mind off the constant war and he could bet Malfoy would be just as eager as he was. He always was. The Slytherin spent his days flying with Harry and the other Quidditch players, but even with all the excitement during the day, he never walked away from the possibility of shagging.

The thought made Ron grin. Slytherins!

He stood at the doorway for a moment, hesitating before he could step inside. For some reason he didn't want to go to Malfoy's room tonight, preferring to stay on his own turf.

It wasn't something he thought of often, the decision between getting up and crawling across the hall to his own room and just falling asleep and risking rolling into the wet spot made when it was actually an issue. Most of the nights he chose to leave Malfoy to deal with the mess, sneaking back into his own room, but all the thoughts about Snape made him reluctant to risk the nightly hallway tonight.

The bastard had spent decades patrolling Hogwarts at night. He was bound to sneak around the
house as well. Let Malfoy deal with the possibility of running into him while being half naked and smelling of sex.

They had no script for this, no words or hidden looks for deciding things. He waited for Malfoy to come up and take care of his evening routines and then they kind of went straight to business and ended up in someone's bed, happy and sticky.

Yanking his favorite T-shirt down a bit -- and yes, it was definitely too small for him -- Ron stood there waiting, knowing he wouldn't have to wait for long.

He didn't like waiting, but was usually willing to be patient. Something was different today, and by the time Malfoy finally came upstairs, he glared at him before the annoyance morphed into anticipation.

"Weasley." Malfoy's voice was quiet as he nodded at him as he passed him by.

Ron answered the nod with one of his own. "Malfoy." He sounded rusty, as if he hadn't spoken for a while, the sound mirroring the dull ache inside.

There were no words, there was no need for those these days, and he gestured at his own room, not even waiting for Malfoy to nod again before heading towards his bed. It was a nightly ritual, like washing his hands before dinner, and it always played the same.

No matter how hard the day was, there was always this; the unnamed connection between Malfoy and him, something he couldn't even begin to describe even if he wanted to. And he definitely didn't want to think of names or definitions for something that should be just as simple as it was; fucking.

It was damn convenient to have Malfoy in his bed. Not that he would admit that to anyone. It had taken him a long time to even admit it to himself, but these days, he was almost comfortable with the thought. For once Malfoy had been right; he didn't have to like the bastard to like fucking him.

Sex didn't have to change anything.

The door closed behind Malfoy, and the sound alone made him shiver. He was tired, but not that tired, and the idea of Malfoy's body writhing under his was enough to drive all thoughts of sleep away.

Not bothering to say anything, Ron turned to Malfoy, pulling him close as soon as the bed dipped.

He took control of the first kiss, determined not to give Malfoy a chance to try anything funny. It was always a rush to feel Malfoy's mouth open under his and respond to his kiss, the capitulation hesitant at first and then complete as Ron took everything Malfoy was willing to give.

One kiss lead to others, and soon Ron was pulling Malfoy's flying robes off, needing to feel the soft skin and strong muscle hidden beneath the heavy cloth.

Malfoy's hands were already under his T-shirt, his lips curling into a smile against Ron's lips and driving him just as insane as his touch did. It was always enough to make Ron burn with a mixture of anger and lust and his movements turned frantic.

Sometimes Malfoy simply went with it, surrendering to his need as if it was somehow too much to fight. Now it looked like the angry lust was contagious.

They barely had enough time -- or brain cells left -- to put their wands securely on the nightstand before Malfoy's robes pooled on the floor with various knick knacks and small coins falling from his
pockets, bouncing on the thick carpet before rolling under the bed. Malfoy bent down to collect something, giving Ron a perfect view of his arse, and once again it got a little hazy after that.

All Ron could think of was getting that arse naked and in bed.

He peeled off Malfoy's clothes layer after layer until he had him naked, working without thought. This was familiar by now, the need to touch and be touched, the small twinge of guilt for doing something like this with Malfoy so faint he could almost ignore it completely.

It was drowned when Malfoy's hands moved to undress him.

Malfoy grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and tried to yank it over his head, growling as it didn't really work. He yanked again, and one of the small tears at the hemline finally gave up, splitting the shirt in two as Malfoy's strong hands searched for bare skin.

The sound of tearing cloth was astonishingly loud. Ron groaned as he felt his shirt rip, the nice familiar haze disappearing somewhere. Losing his favorite Cannons T-shirt was definitely a mood killer. "Damn it, Malfoy. That's my favorite shirt!"

"I'll buy you another one." There was more ripping as questing hands moved over Ron's chest.

Ron lay absolutely still while the words rang in his head over and over again. Malfoy would buy him another shirt.

They were in bed and Malfoy was destroying his favorite shirt, the one his father had bought him after saving for it for months and he thought it would be enough to just buy him another one?

But of course. He was Draco Malfoy, and he had enough money to buy anything in the world.

He rolled to his side. "Get off me!"

It was surprisingly easy to push Malfoy away, the balance between lust and anger shifting so that for once the lust was losing to the burning anger building inside.

"What is it now?" Malfoy asked, exasperation evident in him, and the way he looked at Ron told all too clearly that he had no idea what was making him push him away.

Ron seethed with anger. He wasn't going to lie here and let Malfoy use that superior tone at him anymore.

He'd be damned if he ever let Malfoy buy him anything!

It came out a bit differently. "I'm not your fucking whore!" Ron snarled from between clenched teeth.

The words seemed to almost echo in the room, and even Ron cringed a little at the way they sounded; mean and sharp and full of venom.

He didn't regret them. Things had changed a lot recently, with people looking up to him, seeing the youngest son of Minister Weasley instead of a poor kid who would be a nobody if he didn't have Harry Potter's friendship. But Malfoy never seemed to change, and here was once again proof that he saw Ron as he always had, looking at him with amusement and superiority showing in every look and gesture he made.

Now the bastard didn't even try to hide it, offering him money for... He didn't really know what.
Probably not just for the shirt, but everything possible. Ron couldn't really tell; it was all a jumble in his mind. All he did know was that he had already sold out on most of his principles concerning sleeping with people he didn't even like, and this was simply too much.

"You really think I would do that?" For the first time in ages, there was resignation in Malfoy's eyes, and it was clear from his expression that he could almost taste the bile in his mouth. "You really think..." Seeing the awful truth in Ron's flaming gaze, he shrugged, as if getting rid of the pain, coldness replacing all doubts. "Fine then."

Ron stared as Malfoy got off the bed and just looked at him for a while.

He didn't know what to say, seeing quite clearly that his words had actually managed to hurt Malfoy and sort of hating himself for that. Never really good at articulating his feelings -- or even acknowledging most of them -- he didn't know what to say, knowing only that whatever words came out next would probably be something he'd never even dreamed of using while addressing any of the Slytherins.

Especially Malfoy.

Gathering his clothes from the floor, Draco picked up a Galleon he'd dropped only moments ago when undressing had been the most important thing in the whole world and squeezed it so hard his hand hurt.

This was going to end right now.

It had been good for a while, with Weasley getting over stuff and saving all the stupid outbursts for the training hall. Things outside were insane, and it had always been easy in bed; Weasley holding him tight and making his skin burn. Shagging like that was for fun and an end of its own, it had nothing to do with guilt or games and he had reveled in it.

No amount of guilt or desire or need would make him do this anymore. Whatever problems Weasley had were his own and didn't have anything to do with him.

He didn't want mushy emotionalism like the looks thrown between Black and Lupin when they were once again harboring the delusions no one could see. This wasn't a relationship, this was never going to be one. He wanted the connection with someone who wasn't repulsive and knew what was going on. Weasley fit both categories and for a moment it had seemed like they were actually seeking the same.

Now he understood it was all an illusion, and he was going to walk away and never come back.

Draco finished pulling on his pants, and straightened his back, unwilling to linger here longer even if it meant walking around in his underwear. The Galleon in his hand felt awfully hot, and he realized he was holding something that would hit Weasley just as hard as his words had hit Draco.

Throwing the coin at Weasley as an adequate payment for the services that were no longer needed would hit the arrogant redhead right where it would hurt the most, and for the first time in ages, Draco would revel in the pain his actions would cause.

"Don't go."

The tone from Weasley made Draco hesitate, and he looked up from the Galleon. He'd never heard that tone on Weasley, especially when he was talking to him. "What do you want?"

Ron stared at Malfoy, trying to remember all the nasty and evil things he'd ever done to him. It didn't
really work. All he could remember was how Malfoy had already apologized for all the bad things that had happened to his family and that he had practically laughed in his face.

He didn't want to be like that. "I'm... I'm sorry, all right?"

It came out sullen and more as an accusation than a real apology. For a few moments Draco couldn't comprehend just exactly what Weasley had said. Then he raised an eyebrow, his hand forming a protecting fist over the golden Galleon. As an apology, that was completely unacceptable.

Sighing, Ron brushed his palm across his face and then said, "I mean it. Not just because of the sex and not because of..." He couldn't really think of anything else tangible enough to force him to apologize. He kept his eyes focused on Malfoy even though looking at him was even harder than saying the words. "I really mean it. I'm sorry." Even if Malfoy was a bastard at times, he wasn't bad all the time.

It was insane how the way Malfoy nodded to accept his apology made him sigh with relief.

Insane and wrong on so many levels he couldn't even begin to describe them. But he knew that apologizing to Malfoy was not something he should do. It was probably even worse than shagging him.

"I really shouldn't want this..." Ron muttered, needing to fill the silence with something, since it looked like Malfoy wasn't about to return to bed. Then again it didn't look like he was about to leave, so maybe he hadn't ruined everything. "I shouldn't like this. Or... you know..." He wasn't going to add he wasn't supposed to like Malfoy, even if that was what his silly brain had conjured up.

Draco cocked his head. "Why?" He wasn't sure why Weasley was making such a big deal of it; he hadn't done or said anything to insult him or his friends for ages. The verbal sparring was exciting and the following sex was fantastic. So what on earth was the problem?

"I..." Ron couldn't really use Malfoy's father as an excuse anymore. Nor could he make comments about him being a Slytherin; Blaise was one and he wasn't that bad. "Because I'm supposed to marry a nice Gryffindor girl and have a family." It just came out and sounded silly even in his own ears, but ever since he'd been a kid, he'd known that was what Weasley men were supposed to do.

He could see from the slight softening of Malfoy's gaze that Malfoy knew all about duty and the way things were supposed to be. Then he realized that it had always been like that with Malfoy. He had been supposed to follow his father's footsteps, become a Death Eater, do things too awful to mention and enjoy every damn minute of it.

Not really liking the implications of his own thoughts, Ron waited for Malfoy to say something about his inane words or maybe laugh at him, wondering why this was so damn hard. He shouldn't be with Malfoy, shouldn't want to spend time with him or shag him or talk about Quidditch with him, but it didn't change the fact that doing all those things was nice. Probably one of the nicest things in life right now.

Draco let his hands relax, his robes and the Galleon falling to the floor unnoticed. "I am not asking you to marry me." There were so many things he could say, most probably things Weasley was thinking right now if that overly serious look on his face was any indication, but he could only manage this.

"Yeah." Smiling hesitantly, Ron was glad Malfoy was willing to let it go. "That would definitely be weird."
They were actually grinning at the same stupid joke and the world wasn't coming to an end. That alone was a miracle.

"So... What happens now?" Ron might be able to joke with Malfoy, just a bit, but he didn't want to ask him to come back to bed. Sure, he would ask if that's what it took, but that would make it serious again and he was really not comfortable with that kind of a discussion.

The reply was highly satisfying in all its elegance, even though there were no words until Malfoy was crawling back to bed all naked.

"What happens next is that I'm going to kiss you. Right now," Draco muttered, his lips a breath away from Weasley's. The kiss was soft, teasing. "And then I'm going to taste you." Another kiss. "And then I'm going to suck you off."

Ron had absolutely no objections to that plan. "Yeah. Okay."

Licking the corner of Weasley's mouth, Draco added, "And then you can bring me off any way you want to." It was a dare and they both knew it. Until now, he'd only felt Weasley's hand on his prick when they had been shagging, and it had probably never even occurred to the redhead to reciprocate the occasional blowjob he gave him. That would have to change, if not tonight, then sometime soon.

Draco was perfectly fine with Weasley shagging him, but the other thing felt too much like being used, and he wasn't going to allow that. Not anymore.

Ron swallowed. He wasn't sure if he could actually try to take Malfoy's prick into his mouth -- and definitely not if that meant going down on his knees in front of him -- but the challenge in the gray eyes made him determined to at least consider it. It wasn't as if he wasn't as brave as Malfoy! If Malfoy could suck prick and be so blasé about it, so could he. "Sure."

Part 21

Hands still cramping from clutching onto the broom all morning, Harry looked around the room, finding the meeting a bit strange after days of actually doing things instead of just talking.

But right now, this was more important than going through the swoops and formations again. His air force could practice without him for an hour or two.

"We need to make final decisions on the task forces." He knew they should have probably done this ages ago, but every decision seemed to be final in a morbid way, and he'd wanted to postpone the inevitable just a little while longer.

There were nods, people already gathered in small groups as if they had only been waiting for him to say it out loud.

"When the time is right," Harry said, "Remus and Sirius will take care of the smuggling business. They need people with knowledge about the Dark Creatures with them."

The long hours of training and classes had drawn people to their areas of expertise, and it didn't take long for the ones who felt competent on this to raise their hands and then migrate to the two wizards.

Harry didn't say anything as Hermione joined them.

"Good. Then we need people to take care of Voldemort's strongholds. We can not leave them any place to fall back to."
This time, no one said a word about destroying homes. People simply waited for Harry to call out places and then made decisions of where to go, choosing either the smaller, more remote mansions that would be taken down soon, probably the following days, or the larger estates.

Leaning back against the backrest, Harry let his mind wander as people talked, confirming plans about the big battle they were now looking forward to.

The main force of their army would stay at Hogwarts and face the Death Eaters. Though that battle would undoubtedly be formidable, it was the smaller operations that could well turn the tide of the whole war.

It wasn't exactly a matter of choice anymore. The preparations for everything had been set in motion a long time ago, when Dumbledore's words had made it clear that this war would be won or lost at the conference table and not on the field.

Harry tried to keep that in mind, but he couldn't really ignore the clenching in his gut that told him that as usual, Dumbledore had not been completely truthful with his words.

Whatever would happen before the battle would be easy to plan, especially the small raids that were meant to drive Voldemort to actually attack them head on. No one could really predict what would happen when the battle was engaged.

The silence in the room jolted him out of his thoughts, and he looked around, wondering what had caused the uncomfortable mood.

It didn't take a genius to guess.

"I think I should be the one leading the operation to the Mansion."

Harry knew he should have told Draco to stay with the others at the pitch. "Out of the question." He could see others around him nod at his stern words. "You're already involved with the air force, and I need you in the air."

Draco shook his head. "You'll need my expertise." He didn't want to say this, but had to. "I know the place better than anyone, I know all the secrets. When we go to my... the Malfoy Mansion, I should be there to guide our people."

He'd been over this in his head, and there was really no other option for him. He'd spent his childhood sneaking through the endless corridors of the Mansion, snooping around, following the house elves and the visitors who had always seemed to sneak around in silence, casting furtive looks around as if they were afraid of every shadow.

"No." Harry wasn't going to let Draco go anywhere near that place. "You're needed in the air with us. End of discussion."

Arrogance almost drove Draco to his feet, but then he realized that Harry was probably trying to protect him. Even with all the show of friendship and the quiet conversations they'd had, this still managed to shock him to the core. "I appreciate what you're trying to do, but it's my place to..."

"... do as I tell you." It came out more easily that Harry could have ever imagined.

He wasn't going to let Draco do something as bravely idiotic as that. It would be hard enough to face the people who would come for them, Draco's former friends, his housemates. His family. Going back to destroy his own house was inconceivable, and Harry wasn't going to add a friend's nightmares to his list of future regrets.
Draco nodded slightly, acknowledging Harry's words as truth on one level. Yes, his place as one of the Order of the Phoenix was to do as their leader told him to do. But he was not going to let Harry operate on foolish sentimentality when he knew quite well that this gave them strategic advantage. "I know. But it has to be me. No one else knows that place as well as I do."

Besides, it felt like it was his duty to do this, no matter how foolish it sounded.

He had definitely been spending too much time around Gryffindors.

"We will find someone else."

Seeing the stubborn way Harry was clenching his jaw almost made Draco roll his eyes. There were days he could honestly say he liked and even grudgingly respected Harry, but sometimes he thought he needed a swift kick in the backside. "Who?"

He wondered if Harry had any idea of what he was talking about. The Mansion was huge with corridors that went on and on, rooms hidden behind tapestries, vaults hidden cleverly in plain sight so that one would simply walk by and never even know what was there. Then there were the levels below ground, the dungeons no one could have possibly memorized completely.

"I think that should be rather obvious."

Both young men turned to stare at Snape who was sitting next to Minerva McGonagall, looking as calm as ever.

Harry was the first one to realize just exactly what he meant. "No!" The exclamation was instinctive, but came out without any real fire, as if he already knew he couldn't win this argument.

"I know the Malfoy Mansion, especially all the places where Lucius has been performing the Dark Arts as well as most of the vaults." Snape didn't have to add how he'd managed to gather that information. "Furthermore, I am completely capable of defending myself against whatever surprises they have left there."

Before Harry could say anything, professor McGonagall turned to face Snape, her hand touching his sleeve softly. "Severus, surely you can not mean you would actually go back there!"

"I don't want to go there." It was the absolute truth, the memories of the Mansion not considerably more pleasant to Snape than they were to Minerva. "But I do believe that should be my part in the fight."

Harry's throat squeezed shut, silencing all the arguments. He wanted to scream and shout and absolutely forbid Snape from doing anything as dangerous as that, but what good would that do? They would have to leave the Mansion to the last and destroy it when Voldemort's people had left, and that meant that while Harry and the Order faced the Death Eaters at Hogwarts, others would be sneaking through the corridors of the Mansion.

It would be dangerous on so many level, but the alternative was probably even worse.

He knew that leading the Order into battle meant that he would lead people to their death; good people, those he had known half his life. Would it be any better to have Snape facing the Death Eaters on the field than to have him in the Mansion?

Harry didn't want to make such a decision, not for people he loved, but there was really no way he could shelter them from harm.
He looked at Snape, ignoring the way other Order members were staring at him, silently begging him to consider it.

Snape looked straight back, his gaze burning dark.

No one in the room made a sound, the tension growing until it reached an uncomfortable level, but still no one moved or said anything to break it.

Harry hadn't objected on Sirius going on a mission, but it had been decided months ago, when they had first heard about Voldemort's plans on using the Dark Creatures. That had been Dumbledore's call.

He'd known Ron would stand by his brothers, just as he'd known Hermione would go wherever her knowledge would be needed the most.

There was no way on earth he would order Snape to do this, but even with the man volunteering, he felt nauseous. It wasn't just that the Mansion was a familiar place to Snape, the place was dangerous, and sending anyone there wasn't easier than telling them to stand by him on the battlefield.

"Are you sure?" Lips numb, he forced the question out. Seeing Snape nod curtly, he repeated, "I mean it. Are you absolute sure about this?" There was really no alternative he could offer Snape, or indeed anyone. It had gone beyond choosing between fighting and trying to find another way years ago.

Snape nodded. "Yes."

The hand on his arm tightened convulsively, McGonagall's fingers closing over his Dark Mark through the cloth unintentionally.

Knowing all too well that he might one day look back to this and regret ever agreeing to any of this lunacy, Harry said quietly, "All right. You will lead the operation to Malfoy Mansion."

His mouth tasted horrible as he said that.

There were soft whispers in the room, people who hadn't attended the smaller Order meetings now looking at them with curiosity evident on their face. Harry pretended he didn't notice, ignoring every word.

He would have to avoid the newspapers like the plague. If anyone dared to comment of the hero of their word sending his lover to face almost certain death... He didn't even know what would happen next.

It now felt incredible that he had once stood by and let Arthur Weasley face the idiots who had tried to hurt Snape. He wasn't sure what had changed, or if indeed anything really had, but if something like that happened now, he wouldn't simply deal with the issue. He would probably do something too awful to even contemplate.

Snape had been right about one aspect; forming bonds of attachment with people made life more difficult on occasion. Not that Harry regretted anything he had with Snape. He only regretted he had to be a part of this charade, now more than ever.

"Er... I think I'll join your expedition, if you don't mind, Snape." Arabella Figg's voice rang oddly loud in the room.

As if relieved that someone had broken the awkward silence, there were a few others to join in as
Bill Weasley hesitated as one of his colleagues from the Cursebreaking department made a comment about them needing professional curse breakers at the vaults, casting looks at his father and Charlie before looking at Harry, clearly unable to make his mind.

It was clear to Harry that the Weasleys were less interested in destroying the Malfoy ancestral home than they were in destroying the lord of the mansion. He couldn't blame them.

He wasn't going to order the Weasleys around. Arthur would most likely stand firm on the Hogwarts ground, their new Acting Minister completely unable to hide behind his status. Charlie and George would fly with Harry. Bill and Ron could choose where they went, both eager to join the fight.

Harry was just glad that Percy was nowhere to be seen in the meetings and that everyone had agreed that Ginny was too young to take any part in this.

Leaning back on his chair again, Harry listened to the discussion half heartedly. He didn't have anything to contribute to the discussion anymore. It was all too clear that people around him used their training to figure out what to do on their own.

That was the only good thing about this situation.

Snape leaned closer to him, paying no real attention to the fact that people were staring. "Thank you for not making a scene." He paused, and then added more quietly, "We should have discussed this earlier."

Yes, they should have. The only problem was that Harry didn't think of any time that would have been good for such a discussion. Maybe it was better this way. Now they all had things to concentrate on, and he didn't have extra time on his hands to wallow in the pointless anxiety the thought of losing Snape caused.

Letting out a little laugh, Harry muttered, "I don't think talking would have made any difference."

"Perhaps so," Snape admitted.

Harry looked at him, realizing that Snape knew exactly what was waiting for them. Funny how it could hit him so hard, even after all the countless hours of talking about war and fighting and death with this man. He had been so angry then, so frightened, and nothing had been able to drive those emotions completely away.

They were still there, right under the surface. But now there was also hope, fierce hope about the future. All the things he could lose were also things he would fight for; everything he shared with Snape was worth fighting for and dying for if needs be.

He didn't think it was selfish of him to think about such a big thing with such definitions. Why should he be any different from anyone else? They might all think about their world and freedom, but in the end, everyone fought to keep their loved ones safe.

"I still worry, you know," he muttered quietly so that no one else would hear.

Snape looked at him for a moment before nodding slowly. "I may share your misgivings on the situation as well." With that, he turned his attention back to the conversation that was still going on.

Lips twitching a little, as if trying to fight a huge grin that would be completely inappropriate, Harry let Arthur Weasley draw him into a small argument about the Ministry.
It was strange how easily everyone accepted their parts in this. Weeks of training had called everyone to focus on the war, and no one seemed to question the logic behind all the plans. Harry was glad for that. The way people talked about the upcoming battle as a certainty was better than the endless questions.

Plans made, they called it a day right before dinner time.

People walked out of the headquarters in small groups. It was a habit by now; no one traveled alone, not even the few blocks to their quarters. Hogsmeade was safe -- or as safe as any place could be -- but it was still best not to tempt fate.

Harry waited patiently for Ron to finish saying goodbye to his father and brothers so that they could all walk back home together.

The others were already by the door, Remus and Hermione standing between Snape and Sirius. They didn't even seem to be conscious about it anymore, all staying together as a silent agreement. Most of the time, the small group didn't even attract much attention, except for the few curious looks people threw at Snape every now and then.

"Harry." Hermione nudged at him, shifting parchments under her arm. "Do you have any plans for the evening?"

The glance at Snape was involuntary. "Er... No. Not really." Nothing beyond the usual. Dinner, maybe joining Snape downstairs to watch him brew, snuggling down with him if they were tired, but most likely something more vigorous.

Hermione smiled. "I see." It was clear she knew exactly what Harry meant.

"Oh hush," Harry muttered. He liked the matter of fact way Hermione was talking to him about what he shared with Snape, but there was no reason for the smugness. They weren't as bad as Ron and Draco after all, not keeping anyone up with all the ruckus.

"I didn't say anything!" Still smiling, Hermione turned to look at Ron who was walking towards them. "At least you're not as bad as Ron and Malfoy." There was a slight edge to her voice, as if she still didn't really approve them.

Harry thought it made her sound exactly like McGonagall. Ignoring he'd just thought the same a moment ago, he gestured towards the door. "If you say so." He was pretty sure she was lying.

Part 22

The small attacks seemed to be working. Soon, there were fewer raids on the villages as the Death Eaters gathered to protect their forts, fearing that what had happened at the Riddle house would be repeated. It was good to finally have a victory, even though it brought Harry no joy to order people's houses to be destroyed.

But not all the news were good.

Small bands of Aurors and Order members had been lost on training missions, some turning out dead, but others disappeared from the face of the earth. Such losses always hit Harry hard, but this time it was worse than before,

One of the names on the list handed to him was Neville Longbottom.
Harry could only sit there and stare at the parchment, ignoring the buzz around the room. He didn't see Hermione's tears or the way Dean broke his knuckles on the solid stone wall. All he could think of was that he should probably make sure that someone had informed Mrs. Longbottom.

He had no idea what he should tell her; assuring her he'd do anything to get him back would be kind of hypocritical, but he'd be damned if he sent condolences before knowing his friend was truly lost.

It was fortunate that Sirius had stayed home with Remus, both finding it easier to browse through the books in silence while they figured out the final details of their mission. Harry was having hard time staying in control as it was.

Trying to deal with Sirius' worry would have probably made him snap.

The mere thought made him gag. Merlin! Sometimes he loathed himself more than anyone else.

This wasn't about some strategy on the paper, this was about a friend and how the hell could he just stand here and watch his housemates crumble all around him without joining them in their grief? In their rage.

Harry saw Ron looking at him, and for the briefest of moments he knew that if Ron made even the barest of suggestions of going out with their army and bringing Neville back, he would probably say yes and think about it later. At the same time he knew with absolute certainty that he would never do anything of the sort.

A horrible thought hit him, making him gag again, and he turned slowly to look at Dumbledore. The fact that the old Headmaster was very carefully standing on the other side of the room with his back turned to him made him mutter curses from under his breath.

The room was suddenly too full of people. He couldn't breathe in here; any deep breath would surely force the primitive scream out of his lungs.

Harry turned around and walked stiffly to the smaller meeting room he used as his private office.

Glad that professor McGonagall was taking care of the girls -- Hermione now reduced to growling, but both Lavender and Parvati sobbing loudly -- Ron inched away from the other Gryffindors. He was unable to let himself even think about what it meant to have Neville disappear like that.

Until they knew anything for sure, he refused to consider the fact that being taken by the Death Eaters was as good as being dead.

He knew death, and this wasn't it. Couldn't be it.

Denial was a happy place right now, and Ron was trying his best to stay there for as long as he could. It was clear that to everyone else, reality was too hard to escape, and there were all sorts of angry outbursts coming from his friends and even some of the professors in the room.

He didn't want to talk to Dean, who was already being scolded by madam Pomfrey for breaking his hand. What good would words do anyway? No one in this room could do anything about the whole thing, well except maybe for Harry, but even he was looking weird, walking away from his people, his robes billowing behind him menacingly.

Ron rushed after Harry. "Harry, wait up!"

"Not now, Ron."
Not paying any attention on the words beyond realizing they were so obviously growled from between clenched teeth, Ron went after his friend. This was not the time to be alone with grief. "Harry..."

Harry stopped and slowly turned around. "Not. Now."

Ron shivered at the maelstrom of fury and pain showing in Harry's eyes. He'd never seen Harry like this and had no idea what to do or say. Anger or grief would be okay, but this went beyond anything he had experienced.

"Mr. Weasley."

Spinning around at the sound of his name, Ron actually felt relieved to see Snape standing at the doorway. "Yeah. Okay." It didn't matter that Snape hadn't actually said anything; he understood him anyway.

It was definitely weird.

He wanted to leave the room and the oppressive mood, but for some reason he hesitated before stepping out, lingering by the wall in silence, almost afraid to look back.

To Ron's relief, Snape was just standing there, behind Harry. He was touching Harry's shoulder, but that was all. Letting out a shuddering sigh, Ron turned to go and then froze as he heard Harry whisper quietly.

"They will know who he is and if he's not dead already..."

"I know."

Ron flinched at the calm way Snape just said it. How could anyone just say something like that?

"Damn, I'm tired of all this..." Harry's voice trailed off. There was a brief silence as Snape said nothing and simply stood there, waiting. Then Harry turned to look over his shoulder. "Do you think it was intentional that they took Neville?"

"I don't know."

Ron shook his head a little, exasperation radiating from him. Why on earth couldn't Snape just lie? It would be easy, even Ron could probably manage the words about it not being anyone's fault. That it was probably a random attack or something. He knew how hard Harry took these things, so why couldn't Snape do something to prevent all the guilt and stuff?

"Yeah."

Turning around completely, Harry kept his gaze on Snape. "We have a lot to do. I can't do this now." His lips twisted into something that wasn't exactly a smile. "It won't help anyone and I'm just so..." It seemed he didn't how to finish his sentence.

"Anything you need right now?" Snape asked, still calm as ever.

Harry shook his head. "Later."

They stood there for a long moment, Ron unable to leave, neither Harry nor Snape even noticing his presence. There was a commotion in the big meeting hall, but Ron knew no one would come here now, no matter what.
Finally Harry sighed. "You know what happens next, don't you?" He didn't even wait for Snape's muttered affirmative. "I have to use this. It may be the only chance we get."

Ron had no idea what he was talking about, but he could hear disgust in Harry's voice. He was a bit surprised to see that Snape didn't seem to be much happier about the whole thing.

"Can you do it?"

There was not even the slightest of hesitations, as Harry nodded at Snape's question. "I have to." His lips quirked into yet another not-really-a-smile. "So yeah. I can do it."

"Good," Snape said quietly.

Ron's eyes widened as Harry stepped closer to Snape, hand moving to touch Snape's. Trying not to make his disgust too obvious, Ron turned around and rushed back into the big meeting hall. Whatever happened next, he so didn't need to see it.

He wished he knew what they were talking about.

Harry took a deep breath, his fingers brushing against Snape's grounding him. "I can do this," he muttered, trying to reassure himself more than Snape.

He didn't expect there to be a reply, glad that Snape only looked at him. It was more than enough, and way better than the empty words anyone else would offer. Snape would also understand what he wanted to say even when he didn't really say it.

"I think I should go back there." Not that Harry wanted to. He just knew that hiding in here didn't help. The longer he stood here, the less he wanted to go and face his troops.

Snape agreed. "Yes, I think you should."

They walked out side by side without touching. Snape had his arms crossed on his chest, his robes billowing as usual as he swept out of the room, Harry looking just as forbidding with the tight expression on his face.

The mood in the big meeting hall was still somber, and for once people didn't focus on Harry when he stepped through the side door. Everyone was staring at an old lady who was slowly making her way across the room towards Albus Dumbledore.

Even though Harry had never seen Neville's grandmother before, her appearance was too famous to be missed. Looking drained, Mrs. Longbottom still managed to stand straight under the impressive hat as she walked slowly across the room.

McGonagall went to greet her. "Fenella. We just heard. I'm so sorry."

"Minerva." The stuffed vulture shook a little as Mrs. Longbottom nodded curtly. "I don't need you to be sorry. I want my grandson back!"

Harry flinched as if someone had slapped him.

"My dear Fenella, I assure you, we want Neville back as much as you do," Dumbledore stepped forward, holding out his hands and looking as sympathetic as possible.

This time, his sympathy wasn't received with the usual grace.

Mrs. Longbottom's hat looked it would capsize as the old woman shook with anger. "Nonsense!"
What are you going to do about getting my grandson back?"

"Fenella... I'm not sure there is anything to be done." McGonagall muttered quietly, trying to draw her attention away from the Headmaster. "The Death Eaters...."

"Don't try to patronize me, Minerva. I know quite well what the Death Eaters do to their victims. What I don't know is what you're going to do about Voldemort and his foolish games!"

Something inside Harry snapped, and he didn't have to pretend as he said calmly, "I think we've had enough games already, Mrs. Longbottom."

People turned to look at him.

Mrs. Longbottom glared. "Harry Potter. What are you going to do about this?" It was clear that she didn't think he could manage much better than Albus Dumbledore.

"I will challenge Voldemort to a duel," Harry said. The anger burning inside turned this into something far beyond a simple strategy, and right that moment he would have indeed issued any challenge possible and even believed in it, no matter how he knew all challenges would be futile. "That should get us Neville back."

Ron opened his mouth to say something, but Hermione hissed, "Don't! Harry knows what he's doing!" making him close his mouth and glare.

It once again looked like everyone else knew what was going on and he was left out of the loop. There would be some explaining to do later on!

Mrs. Longbottom's expression softened a little. "And he will accept your challenge?"

"He will if I make it official. It's almost new moon, and I have all the witnesses I need here." Raising his voice, Harry repeated with a louder voice, making the whole room echo with his words. "I hereby challenge Voldemort to a duel."

The sound of cheers and applauds in the room was almost deafening.

Ron couldn't believe his ears. What the hell? They were supposed to take care of Voldemort's troops and now Harry was throwing away his life for what? For revenge? "Are you insane?" he asked, his voice drowned by the catcalls and whistles.

"There will be no duel," Hermione said, leaning closer to him again. "Think about it, Ron. This isn't more than just another way to make him attack us."

Of course that kind of made sense, but Ron wasn't convinced. "Are you sure?" Well, refusing a challenge would make Voldemort look like a coward, so he had to react somehow, but would he really risk an attack when he could just walk to Harry and... risk everything.

Eyes widening, Ron turned to stare at Harry again. Seeing the small moue of displeasure on Harry's lips made him realize that Hermione had been absolutely right.

It was strange to watch things unfold and see behind what was shown on the surface. Ron could tell that Dumbledore and McGonagall weren't surprised by Harry's declaration, and neither was Snape who was still standing right behind Harry, as if offering silent support.

Ron realized Harry had known what would happen the moment they told him about Neville's disappearance. It made him slightly nauseous and he knew that would never be able to use anything
as cold bloodedly as this.

McGonagall stepped closer to Harry. "Are you sure you want to do this, Mr. Potter?" There was genuine worry behind her quiet, planned words.

"I'm old enough to issue a challenge, and it's the right time for it. Yes, I'm sure." Harry nodded.

"According to the laws about dueling, you have to be an adult to issue a challenge, and the most traditional time for one is when the moon has waned." Hermione whispered into Ron's ear. "It would probably be even better around Halloween, but I'm sure this will work as well."

Ron could only nod at that, remembering the stories great-aunt Tessie had told him when he'd been little. They hadn't exactly been happy fairy tales about baby crups and bunnies.

They had given him nightmares for weeks.

Mrs. Longbottom wasn't looking angry anymore, her expression full of grief. "And will you bring my grandson back to me?" She raised her hand when she saw the flicker of doubt in his eyes. "Even to be buried. I... would like to have him back."

Instead of an enraged old madam, there was only a grieving grandmother left, someone who hadn't been able to bury her son even when he was lost to her, forced to only visit the living shell of him and his wife at St. Mungo's.

It reminded Harry of that awful scene at the cemetery over three years ago, making his ears buzz. He didn't want to bring anyone's body home to be buried, he never wanted to attend another funeral. But he had no choice but to nod, "I will bring him back if that's humanly possible."

She acknowledged that with a nod of her own, clearly unable to say anything else.

Minerva McGonagall took the few steps that separated her from Mrs. Longbottom, and this time the elderly woman allowed her to lead her away, accepting the soft words without a scathing comment.

One of the older Ministry officials, one of the few who had survived Fudge's last attempt for glory, approached Harry. "Mr. Potter!"

"Yes?" Steeling himself for whatever the man had to say, Harry quirked an eyebrow.

The man gushed about his bravery for a moment, getting both approving nods and exasperated looks from the people standing nearby. Then he got to the point, explaining the intricacies of a formal challenge, relishing the details and droning on and on about it.

Harry listened, nodding politely every time the man looked at him.

He agreed to go to the Ministry for the paperwork, even though all the witnesses here were enough to make it formal already. He also agreed to make the challenge public, knowing that there would undoubtedly be yet another special edition of the Prophet later on today, describing this very moment to everyone.

The official made a few notes on a parchment and then insisted on shaking Harry's hand. "This is indeed a glorious day, Mr. Potter! People in our world will tell your story forever."

Harry waited until the man was gone to let out a laugh that was so sharp it could cut anyone standing close enough. "Yeah. The great story of Harry Potter." He didn't even see the way Ron and Hermione cringed at that. "None of the great tales have a happy ending, now do they?"
How the hell could anyone suggest his actions were heroic now that they were on a fast track towards death and destruction, and one of his oldest friends had just disappeared? It was so wrong he didn't have words to describe the wrongness.

He didn't want to be remembered, to become another Godric Gryffindor. It would suit him perfectly if no one even remembered his name in ten years. Maybe becoming a legend was someone's dream, but it definitely wasn't his. All he wanted was to live in peace.

Needing to get away from this, Harry retreated to the corner with his broom, going through the motions of clearing the twigs even though they weren't even ruffled. The others from his team joined him soon after, followed by Ron, Hermione and Blaise who were talking quietly about something Hermione had read.

Harry listened to the others half heartedly, smiling just a little as he heard some of his old team mates ribbing Malfoy. It sounded nice, like something they might have said to any other player back when it was all about Quidditch, and Malfoy's response was equally light.

Some of the banter sounded forced at first, but they were soon enough bickering with gusto.

It was easier to concentrate on this as if it was nothing more than a preparation for a game. Whatever idiocies of fame and fortune others might sprout sounded as inviting as the horrible slavery Voldemort handed out as a prize to those foolish enough to follow him.

Maybe a gilded cage, but it still had bars that would hold you prisoner.

He sighed. Wishing people wouldn't focus on him was rather stupid considering he had just made the announcement they had probably all waited for.

"You okay?" Sliding into the empty chair next to Harry's, Ron nudged him.

Harry just stared at him.

"Oh. Yeah, stupid question." Ron shrugged. "Sorry. I just mean... I know what you're doing and being a friend here, you know?"

"It's okay. And thanks." Not that it changed anything, but Harry was still glad Ron was trying. He had to be just as upset with the thing with Neville as he was.

"So... Now we have a plan." It wasn't a question. "Like a plan that actually works?"

"Yeah."

"Mm hmm." Ron nodded, trying to look like he actually knew what was going on.

Harry looked into the distance as if he was trying to see something that was beyond his grasp. "One day, people far smarter than I will look back and analyse our actions here. They'll probably see exactly what we did wrong and what should have been done instead. But..." He shrugged, gaze focusing on Ron again. "Right now, I can't think of anything I could have really done better."

"Yeah." There was nothing Ron could really say to that.

"I mean, challenging Voldemort years ago would have got one of us dead, most likely me, but Dumbledore was right. It's not enough to get rid of him anymore. If I die..."

Ron flinched, hand moving to his wand. "Don't say that!" The mere thought was making his skin
tingle unpleasantly.

"It's a possibility, Ron," Harry said. "Whatever happens to me, you'll all still fight to defeat the Death Eaters. It's not about him and me, it's about us and them."

It sounded unlikely to Ron. Surely their world would collapse if Harry... was lost now. He tried to imagine his father leading the troops with Dumbledore by his side, and to his astonishment it didn't seem as ridiculous as he'd thought.

Maybe they had all been changed by this.

"You don't think Voldemort will accept your challenge? Like... there will be no duel." Ron didn't know enough about the Dark Lord to make a guess either way, but somehow it didn't seem like he would abandon his plans and meet Harry alone somewhere.

Harry cocked his head, as if weighing whether to tell the whole truth or not. "No, I don't think he'll accept this challenge or come alone. I don't think he'll wait until I make it really official." He paused for a moment, the cold hard look creeping back into his eyes. "But I don't know if this war can ever really end without some kind of a confrontation between the two of us." The smile on his lips wasn't amused. "That's what everyone wants, right? The great hero and the great villain meeting alone."

As always, Ron shivered at Harry saying things like that about himself, but he couldn't really say he was wrong. "And you think this will work?" He asked. "I mean, I get the whole thing with us picking a fight and the challenge at the waning moon and all that crap, but... How can we be sure they'll really come?"

Casting a brief look at professor Trelawney who was sipping her tea on the other side of the room, Harry wondered if they should indeed have Snape brew a potion that would make her actually prove she could handle real Divinations. It was morally ambiguous, but extremely tempting.

"It will work. The Death Eaters will come."

Harry jumped, and then turned to look at Blaise who was smiling slightly, his blind eyes focused on nothing at all. "Are you sure?" He could remember the Slytherin's weird behavior from weeks back, but was still reluctant to believe he had the Sight.

"Yes." Blaise nodded, his unseeing gaze suddenly on Harry. "The Death Eaters will come."

The certainty in his voice was so compelling that Harry knew without doubts that their long wait was finally over.

"Part 23"

Harry couldn't help wishing he could grab a time turner and go back an hour or two just so that he could have a moment for himself and his thoughts.

All the long weeks of planning were coming to this; a few simple words from him that were more efficient in goading Voldemort into a fight than destroying his ancestral home had been. He'd known it for a long while that when the time arrived, they would have to move quickly. In a way it was the relief he'd expected.

Leaning his forehead against the window, he tried to tell himself that the feeling he was experiencing really was relief and not nausea.
It was all in place now, and the Death Eaters would come. They had all known that, some for weeks, some had known for years, and it had only been the question of when.

Now they knew.

Soon, the sun would set, revealing the darkness of the moonless night. It heralded the time of darker magic, the darkening time of the year only boosted that image, and Harry knew that with the challenge and the Ministry's evacuation to Hogsmeade, Voldemort could not stall anymore.

"Red caps... red caps... I can't remember how to destroy them!" Muttering frantically, Hermione grabbed another book, browsing through it with panic evident in every move. "Oh for... Who cares about red caps? I'm forgetting something important! Occamy!"

Harry listened to her mumble to herself, finding her last moment reading almost relaxing. It had been like this every time they had an exam; Hermione panicking even though she knew all the books by heart.

The fact that she was now hyperventilating and reaching out for yet another book was familiar, just like Ron's idle lazing with a fizzy drink and a chunk of chocolate in front of him on the table.

They all dealt with the waiting their own way.

Sighing, Harry turned around to face the room. They wouldn't have to wait for long now that they knew the Death Eaters were coming.

He didn't want to stand here and contemplate anymore; things had moved so far from the realm of what ifs that he could just sit back and do nothing and it wouldn't change a thing. They had made all the preparations just the way they had planned ages ago.

"I think I'll go to bed." Ron stood up, ignoring the chocolate on the table. He looked slightly green, as if the idea of sitting here and drowning his worries in sweets was making him sick.

"Good idea." Nodding slightly, Harry added, "See you in the morning."

His words made Ron look even greener. "Yeah, right..." Ron took a few steps towards the door, and then stopped, glancing at Malfoy. "So, you coming or not?"

Draco had been busying with his broom, fussing over it unnecessarily as if any action was better than waiting. He looked a bit surprised at the invitation, but simply nodded, resting his broom against the wall and then joining Weasley on his way up.

No one in the living room said a word.

Harry could see that the others were ready to leave as well, Sirius leaning his head against Remus' shoulder, muttering soft words that would soon turn into caresses and Hermione gathering a few books to take to her bedroom.

He waited in silence as they got ready to leave the room, nodding his good nights and hugging Sirius tight. Then he was left alone, staring into the few candles Hermione had lit -- more out of habit than any real need -- for a moment before extinguishing the flames.

It had been a long day, and the evening had felt even longer with all the unsaid things hanging between them. Fortunately no one had been willing to talk about the fact that this could be the last evening they spent together like this, everyone concentrating on the moment.
Harry hadn't been surprised when Snape hadn't stayed, preferring to finish with his potions before retiring for the night.

Probably hoping that would avoid him from being a part of any emotional outbursts.

Sighing, Harry finally turned away from the fireplace and walked upstairs, his feet feeling heavy. Maybe it had been good Snape had chosen not to join the somber group in the living room; that way no one had been tempted to relieve the tension with angry words. Though Harry doubted anyone would have wanted to get into a fight tonight. They all knew there'd be plenty of that tomorrow.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar, showing that there was no one else up and about. Not that Harry had expected anyone to linger with their ablutions, especially since the sounds coming from behind Ron's door told him that both he and Draco were busy with something else.

He didn't waste extra time on his own evening routines either.

Snape was already sitting on the bed, a towel in his lap as he was working a familiar looking potion on his skin, covering his Dark Mark with a wince. "Potter."

Squinting his eyes with suspicion, Harry wondered if Snape had accidentally scrubbed the remains of the barrier potion off earlier or if he had tried to confirm the thing Blaise Zabini had already stated. It would be so like Snape to trust no one with things that really mattered.

He had no idea how the link between Snape and the Dark Lord worked, and was pretty sure he didn't want to know.

"Maybe after tomorrow you won't need that anymore," he muttered quietly, gesturing at the bottle half full of the green salve sitting on the table.

Snape refused to comment on the stupidity of Harry's words. They had always intended to throw everything they had at Voldemort on the day of the battle, and if they failed to defeat him tomorrow, it was most likely it meant the Dark Lord won. One way or the other, he would never have to use the barrier potion shielding the Dark Mark again; the potion would either become redundant or he would be dead.

He wasn't going to say that out loud either, unwilling to approach the subject of his own mortality, knowing all too well how Harry would react to such musings. "Maybe."

"They really are coming."

"Yes."

Harry nodded. No one had really doubted it, not when Blaise had said it, not when the long-eared owl had arrived bringing news from Hagrid about strange weather phenomena preventing him from traveling across the Channel, not when the small attacks had stopped as if all the Death Eaters had vanished somewhere.

Most likely gathering in their stronghold, just like people had been moving to Hogwarts and Hogsmeade these past two days.

Harry walked quietly to sit next to Snape. Waiting until he was finished with the potion, Harry leaned against him, needing the contact.

Neither said a word as Snape wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him closer. They simply sat there for a long time.
It was getting darker outside, even though it was still bright enough to see without a magical light or candles. Yawning, Harry toed his socks off and then squirmed out of his robes before crawling under the blankets.

He smiled slightly as Snape cast a pointed look at the clothes he'd abandoned on the floor before standing up and slowly undressing himself.

"Snape?" Harry didn't know why this felt even more difficult than that first time he'd ever really talked to Snape about things. They hadn't been lovers then, not even friends -- mutual hate was probably the best way to describe what they shared -- and still he didn't know how to say this. "May I ask you something?"

Knowing all too well that this would be extremely emotional, Snape suppressed a sigh and nodded curtly. He had been expecting something like this, and the fact that Harry was asking him in private and not in front of others was a small blessing.

"What do you want to do afterwards? I mean... After. If we survive." It was something Harry hadn't dared to ask before. He barely managed to think about the future himself, unable to really contemplate a time he wouldn't have to worry about everything.

He usually just imagined a peaceful life, happily thinking about utter boredom.

Snape blinked. This wasn't what he'd expected. He couldn't answer it right away, pondering the matter as he folded his robes over a chair. For years now, life had been about fighting Voldemort and trying to defeat him. He had no hopes or dreams beyond that.

Surviving? It had always been about that. Even when he'd risked his life for their cause he'd never taken unnecessary chances. Not before Harry Potter had wormed his way to his life. How absurd he had never considered this; had never believed he really deserved a life after the battles against the Death Eaters.

"I don't know."

The perfect life had always meant the small rooms in the Slytherin dungeons. He knew Albus would take him back if they survived the war and that he could resume his position as the Potions professor and live the rest of his life in Hogwarts, terrifying children and brewing his potions in peace.

He realized the thought wasn't as pleasing as he might have imagined.

It was strange to contemplate the future like this. "I guess... It would be a good time to retire." No more children to herd, no more idiots to teach. That would certainly be wonderful. "I could find a small house somewhere far away from people."

The cottage they had stayed in didn't seem too far from his dream.

He didn't want to spend a lot of energy imagining a future that might not be, but the possibility of concentrating on new potions and maybe even tutoring those who weren't completely inept in his line of work was exhilarating. His life that he would choose for himself, not something he had to do out of duty. It was almost too much to even contemplate.

Harry closed his eyes. Peace and quiet sounded like bliss to him. "That sounds perfect." His chest ached with dozens of things he wanted to ask, but his throat couldn't squeeze out the words.

He didn't want to look at Snape. It was better just to lie here and imagine for just a little while that they were actually planning a future together.
"No, Potter, that's a simple thought. Perfection would require house elves there to take care of the mess you'd undoubtedly create."

Opening his eyes in shock, Harry could only stare. Then he had to blink hard. "Oh."

There was nothing on Snape's face to indicate he even acknowledged the enormity of what he had just said, but Harry was sure he hadn't just said that out loud to please him, or as an unconscious comment about Harry's robes on the floor.

While Snape's expression was unreadable, his gaze was open, shining with a myriad of emotions, none of which were malicious. The usual half sarcastic self-mocking glint was gone, replaced by something quite incomprehensible.

Harry smiled a bit wobbly, his throat squeezing shut, and it was a relief to have Snape take that step forward and tilt Harry's jaw so that he could easily kiss him. It was a gentle brush of lips that left Harry breathless.

It was always unwise to make assumptions like this, but Snape was certain of the one he'd just made. Harry had made it all too clear more than once that he wanted this, and considered -- or at least hoped -- their arrangement was permanent.

He'd been right when he'd thought all this was far from being innocent and harmless. No matter how foolishly Gryffindor Harry was with his straightforwardness, the things were far more dangerous than any games Snape had ever played.

"I'd like that," Harry managed to whisper. "I'd like that a lot." Images of sharing such a simple life with Snape filled his mind, full of memories from their stay at the cottage, where it had been so easy to just be and maybe do some chores and forget all about the world that hungered for his presence.

It was better than anything he could dream of.

"Yes, maybe then I would actually find my socks," Snape muttered, gesturing at his bare feet as if to remind Harry of the earlier discussion about laundry.

He slid between the sheets, trying to find a comfortable position even as Harry wriggled closer to him as usual, smirking as Harry let out a loud yelp as their feet collided.

"Cold feet!" Harry muttered, knowing all too well that Snape wasn't at all sympathetic to his complaints.

Letting out a snort, Snape endured the squirming and protests and waited for Harry to settle down and melt against him as he did every single night.

Snape wasn't certain what made this so addictive. It wasn't the way Harry touched him or arched against him, naked and needing more. It wasn't the frantic blur of torn robes and drive towards completion.

Snuggling even closer to him, Harry kissed his neck and then made snuffling sounds, burying his nose to his skin.

There was no need for anything more, the silent evening lulling both into mellow drowsiness.

Snape's hand pushed its way beneath Harry's T-shirt, making slow, lazy circles on his back. He liked the simple touch, enjoying the pleased murmurs from Harry as well.
This was like most things with Harry; an embrace he offered willingly, even eagerly, not lying to himself about its purpose anymore. It wasn't necessary to think about things he could give to Harry. He shared the pleasure of this simple touch.

Harry tightened his arm around Snape.

He didn't want to think beyond this moment, not even to fantasize about the future. He definitely didn't want to think of this as goodbye.

Murmuring a few soft sounds that formed no real words, he pressed a kiss against Snape's skin again, not wanting to blurt out any emotional phrases or promises.

He doubted they could really add to this moment.

Harry felt a soft brush of lips against his temple and smiled. "Is this Slytherin emotionalism?" he murmured quietly, unable to resist teasing Snape.

"I do hope so. It would be extremely disappointing to have your idiotic traits to start rubbing off on me." Snape's voice was too mellow for the words, but he didn't seem to care about that now. "Go to sleep."

"Okay." It wouldn't be that simple, but Harry didn't want to waste any more time on words that in the end meant nothing.

He rested his head on Snape's shoulder, relaxing even more under his touch, smiling as Snape's hand slowly moved across his back.

Tomorrow would dawn soon enough, even though nighttime hadn't really fallen yet. Everywhere in Hogsmeade, people were now getting ready to fight, some going through strategies and plans one last time, some simply enjoying the presence of their loved ones.

There had been other fights, other battles, but inside, Harry knew this would be the battle. Hopefully the last one. They would not surrender, would not stop until Voldemort was defeated for good.

People would die. It was quite probable that he would die as well, and though facing the Dark Lord was the most dangerous thing he could think of, going to the Malfoy Mansion wouldn't be much safer.

It was far worse to think about that than it was to think about dying himself.

Harry listened to Snape breathe, refusing to waste this moment on contemplating death. This was yet again one of those good moments, perfection that would be etched in his mind for as long as he would live. It could be only a matter of hours, it could be for decades, but this one moment would remain there.

He liked the idea; it was almost like the happy ending everyone always wanted, even though the endings in life were rarely happy. Inside this room he had everything he could ever desire and for someone who'd never got what he really wanted, that was happiness beyond measure.

Determined to hold onto it for a while longer, he closed his eyes.

Part 24

Harry was awake at the brink of dawn.
He squeezed his eyes shut after one glance at the window. It wasn't bright enough for him to get up, but he didn't feel sleepy anymore. Maybe it would be the best for him to just lie here and enjoy the soft sounds of Snape breathing.

Realization hit him a moment later, driving all thoughts of relaxation out of his mind.

This was the day they had all been waiting for. The sunrise was a sign, the dawn of the battle. All the preparations they had made, all the years they had plotted and planned and suffered had led them to this day.

His first thought was to crawl under the blankets and never come out again, but after a few breaths he let go of the panic, knowing that while it was normal, it wouldn't change anything.

He was going to have to get up and do his duty, so that maybe some day soon he would have the luxury of spending the whole day in bed without worrying about the Order or their world or anything.

Sighing, he pushed the blankets away, only then noticing that Snape was awake as well. "Morning."

"Yes, it is." Not bothering with the niceties, Snape sat up. "We should get ready."

Harry nodded, knowing that any other words would simply make him want to stay in bed for longer. "Yeah."

They went through their morning routines quietly, sharing the bathroom under the pretense of saving time, neither commenting on the quiet companionship. Harry finished his ablutions first, dressing up and then waiting for Snape as the man spread the familiar potion on his Dark Mark, hopefully for the last time.

The others were already up, and Sirius and Remus were getting ready to leave with Hermione, their operation the first action planned for the day.

Harry half wished they had left already, wondering just how many teary goodbyes he could deal with today. He was pleasantly surprised when Sirius enfolded him into a bear hug, followed by a few pats in the back and his eternal Gryffindor optimism as he muttered, "We'll deal with the creepy crawlies and then come and watch you kick Voldemort's arse."

After a few similar words from both Remus and Hermione, Harry padded into the kitchen, not wishing to watch them leave.

Sirius' false cheer dropped from his face immediately.

"So are we ready?" Looking from Sirius to Hermione, Remus finally gestured at the door. "Let's go then." There was nothing more to do, really.

"I'm ready," Hermione muttered, tucking the slim Scamander book into her pocket just in case she needed it.

"Snape." Barking the name out, Sirius looked at the man from the doorway, ignoring the worried looks Remus was casting at him. "Wait a moment."

Snape raised an eyebrow, wondering what on earth would the mutt have to say to him.

Sirius stared at Snape, for once his gaze devoid of the smallest hint of resentment. "If I don't come back, make sure he will be all right." It was half a plea, half a command.
"Of course."

Taking a deep breath, Sirius nodded. That would be good enough. He knew that Snape was a complete bastard, but for some reason he could be trusted with this. "But if I do come back..." His voice deepened into a growl.

"You will still hate me as much as ever. Yes, Black, that is quite obvious and the feeling is completely mutual." Snape sneered. In time, he might be able to tolerate the mutt's presence, but the truth was that the less time they spent in the same village the better.

He turned away, not watching the three Gryffindors leave.

No one seemed to have any appetite that morning -- even Ron who had slept longer than usual was just nibbling his toast -- but they all ate anyway, not knowing when they might have the chance to eat the next time. No one mentioned the fact that this might be their last meal either.

Everyone in Hogsmeade seemed to be ready, people milling around in the streets, waiting. When Harry and his friends finally emerged from their house, no one said a word, but it was clear what they had been waiting for. United, the army of Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix made their way towards Hogwarts.

Eppy and Bob stood at the doorway, watching the witches and wizards pass by.

There was a crowd waiting at the Great Hall, the professors getting ready to join the fight. Small groups were forming here and there; the different task forces preparing to leave as soon as everyone was present.

Arabella Figg nodded briefly at Harry before going to Snape, her face grim. Everyone knew that their mission to the Malfoy Mansion would be the most dangerous assignment, not counting the main force staying to defend Hogwarts of course.

Harry simply nodded back at her.

This was it. Funny how he felt none of the things he'd always thought he would as he watched people get ready for the fight. His mind was filled with a strange combination of exhilaration, relief and utter terror, forming a loop that didn't allow any emotion to gain dominance over the others.

He looked at his friends, smiling a little as he saw Draco adjust his flying robes. Still a Slytherin to the core, his new black robes lined with silver and green, looking perfectly groomed even now.

Next to him, Ron was pulling off one of his boots and wriggling his toes, looking really pale. Harry sighed. He wished he could be there with his friends, but knew that in the end, he'd just be in the way in the melee. It was best to stay out of the crossfire and look for his real enemy, no matter how uncomfortable the idea felt.

Flying was what he did best.

Harry watched Parvati Patil tie her long hair into a ponytail. It was a good precaution; even Draco had combed his hair back again, the hairgel making it look like a slick blond helmet covering his head.

Of course Snape's only concession to the situation was to push some of the greasy locks behind his ears.

"Are you ready?" Finishing with his robes, Draco looked at Harry. "We should get in the air before
the Death Eaters arrive." His voice was tight. Somewhere amongst the masked figures was his own father, surrounded by people Draco had known all his life.

Fastening the gloves tight, Harry nodded. What else could he do; say that he would probably never be ready for this and would prefer to run and hide?

He wasn't even sure that was true anymore.

"Good." Draco brushed his hand down his front, adjusting the robes one more time. Then he grabbed his broom. Most of their small team was already outside, waiting for them to join them. There was really nothing left for him here.

Except for one thing.

The broom clattered against the flagstones as Draco twirled around. Weasley didn't even seem surprised by the sudden movement and allowed himself to be pulled into a fierce embrace. It felt as natural as breathing, the slender figure against him, the strong hands holding him tight. Both knew that everyone was watching, but neither really cared. If someone wanted to make comments about them, they could just go ahead.

There was an eerie silence in the room.

Ron let everything else fade away as Malfoy's hand touched the back of his head and guided him into a hungry kiss. He was terrified of what lay ahead, suddenly realizing this could well be the last time for everything.

What a stupid moment to admit to himself that maybe he really didn't hate Draco Malfoy anymore. That maybe shagging and fighting and then shagging again sounded better than dying or losing people he didn't hate. He still didn't like Malfoy, but damn it, he didn't want to see him dead!

And he definitely didn't want to lose his own life either.

Closing his eyes, Draco let his lips move against Weasley's, devouring his mouth. Then he let go, stepping back before the need to melt against Weasley could override his mind. "Accio Nimbus!"

As soon as the broom jumped to his hand, he turned around and walked out of the Great Hall without looking back.

Leaving Ron stare after him with a tight expression on his face.

It took a moment for everyone standing nearby to shake off the shock and continue with their preparations. Bill Weasley was muttering softly from under his breath as he shoved his wand into the holster on his belt, his expression telling everyone that he was definitely going to have a long discussion with his little brother later on.

"What a lovely display."

Harry smiled a little at the dry voice. He didn't need to look up to know that Snape was standing right next to him. "Yes. I thought so too." The snort that his words produced was exactly what he'd expected. "Is your group ready?"

"Yes. They're ready to leave." Snape nodded.

The panic flooding over Harry was unexpected. He'd thought he would be able to deal with this, considering how calm he'd felt all day, but now that the time to go was finally here, he realized he
was far from ready. Then as soon as the terror had come, it was gone, buried beneath the knowledge that ready or not, this had to be done now. Only after defeating Voldemort could there ever be the peace he so desperately craved.

"Then you go in there, take care of the business and get out of there. Burn the place down if you have to, just make sure there will be nothing there to aid Voldemort's people ever again." He was glad Draco wasn't there to hear him say it.

There was another nod.

Harry didn't know what else to say; all the platitudes he could come up with sounded stupid and anything personal would surely choke him.

"Harry." It came out calmly. Only the fire in the dark gaze told about Snape's inner turmoil.

Swallowing down the wobbly grin that threatened to spread on his face, Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yes?" He knew there wouldn't be any earth shattering goodbyes, not in public, but damn it, Snape could have chosen another moment to call him by his first name.

Snape stared at him for a moment, then raised his hand to touch Harry's arm, a quick brush of fingers against the thick flying robes. "Don't get killed."

He resented leaving Harry like this; the idiot would be in more danger than ever and he wouldn't be there to protect him.

"I'll try not to," Harry said.

"Good." It was really all Snape could ask.

Harry looked at Snape, knowing all too well that this could be the last time he ever saw the man. All the things they had said last night, all the unsaid promises, and there was still so much he wanted Snape to know. So many things he wanted to do or say and now time had ran out and all they had was this. "Snape, I..."

He couldn't finish the sentence, already losing the grip he had on all his emotions, the ache and the nervous clenching in his stomach driving the calm away.

He couldn't do this now.

"Go!" Drawing the detachment around himself like a cloak, Harry copied Snape's gesture, his fingers brushing against Snape's sleeve. "I'll see you when this is all over."

This was not the time for confessions. He wished there would be a chance to make them later on, when it really would be over and he wouldn't have to think about fighting and dying.

There were no other words, no other touches. With one last look, Snape turned around, his robes billowing. Harry refused to watch him go, fearing he couldn't just let him walk away if he did.

People were leaving. The small groups that were to attack the stronger manors and mansions around their world were gathering outside, letting portkeys hurl them to their destinations. Those who would spread out on the grounds or go to the Forbidden Forest were already on their way, those who would stay closer to the castle and protect it with their lives were saying their goodbyes.

Harry walked slowly through the corridors, gazing at the empty paintings on the walls. Everyone was gone. The people in the paintings and the ghosts had all traveled to places where they could see
outside, crowding the windowed areas.

He could hear the sound of children running and laughing somewhere deep inside the castle, and wondered if his mind was playing tricks on him. There should be no one here yet, the school term starting weeks from now. If the school still stood then.

Steeling himself against the need to go and check it out, Harry went on towards the main entry. The school was still Dumbledore's responsibility.

The world outside was his.

Right inside the great doors leading to the courtyard stood a man with a small form of a fluffy cat sitting next to him. He was holding a pitchfork.

Harry said nothing as he passed him by, barely noticing the glare Filch cast at him. Yes. Everyone was ready.

The purebloods, the Muggleborns, the Squibs. The members of the Order standing side by side with Aurors, the professors with youngsters who had barely finished school. All of them making a stand here, at the heart of their world.

They would all die before they let Voldemort take over. Everyone knew that, most probably trying very hard not to think about the fact that the battle would indeed claim lives. Still, they were standing here, standing and fighting. No one would ever again have to face these horrors if they succeeded in their task of ridding the world of the Dark Lord and his followers.

Harry took a deep breath. All the games and the playacting had grated on his nerves for months, but this here, this group of people getting ready to defend their world, this was right. It wasn't about one man being a hero, it was about all of them doing what they had to do.

That was the one thought he held on to as his steps carried him over the threshold, out of Hogwarts and its protective walls into the battlefield.

Outside, the sun was almost reaching its zenith.

It was a beautiful day.

Part 25

"Harry."

"Harry Potter!"

Nodding to everyone who called out his name, Harry walked to the small group standing with their brooms ready. The gesture was instinctive and needed no extra thought.

This time the greetings and the attention weren't unfounded; they were really standing here as his army and he was going to lead them into battle. No matter how many people called out his name, he acknowledged them and then moved on.

Draco Malfoy grinned at him, his expression strangely feral. "Harry." There was the slightest incline of his head.

Harry responded in kind. "Draco." He stopped for a moment to clasp the offered hand, needing this
brief moment of contact.

He spent a similar moment with everyone in his group of the 'wizarding air force', saying back names no matter how he was called. Most of the people called him Harry or Potter, but to the Gryffindors, he was 'captain'. The smiles accompanying the title were just as feral as Draco's had been.

The smile on Harry's lips was probably the same.

Stepping in front of George who was adjusting the gloves the same way both he and his twin had always fussed with them before a game, Harry nodded at him in greeting before saying quietly, "Be careful out there. No unnecessary heroics."

"Wouldn't dream of anything like that." The smirk on George's face was full of mischief. "No, sir!"

Harry shook his head, clasping his hand on George's shoulder. "I mean it. No stupid stunts out there, guys. Both of you." Seeing the way George's eyes widened at that, he added. "Do I make myself clear?"

Not even bothering to hide his amazement, George nodded. "Yeah. We'll be careful. You got my word for it. Wouldn't want to disappoint mum by killing us both."

"Good." Squeezing slightly with his hand before letting go of his friend, Harry turned his back to George and then moved to exchange a few words with Oliver Wood.

When they were finished with the final greetings, Harry made a small gesture, and they all mounted their brooms. Without really thinking about it, they had already taken the group formation on the ground, ready to start flying together.

Without a word, Harry kicked himself up in the air.

Everything was so much more coherent from up high, and Harry could see clearly the different parts of the army moving around the grounds. Those who were still lingering close to the castle stared at him, and he wondered if they expected him to say something. Maybe give a speech of the importance of this day of all days and remind them of what they were fighting for. Act like their great hero and cheer them all.

As much as he thought that they all deserved to have a good leader, someone who could inspire them to do great things, there were no words. He couldn't think of anything uplifting or heroic to say. Didn't know how to take away peoples' fear for he was scared as hell himself.

Harry looked at his airborne taskforce, meeting somber gazes and knowing they felt just like he did. "Let's make sure this really is the final battle."

He wasn't prepared with the way his voice thundered with the force of a *sonorus*, just as he wasn't prepared for the strong gust of wind that lifted him higher in the sky than he'd planned to fly. For a moment he raised above Hogwarts, circling the Gryffindor Tower before retaking his position as the leader of their flying squadron.

His robes fluttered wildly in the wind like a banner.

Down on the ground, people cheered at the sight, calling out his name and waving their wands in the air.

Ignoring the slight annoyance he felt at the clearly magical wind and the old man who had so
obviously conjured it up, Harry set his gaze on the horizon and then started the journey towards the gates as if he'd just spotted the Snitch there.

Determined, with nothing else in the whole world to distract him from his goal.

They were so used to the waiting, it was almost unreal when Madam Hooch called out, "I think I can see them!"

Even after Blaise's prophetic words and the assurances that Voldemort would indeed have no choice but to attack, Harry had to swallow as he saw the Death Eaters in the horizon.

Wiping her sweaty palms on her robes one by one, Angelina stared into the distance. "I didn't realize there'd be so many of them..."

Harry kept his gaze on the horizon as well, knowing that it was no illusion. The Death Eaters were really a small army now, their number probably about as great as the joined forces standing against them. Even more, the masks and the robes and the occasional scythe he could see even from here gave the Death Eaters the advance of fear.

"All right then. Let's head back. Break the formation!" Harry called out, his hand repeating his orders in the silent gestures as if this was indeed a game.

His troops followed his order immediately.

Hermione raised a handkerchief to her face, trying to keep from coughing even as the acrid smoke made her eyes burn.

"Are you all right?"

Nodding at Remus' question, she finished with her incantation and released yet another charm at the warehouse filled with jars and bundles of dead creatures. The place was somewhat fire resistant, and it took all her concentration to make the fire charms work.

She was just glad she'd been appointed to this task instead of actually going after the living creatures.

There had been relatively little actual fighting, with only a few wizards left to defend the compound. Most had been getting ready with carts and carriages filled with barrels full of something that had exploded with the first fire charms, leaving only one masked Death Eater to try to ward the Order away.

Hermione had been there to see him fall.

Some of the huge pens had been empty, but there were still dark creatures caged in the compound, and Hermione didn't ask Remus what was happening to them. She knew some of them were at least half sentient, and no matter how she told herself this was war, she didn't want to know.

"We're almost finished here," Sirius yelled as he approached them, coughing at the smoke. It was fairly obvious why he wasn't in his Animagus form.

Remus wiped a hand over his sooty brow and nodded. "Yes. After we're certain we've destroyed everything, we should get back to Hogwarts!"

Muttering out another fire charm, ignoring the high pitched squeal that came from somewhere inside
one of the warehouses, Hermione tried not to think about the fact that this was only the beginning.

Now that the waiting was finally over, it was all too clear what they would do.

Harry swept over the yard, dismayed by the completely inappropriate exhilaration that always accompanied him when he was flying. The familiar landmarks could almost make this feel like a Quidditch match, though now his gaze was trained on larger targets than the snitch, the silent figure next to him an ally and not an adversary.

It was strange; three Seekers in the air together, forming a small group that was followed by others. He kept his gaze down on the ground, trying to concentrate on the fight even as his instincts were screaming to him about Draco hovering somewhere to his left and Laura Madley flying right behind him.

There had been a moment of hesitation, an oppressive feeling in the very air he was soaring through, as the first attack had come, aimed at the protective barriers guarding the school.

Then it had become easier to breathe again, as the wards around Hogwarts grounds had failed, Voldemort's first victory won hard enough to actually seem like real work instead of Dumbledore letting go and then allowing the dark robed masses to swarm through the gates.

Green sparks erupted here and there below, as the most eager Death Eaters flung the death curse without hesitations. Most of the Order members seemed to work on less malevolent curses, but there were those who were answering darkness with darkness, and they weren't all older Aurors who had already seen too much death.

Standing next to the main entrance of Hogwarts, side by side with the Headmaster, professor McGonagall was holding her ground, her blue gaze burning with rage as she aimed curses at the small group of Death Eaters who had somehow managed to get past all the wards and were now trying to invade the castle itself.

Harry shivered as he saw her fling the familiar hex at the approaching Death Eater, dropping the masked figure with two simple words.

He remembered what Snape had said about rescuing her from the Malfoy Mansion and how she had used non lethal force to subdue her torturers. There was no sign of such consideration now.

"Avada Kedavra!" Her voice rang cool over the distance, as if she was chastising a student who was late from class.

Harry couldn't really blame her.

Seeing that everything was going more or less as planned, he flew higher, dodging a few stray curses flung at him. He couldn't get involved with the fighting yet, no matter how a part of him was screaming at him to get down there and do something. His job was to aid and assist if he could and keep an eye on the Death Eaters so he could find his real foe.

It would be so much easier if he still had his Invisibility Cloak and he could just fly around as he pleased and try to target Voldemort without the risk of being killed. Then the stray thought was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

He'd totally forgotten about the whole cloak, and it was now too late to do anything about it. He couldn't focus on what he couldn't change right now. Gaze sweeping over the mayhem down below,
he tried to spot Voldemort, hoping it would all be over soon.

That would be the real battle, even though the larger one was probably just as important for the safety of their world. But him facing Voldemort would be the chance to end this all for good, that was his part in all this, like it was for some to stand firm on the ground and for others to destroy the Dark Lord's strongholds.

No matter what happened afterwards, that wouldn't be of his concern. This was the fight he intended to win, and the rest was someone else's problem.

Swooping down in a graceful arch, he almost laughed out loud. How insane was it to think of something like that right now?

Then again, there were probably more insane things in the world.

Since most of the people on his team were members of the Order, Snape had no problems ordering them to spread out across the Mansion. His curt words about secret cupboards and vaults weren't questioned; even the few Aurors went where he directed.

It was highly satisfying.

They had to hurry to secure the place, for who knew just when the first Death Eaters tugged tail and ran from the battlefield. Snape sent the least experienced witches and wizards to herd out the house elves and some of the Aurors to place Narcissa Malfoy under arrest. He didn't want to be forced to kill Draco's mother, remembering how she had never been an enemy, not during their school years, or the dark nightmare following them.

Waving the young Order members who were hovering behind him to go and check the library and the huge ballroom, Snape took a detour to the small sitting room before he could go to see the place he knew the best.

Some things were too private to be handed to others. Snape had to fight the urge to look over his shoulder as he walked to the chest hidden in plain sight and then poured acidic potion over the documents inside without bothering to take a look.

He was destroying the evidence of a past he wished he could evaporate as easily, not hesitating for a moment. Nothing good would come to those who might survive and even repent their actions if the parchments were ever found by the Ministry.

It wasn't merely self defense; he was protecting his Slytherins as well.

A soft whisper of a sound from the doorway made Snape retreat to the shadows. The heavy velvet curtains offered a good place to hide.

He watched quietly as a barely visible human form slipped into the room with only a soft rustling of expensive robes heralding its approach.

There had been a time when he had known every single person who might have appeared in this house from the way they walked, the tilt of the head, the scent. Small gestures under the hooded robes and the masks screamed out identities better than anything.

Sense memory kicked in as the newcomer closed the door, the gust of air sending a hint of a familiar fragrance towards Snape. One of his old concoctions, the expensive ingredients a proof it was made
"for only one person, the function of the potion no more sinister than a simple perfume."

He held his wand tighter and stepped away from the shadows. He knew exactly who this was and couldn't hex her from behind.

"Narcissa." Snape greeted the blond woman with a curt nod.

The robed figure wavered for a moment before stilling. Turning around, Narcissa Malfoy smiled coldly. "I should have known they would send you here." Her posture was tense, but she wasn't holding her wand.

Snape remembered how she had always been the one to plot behind the scenes at school, using her mind to push others forward and then watch events unfold. If only Lucius and Voldemort hadn't been so eager to consider most women as a mere necessity to breed, Narcissa would have made a far more formidable enemy than her husband could ever be.

"Have you come to kill me then?" Still not showing any sign of fear, Narcissa spread her arms a little. "Go ahead. We both know you will never take me alive to Azkaban."

"I'm not here for that. We came here for the house and you're simply a bonus." Snape didn't believe the faint shock spreading to Narcissa's face, the expression almost as calculated as that on Draco's face sometimes. "Don't. Don't force me to destroy both you and that portkey you're so innocently reaching for."

Narcissa stilled completely, her hand still too far from the vase she was trying to grab. "You always were too clever for your own good, Severus." Her gaze was cold. "What are you waiting for? I said you'll never take me alive."

There was a moment of silence as Snape stared at her. Then he shook his head. "I don't want to kill you, Narcissa."

It didn't convince her. "Oh really?" She squinted her eyes and searched his face for any signs of deception. Seeing he actually meant what he was saying, she let out an amused laughter. "Dear Merlin! Sentimentality always was your greatest flaw, Severus. You would spare me for old times' sake?"

"No. But I will spare you for the sake of your son. Remember him, Narcissa?"

Snape's words made her stop laughing.

There was a hint of regret on Narcissa Malfoy's face that disappeared a moment later. She nodded ever so slightly, as if really trying to remember the existence of her only child. "Like I said, Severus. You're a sentimental fool."

Snape knew what would happen next, but he made no movement to stop her. Keeping his wand pointed at her, he watched her spin around and grab the glass vase perched on the shelf.

He never knew if the sound of Draco's name he heard really came from Narcissa as she disappeared through the portkey or if it was simply a figment of his own imagination. He preferred thinking she had said it herself. It would be the one good memory he could ever offer the boy. If they both survived this.

Not bothering to stay for longer, Snape turned back to the door.

"Everything all right?" Arabella panted as she hurried towards Snape with a small group of the Order
members in tow. "I thought I heard voices here."

Snape didn't have to think about it twice. "Just a house elf." The sneer on his face was perfectly formed. "There's nothing in here that would interest us. We should move on."

"Good. Let's go."

The small group of witches and wizards spread out, sneaking through the corridor with their wands drawn.

Floor by floor they searched through the Mansion. The Aurors concentrated on the vault they had found on the ground floor, others inspecting the upper floors.

Snape waited long enough to see that there would be no real problems facing the team and then went down to the basement. The two wizards and the witch following him seemed to almost swoon as they entered the dark corridor, feeling the dark magic all around them. He ignored the familiar feeling.

They still had a lot to do here.

Watching with satisfaction as the people following him actually recognized most of the wards around him, Snape left the three to work with the storage areas and went on alone. He knew what lay ahead and company would only hinder him now.

"Lumos." Not apprehensive about the dark, he still preferred lots of light around him in this place of all places where memories of death and suffering echoed in every footstep and his own past was tangible all around him. It was appropriate that this would be his part in this battle, and he was more than ready to destroy the evil that lingered here and make sure no one else would ever again have to face it.

Focusing a little too strongly on the people down below, Draco allowed himself to be drawn to a fight that had erupted between a group of some of the younger Order members and Death Eaters, noting only too late that his decision had pulled him away from the safety of the flying group.

He tried to fly away as soon as it was clear that their people could hold well against the Death Eaters, but then there had been others, stronger in magic, and he'd been forced to concentrate all his attention on staying alive.

"Fuck!" Apparently Weasley's crude vocabulary had rubbed off on Draco after all. He fought hard to hold his broom steady as the masked figure down below aimed more hexes at him.

Swearing didn't really help, but it did make him feel a bit better as his broom bucked as if it was alive and resented the one riding it.

Draco squeezed his thighs tighter together around the broom, his right hand trying to aim his wand even though it was almost impossible to really focus in the assault. The Death Eater down below was skilled, maybe too powerful for him.

Grinding his teeth together, Draco forced his broom to obey him, managing just barely to aim the next hex.

Before he could fling a curse at the masked man, the Death Eater pushed back his hood, revealing a shock of silver-blond hair with an arrogant practiced gesture.
"No..." It was just a whisper. Draco didn't let go of his wand, but he felt utterly nerveless anyway.

He had known this would happen. In his nightmares, he had faced the man on the battlefield over and over again. All those dreams had left him completely empty.

It felt even worse in reality.

His whole existence had been based on his family, the Malfoys, who had sent their sons to the first class taught by Salazar Slytherin when he and the other three had founded Hogwarts. Their blood had remained nearly pure throughout the centuries, dictating the traditions they followed with pride.

Nothing had ever mattered to him more than the family line; the unbroken chain uniting the first Malfoys to him. The line which would one day bind his children to the traditions as well. That was what had been taught to him, and he still believed in those teachings.

Blood meant everything.

Lucius Malfoy yelled, "Come on down, Draco. It's useless to fight." His tone was as haughty as ever.

Not bothering to reply, Draco flicked his wand and sent a well aimed cruciatus at his father. Whatever hesitation he'd felt earlier was now gone; his father had chosen his path, and so had he. His dreams had been filled with foolish emotionalism and subconscious memories from his childhood.

He wasn't that child anymore.

He was a Malfoy, proud of it. And he was not going to listen to someone who killed other purebloods because an insane Mudblood ordered him to.

Holding onto the anger that had been simmering inside ever since he'd fought Aurors who thought his name described sinister insanity, he pointed his wand at his father again.

The curse didn't make Lucius even flinch. He muttered something, the air around him shimmering. Then he raised his wand.

Draco knew what would come next. His father wouldn't waste his time now. Any other time, there would have been curses of pain and humiliation, the two lesser Unforgivables flung at him for hours until death came as a relief. This time, there would be two words and green sparks and with shock, Draco realized it was quite possible he wouldn't survive the next few seconds.

"Malfoy!"

Before he could curse his son, Lucius heard his name yelled at him. He turned around, smiling behind his mask as he saw who was calling out for him. Even though cold rage had replaced the vacant look in the man's eyes, he'd recognize the second hand robes and the carrot top anywhere. "Weasley."

Mouth going dry, Draco watched Arthur Weasley approach with his wand drawn. The usually so mild mannered man looked completely mad with rage.

He didn't hesitate for a second. "Crucio!" He pointed the curse at his father, not surprised when it didn't hit. But at least his actions were buying Weasley time. He cursed again, this time almost hitting the man below, forcing him to jump to the side. The polished mask fell from his face, making no sound as it landed on the grass.
Lucius Malfoy looked up, irritation clear on his face. "Draco!"

"Go to hell!" It felt so good to say that out loud, Draco yelled it again, accenting it with yet another curse.

From behind Lucius, a large man was running towards them, his robes askew and the mask on his face looking like it was going to fall any minute. "Lord Malfoy!" Agitated, he rushed towards his master.

Draco would have recognized Vince's father even without hearing his voice. The man had been following his father forever, like his son had shadowed him.

The duel between Arthur Weasley and his father was now raging fully, so Draco turned his attention to Crabbe, wondering if he would have to face his old friend next. Pushing away every thought of old friendships and regrets, he grabbed the handle of his broom tighter and focused on this new threat.

Hoping that rage and grief would win over arrogance in the fight between his father and Weasley's.

No real ghosts lingered in the Malfoy Mansion, but the shadows the small light cast on the walls seemed to paint the horrors from ages past for everyone to see.

Snape didn't spare one look at them, muttering out charms and sprinkling potions on the stone floor.

Clearing the basement was taking longer than he'd thought. Lucius had clearly moved some of his precious mementos from the vault to down here; to be used in obscure Death Eater rituals or to be kept safe.

No matter how long this took, Snape was determined to make certain he found every cache here. There would be no place for the surviving dark wizards to flee to.

The walls were trembling, as if the ancient mansion was trying to fight him away on its own. Snape walked faster, needing to get to the dungeon as fast as he could. He could feel the strength of the magic here, and knew it was probably only a matter of time before the whole building collapsed on him.

He didn't want to be here in the basement when that happened.

This was the last place to search. The Aurors and Figg were probably finished with the vault already. He would check out the last of the cells and then they would be on their way.

Water was dripping down from somewhere, the sound making it feel like there was someone here with him. Snape ignored the feeling, continuing his way down the corridor. The magical light from his wand didn't reach far, but there was plenty of light here anyway; the walls themselves glowed sickly green.

Snape saw the doorway where the remnants of the door still hung on the hinges, the splintered wood looking scarred. For a flash of a second he could remember walking out of the room with Minerva clinging to him, the smell of blood everywhere, the tingle from dark curses still hanging around him like a cloak. He pushed the memory away. That was all in the past, as were the other horrors he'd witnessed down here.

He would never have to come back here after this. No one would have to suffer here. With that
firmly in mind, he hurried towards the end of the corridor.

Something made him glance at a closed doorway on his left. It was just a feeling, for there was no other sound but the dripping water.

There was someone there. He could feel it in his bones. A flick of his wand confirmed the feeling. There was definitely someone locked in the small room.

Not hesitating, Snape pushed at the door. When it didn't budge, he muttered out the charm to open it.

With a groaning protest, the door swung slowly open, revealing a small dark room. The air seemed to shimmer with malice and pain. Eyes already adjusting to the new darkness, Snape could see that there was indeed someone shackled to the wall.

Someone who was not moving, but as Snape stood there, he could hear a muffled sound of pain escaping the prisoner. Whoever it was, they were still alive.

He took a step closer, crossing the threshold.

The Mansion rumbled as if it truly was a living creature, the sound as frightening as a dragon's roar. Then the heavy stones came crumbling down, burying everything beneath them.

Remus let out a muffled curse as he stared at the edge of the forest. They had come back to Hogwarts grounds just in time to see the Death Eaters launch their main attack.

There were no troops here, just a few Aurors trying to keep everyone out of the Forbidden Forest, and it was quickly becoming clear that defending the place would fall to him and Sirius.

He could see Hermione grasp the idea as well, and no matter how much she had always disliked the training with real curses, there was no hesitation in her now.

Remus only wished he could find that strength inside as well.

"Look!" Hermione pointed at the group of Death Eaters battling with the Aurors. "I think they're going to run."

It was a relief of sorts. Remus didn't think it would be their job hunt every dark wizard down and kill them.

Then Sirius yelled out, "I can't believe it!" His voice was gravelly with a note of triumph in it.

Watching in horror, Remus realized that one of the men running towards the trees was familiar to him, his face hidden behind his hood but the almost cringing movements identifying him better than anything.

As the man looked behind to see if anyone was chasing them, Remus caught the look on his blotchy face, a part of his mind calmly assessing the horrified expression.

The sound coming from next to him wasn't even a curse anymore; it was way beyond any enraged exclamation or an outlet for magic. What started out as a call for the man they had once called a friend, a brother, turned into a bloodthirsty growl as Sirius morphed into his canine form.

Hackles raised, the dark black dog loped after the Death Eaters.
"Sirius, no!" Squeezing his hand into a fist, Remus swallowed the rest of the worried words clawing their way up his throat. He knew that there was nothing he could say that would make Snuffles listen, for there was no power in the whole world that could stop him now.

He shivered with horror as a small part of him cried out for blood as well and wished he could turn into the wolf right now and join the hunt.

The human in him gagged at the mere thought.

Holding his wand tighter, he took a few steps towards the woods. Even if he couldn't follow Sirius as fast as he might want to, he knew he'd have to go after him and keep the promise he'd made at James and Lily's funeral. Their killer would die right here, right now.

"Remus!" Hermione's shrill scream jolted him out of the red haze. "Look!"

Remus turned to see a swarm of darkness approaching from the flank. For just a second his mind froze with terror as the sight made him remember the army of Dementors that had circled around Hogwarts years ago. Then reason won over the panic. There were no Dementors left here.

"Lethifolds! They're Lethifolds!" So they hadn't been able to destroy all the dark creatures after all. "Do you know how to kill them?"

He was certain she would. She had once been his best student after all.

"Of course," Hermione muttered, even as she reached for her wand again. "They should be easy to defeat in the light of day, when they're out of their element. We use the Patronus charm and then finish them with a..."

Blocking out the rest of her rambling, Remus nodded. "Good. Now let's get to it!" There was no time to waste.

Wand raised, he turned to meet the lethifolds, pushing all other thoughts out of his mind. Sirius was already too far gone for him to catch up with him, and he couldn't leave Hermione and their little group to defeat this without him.

Sirius would have to avenge their friends alone.

It was getting easier after a while.

Draco didn't think as he flung another curse, concentrating only on making the Death Eaters stop. He used everything he knew, even casting expelliarmus at the large man who seemed to stumble onto his robes, but most of the curses were not as benign.

He didn't know where the rest of their air force was, the formations long gone by now. None of them could just observe and try to locate certain Death Eaters anymore, the battle was a frantic blur of curses and dark figures running here and there and everyone was needed here.

Some of Voldemort's people had lost their masks, and it was impossible not to recognize a few of them. Draco tried not to cast the killing curse at his former classmates or their parents, but survival instinct won over sentimentality pretty soon.

He did what he needed to live.
Right now, he was trying to dodge the *imperius* Marcus Flint was throwing at him, keeping his wand pointed at a group that had ran up to help Flint when they'd realized who he was up against.

And it had all gone so well until now.

Instead of attacking him, the other Death Eaters were aiming at his broom. The charms and curses came flying towards him faster than he could steer his broom, and he knew he couldn't shield from them all, especially with Flint still throwing the *imperius* at him, showing the similar tenacity as he had in the Quidditch pitch years ago.

Draco threw a curse at Flint. He had never liked the bastard anyway.

He knew he wasn't going to be able to hold on much longer. It was already too late to escape, and once he was on the ground, his former housemates would overwhelm him in seconds. From the yells and the furious looks on the unmasked faces, he could tell that his ending wouldn't be as easy as a simple *Avada Kedavra*. They would torture him to death and enjoy every moment of it.

The charms he'd used on his broom had been excellent, but nothing could hold on against this. Draco bit his lip but couldn't suffocate the infuriated scream that escaped him as the broom started to dissolve beneath him.

"Hold on!"

Looking up, Draco saw Harry speeding down towards him. "Go back, you idiot Gryffindor!" he barked, even though it was clear that Harry wouldn't listen to him.

Not that he'd actually thought he would.

He cast a charm down below, not one of the curses that could maim or kill, but a rather harmless explosive charm that raised dust in the air. Then he shoved his wand back under his robes, knowing that this wasn't the time for magic. No charm could save him from the group on the ground.

Draco twisted his body to the side, bracing himself with his legs. He'd never done this in a real life situation, but he was certain he could do it now.

"Now!" Harry held out a hand, keeping his descent as steady as possible.

Reaching out, Draco clasped Harry's wrist as the last of his broom dissolved from under him. The fall was brief, but the jolt almost dislocated his shoulder as the tight grip around his wrist stopped the fall.

Enraged yells came from below, where the Death Eaters were showered with splinters and twigs.

Flying like this was definitely unpleasant, not to mention dangerous, and Draco was glad when Harry steered his broom downwards. He could see red hair tousled in the wind where they were heading to. It was quite amazing how that sight could make him feel better.

"Can you manage on your own from here?" Harry let go of his hand, looking eager of continuing his search.

"Yes." Stepping next to Bill Weasley, Draco nodded. "I'll be fine. Go and kill Voldemort!" His smile looked probably insane, but he didn't care.

The answering grin on Harry's lips was as mad as his was. With a small nod, the hero of their world lifted up again.
Draco only had a moment to try to catch his bearings before Bill Weasley yelled out, "Here they come!" Then his world narrowed down again into the frantic blur of dark figures running towards him and the curses he both cast and dodged.

Part 26

It was a miracle Snape was still alive.

The corridor he'd left a moment ago didn't exist anymore, the doorway filled with rubble. Brushing his robes with slightly trembling hands, Snape got to his feet, amazed by the fact that this one room was still intact.

There was sickly green light coming from the walls, a chemical reaction from mold and old magic. Snape was glad it was replacing the oppressive darkness as he spent a few moments looking for his wand. Even in the faint light, he couldn't find a trace of it and had to admit it was most probably buried under the rocks. Sighing, he turned his attention on the other person in the room.

No longer attached to the wall, he was lying on the ground, the shackles bending his left arm into a very painful looking position. Snape moved his gaze from the arm to a very familiar face.

He blinked. Then he had to curb insane laughter.

Not only was he trapped under tons of solid rock that had formerly formed the Malfoy Mansion. He was trapped here with Neville Longbottom.

"Why am I not surprised?" he groaned out loud. The universe was indeed laughing at him right now. "Longbottom!" When the boy didn't move, he repeated his name louder.

It brought forth a whimper.

"Who is it? Harry? Harr..." Eyes opening to stare without focus, Neville reached out, trying to touch whomever was trapped there with him.

Snape grabbed the flailing hand. "Harry is not here, Longbottom.” It was the first time ever the name came out softly, and not as a vicious curse.

"Professor Snape?" Hysterical but weak laughter echoed in the small room.

Knowing exactly what Longbottom was thinking, Snape didn't comment on the laughter. It was ridiculous; to be here, confined with the most incompetent student he'd ever had the displeasure of teaching. It was even worse for the boy, he thought. He was probably scared witless and needed to have someone by his side.

And he had Snape here. Ironic.

"Are you... Are you here to rescue me?" There was desperate hope in Neville's voice. He didn't dare to believe it, but he had to ask. Snape was supposed to be one of the good guys now so please Merlin let him be here to rescue him. The alternative was unthinkable.

"Yes," Snape said. He hated the expression of joy that came to Longbottom's face, knowing his next words would chase it away. "But I'm afraid we can't leave right now."

The silence that followed his words was full of pain. He saw how the boy blinked furiously, his unfocused eyes filling with tears that didn't fall. Even though he realized that Longbottom could not
"What happened?" Neville hated the silence. He'd been lost in silence for so long, with only his own thoughts to accompany him. Or then there would be the sound of cruel laughter and questions he couldn't answer. Even Snape's cold voice was better than the silence.

Snape recounted the way the ceiling had come down, keeping the sentences precise and simple. It looked like Longbottom was hovering on the edge of unconsciousness.

He moved a little as he described the way he had lost his wand, sitting next to the injured Gryffindor. Keeping his voice calm, he surveyed his wounds. It was clear that they weren't the result of the booby trap, they had been inflicted earlier.

There were little visible marks on the boy. Snape didn't know what his robes were hiding, but could smell the strong scent of blood in the room. Most of the things the Death Eaters were so fond of wouldn't even leave a mark. They would simply destroy a person from the inside, driving them insane.

He came close to the end of his story, already knowing that he wouldn't ask Longbottom any questions about his stay here. He didn't need to be told what had happened.

"So now we're trapped. I can't think of a way to get out of here, so we need to wait for people to find us." It was not exactly a lie, even though Snape knew that there was not much hope for anyone to find them in time.

The basement had no sensible ventilation system. He'd known that for years. It was uncomfortable to stay here for any longer period of time, to brew potions or to torment hapless victims. With the corridor sealed and a big part of the upper floors probably crumbled to the ground, they would only have the air that was trapped in the pitiful dungeon with them.

Neville tried to smile a little, but it came out more like a grimace. "All right." He actually sounded relieved he wasn't completely alone.

They sat in silence for a while. All the time, Neville's breathing got more labored. The wheezing sound echoed from the walls, making it sound haunting somehow.

Feeling his thoughts were slipping slowly away, he rasped out, "Professor? Please..."

"What is it?"

Focusing his unseeing gaze on where the Potions master's voice had come from, Neville gasped out, "My grandmother. Tell her I fought well."

It was a frightened whisper Snape couldn't shut out. Swallowing, he managed to put some of the old sneer into his voice. "You will tell her that yourself, Longbottom. You survived all your Potions classes, so you'll bloody well survive this as well!"

There was a stunned silence as Neville stared into the dark. Then he muttered, "Yes, sir." He would do his best as always.

But he knew that like in the Potions class, his best might not be good enough.

Squinting his eyes, Harry looked down below, trying to ignore the yells and the crying and the
dying, focusing on one thing only. He had no idea how long he'd been flying around Hogwarts' grounds trying to pinpoint his enemy. The sun was so bright in his eyes that he couldn't concentrate on determining the time from its position in the sky. There were more important things for him to watch.

Even though it had become apparent in the past few years that Voldemort preferred others to do his dirty work, Harry had thought the man would lead his troops himself. He could remember that awful night at the cemetery and how Voldemort had mockingly told him about the courtesies of formal dueling.

Now the bastard was nowhere to be seen, and Harry had the sinking feeling that maybe this had all been in vain. Their plan had been to flush all the Death Eaters and their Master in the open and then destroy them, their victory a joint effort. This first big battle was to be the last as well.

Harry didn't want to think of what would happen if he didn't find Voldemort on the battlefield. That could drag this on and on for years; that kind of a future was almost worse than death.

There was a blur of motion nearby, and Harry turned to watch Oliver speed through the air, heading toward something on the ground. Noticing how his former captain was dodging curses, he grabbed a better hold on his broom, figuring that he might as well help him.

The movement stopped, as he cast one more look towards the edge of the forest and saw a small group moving away quickly from the battlefield and towards the hedge, where a gate leading to the grounds had been blown open earlier.

It was clear to see that most of the people running were Death Eaters, their hoods unable to hide the masks completely, the sunlight reflecting off the smooth surface. But the most important was the figure running in the middle of the hooded men.

Harry let everything else drop from his mind and swooped towards the hedge.

He should have known Voldemort would do this; avoid a confrontation to the last moment and then realize it was too late. The master of survival, like some kind of a parasite, would never let go. He would now run and then lay low for some time.

Before returning again and again; killing innocents, preparing their world for yet another reign of terror. Harry would never be rid of the Dark Lord, forced to fight him throughout decades until generations upon generations of witches and wizards would know nothing of peace. There would be nothing but war and fear and destruction and death.

Burning rage filled Harry's whole being. Steering his ragged broom down, he pointed his wand at the small group of Death Eaters.

It was weird how he could feel such a hot surge of anger mixed with perfect calm. Somewhere in the middle of the fear and the doubt was absolute determination.

Down on the ground, one of the Death Eaters spotted him, letting out a warning yell. The others halted and looked up at him, wands ready.

Voldemort's dark clad form didn't stop. He continued his way towards the gates, obviously preparing to Apparate as soon as he was out of Hogwarts grounds.

Ignoring the wands pointing at him, Harry sped down, the move making even the Wronski Faint look like a walk in the park. He dodged the curses flung at him, focusing on the man who had brought all this madness into his world.
He could sense protective magic crackling all around Voldemort. An ordinary curse wouldn't work and he doubted even an Unforgivable would be enough to stop him. The killing curse had never stopped the man before.

Harry swallowed hard, not letting doubts fill him, not now. Even thinking about what he was about to do would be too much, so he shoved the thoughts back and raised his wand.

Concentrating on one thing only; a world without fear.

There were those short moments of perfect happiness he still carried with him. His first days in the wizarding world, meeting Ron and Hermione, finding a place he could call home. His first Quidditch match. Seeing his parents in the mirror of Erised.

His parents who had loved him more than anything in the world. Sirius and Remus, who were his family now. The joy that came with that simple concept went beyond perfection, burning away all doubts. His life, filled with warmth and laughter and sharing it with those he loved. Scent of herbs surrounding him, strong arms holding him all through the night, Snape's presence solid and firm and his.

Happiness so fierce it almost hurt, combining every good moment he had ever experienced.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The silvery phantom shape of Prongs shot forward, moving through the air with impossible speed. Not conjured up to drive back Dementors, it galloped down at the Death Eaters. The magnificent sight made Harry let out a choked cry.

It drove back shock and weariness, glowing with such radiant warmth.

The Death Eaters were staring at the Patronus, most unable to move. In front of them, the running form of Voldemort stopped and then turned slowly to look into the sky.

Harry could see the word 'no' form on Voldemort's lips. Frozen in place, the Dark Lord followed the shining stag with his gaze, unable to move until it disappeared.

There was utter silence. No one moved.

Then Voldemort looked up at Harry, his face a rigid mask of fear and hatred. "Kill him! Kill Harry Potter!" he yelled at his Death Eaters.

Now the curses would come in handy. "Avada Kedavra!" Harry didn't even flinch as the first Death Eater fell.

He didn't have to repeat the curse on the second Death Eater who slammed into an invisible barrier and let out a yelp as he tumbled down. It almost looked as if some creature was there with them, unseen, but still able to fight for Harry's cause.

Harry leaned closer to his broom, speeding down faster. Below him, Voldemort was running again, now desperate to reach safety. The Firebolt was shaking slightly, as if warning him of what would happen if he tried to fly any faster, but Harry paid no heed to it. His beloved gift from Sirius wasn't as important to him as it was to cut off Voldemort's escape.

He landed smoothly on the ground near the edge of the woods, the broomstick falling at his feet as he finally let go. There was a sound of wood snapping, but he didn't look down to see what had happened.
All his attention was focused on one fact. He was still on Hogwarts ground, standing between what was left of the gate and Voldemort, cutting off his easy escape to the Dark Forest as well. There was no one else here, only him and the Dark Lord. Harry's mouth tasted bitter, and his heart was racing, but he could handle the fear coursing through his veins.

Pointing with his wand, he didn't even have to think what to say next. No matter what he'd said earlier about using only whatever force was necessary, he knew without a doubt that there was only one way to end this for good.

Harry Potter stared at Lord Voldemort.

There was only a faint resemblance to the shadow of a boy he had met in his second year. Voldemort had nothing left of Tom Riddle. He looked more like a snake than a man, changed beyond any recognition when he'd been reborn.

For some reason Harry wasn't thinking about that awful night now. There was nothing but this moment.

"You can not kill me, Harry Potter." Voldemort's voice was oozing malice. "Leave now and I'll spare your life."

Smiling, Harry shook his head. "Of course I can't kill you. That's why you were running away like a scared rabbit." Now that the big moment was at hand, all he could think of was that this was utterly ridiculous. They were supposed to fight to death, and here was Voldemort trying to get away from it by lying.

He couldn't believe what a lousy liar Voldemort was.

The mocking words didn't change Voldemort's expression. He simply nodded. "Then die." No formal challenge, no threats. No attempt to catch Harry alive to use him in a dark ritual. Almost negligently, he flicked his wrist and said, "Avada Kedavra!"

Repeating the curse even as he jumped clear of the sparks, Harry let all the amusement slide away from him. Dodging the death curse was harder than anything, for there was no way one could really practice that. He hadn't been completely sure one even could do it before this moment.

Focused on nothing but the space between him and Voldemort, he yelled out the words again.

There were scents everywhere. Old moldy scent of decay mixing with the almost overpowering smell of fear.

The whole forest was alive with magic, the untamed nature of the wild. Every tree seemed ancient with roots reaching far beneath the ground, even the air here seemed thick with spells no one had ever uttered out loud.

Snuffles ran. Mindless of the sounds and sights around him, he ran focused on one thing only. There were other creatures around him, people and animals, magical beings fighting or hiding, but he didn't pay any attention to them.

Right there, in front of him, was the source of the smell.

It was such a familiar scent, tickling some hidden part of him that brought forth old memories he'd almost forgotten, taking him back to a simpler time, to laughter and friendship and joy. Now it was
marred by another scent, the odor of silver as nauseating as the memory of betrayal itself. Wherever his prey ran, he would follow.

He couldn't see it right now, but the small shaking of a leaf, the small paw print of a front paw screamed at him. He knew he was gaining on his prey, and the mere thought drove him forward.

The pain came from out of nowhere. He was so focused on his chase he hadn't realized that one of the dark robed people had jumped closer.

Smelling his own blood on the knife the Death Eater held, Snuffles howled.

The final duel had come, and there was no one to witness the raw power of magic focusing around Harry Potter and Voldemort. Everything around the fighting pair was getting dark, as if the Dark Magic both were channeling was blocking out the very sun.

It was horrendous; naked destructive energy. Truly the fight of their time, and there was no one to see it.

Harry didn't know if anyone had ever really managed to survive a fight like this. There was no finesse, no strategy. Only him and Voldemort. Only this moment, only death.

This was not going to work. Throwing the curse almost aimlessly as both moved fast enough to make the green tingle miss, they were gaining nothing.

Soon, others would come. It would be in the hands of chance, for there could be Death Eaters or members of the Order, and then their world would either fall or be free. Harry had been lucky before, but now he couldn't rely on luck. There was too much at stake.

He didn't know what was keeping him alive right now. Could his mother's love still protect him? Or was there something in the nauseating connection between him and Voldemort that rendered their half heartedly focused curses useless?

This was too much like trying to focus on a hundred details at once; the people who would come, the spins and twirls that carried him away from the destructive power of the Unforgivable. He was trying to hit and hide at the same time, and it was not working.

He couldn't win like this. The thought wiped away the need to spend the next fraction of a second to plan his new escape. There could be no escape. This was the only thing in his world and he would bloody well do it right!

Standing still, he aimed with his wand. A good aim that would not miss its target.

He felt as if he was under water, everything moving through a haze. His tongue felt thick and clumsy as he spoke, "Avada..." The word came out agonizingly slowly. Across the small field, Voldemort seemed to have same sensations, his lips moving slow as well. "...Kedavra!"

Both were casting the curse at the same time, both standing here, not willing to move one bit. Not even thinking of surrendering. This one frozen moment, neither moved to escape the destructive energy.

Instead of making the world explode, the magic they both released hummed around them. It existed everywhere between their wands, unable to focus anywhere. Almost as a living being, it swum through the air, connecting with their wands.
Binding them together in death.

It was clear now, that the power building between the two of them would not be contained for long. As it unleashed, everything around them would be destroyed.

Harry felt the energy grow inside of him. Swirling just beneath his skin, making him tingle all over. He would burn slowly, his scar already on fire.

This was it, the final battle the whole wizarding world had been waiting for. The fight between him and Voldemort. Not what he had expected, but it was still worse than he'd feared.

Better than he'd hoped.

He wished he could tell Snape that. Wished he could have spent one more day with him and his family. He didn't even know if any of them was still alive; they could all be dead now, or they could all be alive, left behind to mourn him.

For he would indeed die here. Would die as the combined magic between Voldemort and him finally ate through his flesh, burning away the Dark Lord as well. Two opposites, equal in strength. What he lacked in experience, he had in stubbornness. He would not give up. Neither would Voldemort.

Dying to save the world. It was such a scary thought Harry knew he would throw up if he still could, but nothing could really touch him anymore, his whole existence frozen here. This moment, this place. The end was here, and as the magic swirled all around him, his mind was strangely clear.

He was going to die, right now. There was nothing more in this world for him, for he was fulfilling the destiny others had conjured up for him. He wished this had never happened, hoped this would make a difference and that there would be peace in their world.

Harry's mind was slowly shutting down, his thoughts losing focus. A sibilant whisper somewhere inside his head was telling him that this was the only proper way for him to die; as the savior of the wizarding world, a noble death, devoid of any sense of self.

A grin bloomed on his lips. Not bloody likely! He didn't want to die, but would if it was the only way to end this insanity. He only wished he'd really told Snape how much he loved him, just to see the incredulous expression on his face.

That was his last real thought, and then even that went away.

"Bastard!"

There was a yell, coming from the distance. Harry could hardly hear it, for his whole world had narrowed down to the space between his wand and Voldemort's. Everything existed in flashes of gold and silver, nothing else could penetrate the bubble that was building around him and his foe.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Thousands of tiny sparks of astonishingly bright green surrounded everything. The blinding burst drove everything else away.

Harry screamed as his thoughts and memories rushed back to him. He recognized the hoarse voice that had yelled out the most horrible curse he knew. It built the energy swirling around them so that it could no longer be contained.

As the power raged over him, he realized what had just happened.
"No! Don't!"

But it was too late.

The power of magic that had bound Harry and Voldemort together in death waned for just a second, releasing Harry from it's grasp before what was left of it refocused on another target. It snapped around, almost draining Harry, searching for another person to become the polar opposite of the Dark Lord.

Found it in an angry man who had raised his wand against the one who had been behind the murder of his wife.

"Percy!" Helpless, Harry lifted his arms to shield himself from the blast that followed. The whole world seemed to shatter in green sparks, the unleashed energy making the ground shake.

"No!" Voldemort screamed, his face contorting in horror. Then all sound died as the power between him and the redhead turned the space between them into a vacuum.

Nothing existed there. No sound, no light. No life.

Their world exploded.

Harry was thrown back by the shock wave, his ears ringing at the collision as he slammed against the ground. The earth itself moved, the force of the explosion tearing trees from the edge of the forest, sending timber flying overhead.

He could hear his own voice yelling in pain and fear until his throat was raw. The madness lasted for only seconds, but it seemed like a lifetime.

The silence was worse than anything.

It was as if everything had ended. There was nothing here and for a moment Harry thought the blast had finished him as well. Then the pain registered again and he knew that he was still very much alive.

"Damn it!" Harry moaned as he rolled onto his belly. His body ached and he doubted he could really get to his feet. His fingers were clenched around his wand, but as he focused his gaze to his hand, he could see that he was actually holding a large splinter.

His wand was broken. It was quiet and he was all alone and his wand was broken.

He looked up, wishing he hadn't a moment later as he saw the figure lying on the ground not far from him. Somehow he managed to drag himself towards it, needing to see if there was anything he could do.

Nothing else really got through the mist that was surrounding his thoughts.

There was no life left in the young man lying on the ground. It was probably better this way. There was not much of a body left even to be buried.

"Oh no..." Gaze blurring with tears, Harry stared down at Percy Weasley. "Damn it, no..."

It was not supposed to go like this.

He bent down to cover some of the burned body with the torn and charred cloak lying next to him, recognizing his father's Invisibility Cloak only when his fingers brushed against it.
He was too numb to even think of what it meant to have it here now. Later, he would wonder about Percy's tenacity and his own blindness, but right now, it was enough to cover his friend with the soft torn cloth that would never again make anyone invisible.

He didn't know what else to do. Should he stay here until someone came? Would anyone really come? Or was everyone dead, like Percy was dead and Voldemort was dead?

The thought made Harry turn to look at the other still form lying on the ground. It looked like the wraith like creature he'd met in the forest feeding from a dead Unicorn. A full circle in a way. All that effort Voldemort had put to rising again had been for nothing.

Mind still sluggish, he couldn't look away from his adversary. He couldn't be happy about his death. Right now, he didn't feel anything.

Then the unthinkable happened.

Voldemort moved.

Harry jumped as he saw the ragged pile move again. He couldn't believe Voldemort had survived the blast that had almost incinerated poor Percy. It had been unlike any death curse he'd ever witnessed, too much power to be released in simple sparks.

Holding the remains of his wand, he crawled over the debris, towards Voldemort. He couldn't see anything else, his ears still ringing from the blast. Everything was focused on this one thing.

Voldemort still existed.

A desperate wail escaped his throat as he raised his hand and then brought the splintered wand down, impaling Voldemort's chest as if he was a vampire. "Die!" It was a muffled sob. "Die!"

There was no magic behind the command, only desperation and Harry's determination to never face this again. This had to end now.

"No!" It came out as a gurgle. Voldemort's final denial over his own mortality that died alongside him.

Harry stared at his own bloodied hands, letting go of his wand with a flinch. Only then he turned his gaze on his enemy's face. The vacant eyed stare made him gag again.

There was no magic here. No power channeled through the small stick protruding out of Voldemort's chest. No life.

He flinched away from the body, his gaze sweeping the ground. There was Voldemort's own wand, still intact, a few inches from his outstretched arm. Harry shivered. Sooner or later someone would try to use something like that to bring him back, and this would all start over again.

Slowly, Harry got to his feet. Eyes hard, he stepped on the frail wand so like his own. It broke with a small sound.

Then there was nothing but silence.

It was over.

Voldemort was truly dead.
The tendrils of destruction went through all the wizarding world. Dark creatures cowered in their lairs, knowing that they were once again alone. It was almost as if the air itself shimmered with the echo of green fire.

On the battleground, Death Eaters were suddenly squirming in agony as their Dark Marks burned for the last time.

Those strong enough to run turned around and fled Hogwarts ground. Others, too dismayed by their ultimate loss, simply stood there, eyes vacant of all thoughts.

Snape raised his head, gaze unfocused. He could almost feel the earth shift, the ancient stones underneath him shuddering with the power of Voldemort's destruction. Here, in the basement of the Malfoy Mansion, it almost seemed like a loss instead of a victory, the darkness gathered here moaning with his death.

"What.... What's going on?" Neville asked quietly. He couldn't find the strength to move anymore, his life seeping slowly away. The sudden way the whole world seemed to shake had registered in him as a prelude to passing through the veil.

Voice hollow, Snape muttered, "Voldemort is dead." He felt completely empty. It had nothing to do with the destruction of the Dark Lord. He would never grieve his death.

He was feeling unbearable fear inside, stunned by the emotion. Now that Voldemort was gone, where was Harry? Everyone had been so convinced that the final battle between their forces would be a fight to the death. He'd always wondered if it was true, knowing just exactly how powerful Voldemort was.

Sitting here in the dark with the dying young man next to him, he hoped Harry was still alive. It didn't really matter if he was never found here amongst the ruins; he wasn't the one who deserved to enjoy this victory and live a happy life. Voldemort's death didn't change everything for him, but Harry deserved to live.

"Good..." Whispering the word out with joy, Neville closed his eyes again, the sound of his breathing getting fainter with every exhale.

Snape didn't say anything. He sat there, listening. When all the sound died, leaving the small cell as silent as a tomb, he leaned back against the wall.

There were horrors and losses that went beyond tears. Snape had never found any comfort in crying, feeling the grief as a choking sensation in his throat, and there was no relief of tears for him now.

Growling out a curse, he wished he had the energy to destroy something. It would take away some of the helplessness he felt witnessing this one more senseless death.

Voldemort was gone. No one else should have to suffer.

Slowly, the dark magic embedded to the very bedrock started to seep out. Without the focal point to keep it here, it faded away, leaving nothing behind. The glow on the walls flickered and then disappeared as well, leaving Snape in utter darkness with nothing but Neville Longbottom's dead body as his company.
The first person to arrive at the scene was a young Auror, his face pale but eyes shining.

Harry thought he looked familiar, but there had been too many faces like his for him to really recognize him. He nodded at the Auror, unable to say anything that would make any sense. Then again why bother with words? It was only too clear what had happened here.

The Auror looked around, blinking as he saw the blood on Harry's hands and on the ground, recognizing the pile of black silk as the remains of a body a moment later. "Is that... Voldemort?" He said the name as if he was still half afraid it would summon the Dark Lord in front of him, alive and powerful.

Harry nodded.

He was too exhausted for explanations or introductions or anything, and then it dawned to him that he did indeed know the young Auror when he turned around and vomited on the ground. It was a familiar sight.

"Yeah." His voice sounded weird in his own ears, but Harry could commiserate with the Auror well.

Rubbing his hands on his torn robes, he wondered if he could somehow get the blood off his hands before other people arrived. He didn't want to shock anyone else.

"Harry Potter!"

Since his name was yelled with obvious glee, Harry didn't even tense, and then he was surrounded by a group of witches and wizards, all a part of his army, all smiling at him.

Harry swallowed. He was safe, they were all safe now. "Yeah." Funny how he couldn't manage anything beyond that, simply affirming anything they might want to say.

"Merlin's beard! What the hell happened here?" asked someone with a hushed voice.

People were already milling around, most ignoring everything but their hero who was staggering towards a tree as if unable to stand on his own and the bloodied mess on the ground with bits of a broken wand still protruding out of its chest.

"Is that... Is that?" The stutter made Flitwick's voice sound almost unrecognizable as he pushed his way towards the corpse. "Is that truly the Dark Lord?"

One of the wizards actually went to poke the remains of the dead wizard with his foot. "Yeah. And he's dead."

There was an awed silence, as everyone turned to look at Harry.

"What happened here?"

Harry didn't know how he could ever explain it all. It felt like he'd engaged the fight with Voldemort ages ago, their battle raging for aeons, but there was the sun still shining from the sky and he realized it had probably just taken minutes instead of hours.

Years of planning, months of training, and then it had really come to this. His throat hurt with the need to let the hysterical laughter out.

"Are you stupid or what?" A wizard glared at Flitwick as if he thought the small professor was totally out of his mind. "Like you can't see it for yourself! Harry Potter has destroyed Voldemort!"
Agreeing murmur came from all around.

"No, I..." Harry didn't want them to say things like that for they were lies. "It didn't happen like that..." He tried to make them listen.

It was a futile attempt.

Smiling brightly, a woman appeared next to him. "I saw everything! You-Know-Who was coming towards the castle, already on Hogwarts grounds, and Harry Potter stopped him. Just like that, with a single curse!" She made a very familiar swish and flick gesture with her hand. "And the Dark Lord died. Just like that!"

Nausea washed over Harry. He wished it had happened like that. Wished no one else had died. "No, you got it all wrong..."

"Three cheers for Harry Potter!" The man with torn robes waved his hands in the air as the crowd cheered.

Harry leaned against the tree, closing his eyes as if that could shut the insanity out. "I didn't do it like that. It wasn't me." The words came out as a sigh, but even if he'd shouted them out, no one would have listened to him.

The crowd yelled and screamed, Three cheers became ten. Some people were crying, hugging each other while the most hysterical ones even tried to hug their hero.

And Harry stood there, completely drained.

The battlefield was a chaos. Only a moment ago, there had been a war raging here, people trying to kill each other. Now there were only Aurors and members of the Order guarding the barely conscious Death Eaters.

Finally letting his wand lower, Draco Malfoy looked around.

His robes were torn and his back was really complaining against any sudden movement, but he was alive. It was almost unbelievable. He'd been so certain this would mean the end and now he was alive.

A very silly grin spread to his lips. It was accompanied by a relieved sigh. The final battle against Voldemort and his people seemed to be over and by Merlin! He was not dead.

"That was some fighting, Malfoy."

He glanced over his shoulder to see Bill Weasley smile at him. The redhead looked exhausted, but there was a foolish grin on his face as well. "Yeah. Nice curses." He made a gesture with his hand and refused to be embarrassed by the complete idiocy of his comment.

Bill seemed to take it as a compliment. "Well you need to know them to break them." Radiating with happiness he clasped Draco's shoulder. "Well done."

It really shouldn't have meant anything, but Draco almost beamed back at him. "You too."

They stood there, grinning at each other for a moment before the world reappeared around them in the form of another redhead limping towards them. Draco watched the brothers hug tight, Bill's
hands clamping convulsively on Charlie's back.

He turned away to look at the battlefield, trying to pinpoint another Weasley.

There were too many people around, yelling and hugging and walking here and there. Draco recognized some of them, but there was no sign of the familiar face he was looking for.

He knew he should go and try to find out what had happened earlier with Arthur Weasley and his father, but somehow he couldn't move away just yet. One thing at the time, and this couldn't really wait.

Still holding his wand loosely in his hand, he didn't turn around when Bill Weasley's voice called out, "Dad!" his voice far too happy for there to be any question of the fate of their new Minister. Draco didn't want to think about it now, he was going to wait and see how it was with the Weasleys before thinking about what it meant to have Arthur Weasley standing there alive.

People came and went, no one really doing anything productive, except for a small group of Aurors who were herding the few surviving Death Eaters towards the castle. After a few muttered words to his sons, Arthur Weasley rushed after them to make sure their prisoners would not be harmed.

Draco watched and waited.

"Malfoy!"

When the familiar voice finally yelled out his name, he almost brought his wand up. Turning around, he saw the redhead unentangle himself from his brothers and then march straight at him. "Weasley."

He wasn't even surprised by the tingle in his stomach at the sight of Ron Weasley alive.

Ron stopped a few feet from Malfoy, suddenly not knowing how to greet him after all. He almost offered his hand before realizing how silly that would be now that he'd already kissed the git in front of witnesses. Had it really been just a few hours ago? Somehow it felt like longer.

"It's good to see you alive." The words escaped him as he wrapped his arms around Draco, the hug just as tight as the ones he'd given his brothers.

He felt the strong arms come around him as well.

Swallowing hard, he muttered in Malfoy's ear, "I... My father killed your father." He didn't know what else to say, remembering the wooden expression on his father's face and the way Malfoy seemed pleased to see him and there was no way he couldn't blurt the words out right now before he had to actually look at Malfoy again.

The arms tightened around him. "Yeah. I know." Draco closed his eyes, not wanting to see anything right now, focusing on this alone.

"I should probably say I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm not sorry he's dead." And that was the one thing Ron kind of did feel sorry about. He didn't say it though. No words could make it all right.

He could feel Malfoy sigh, and wondered if he'd shove him away next or even hit him. It would kind of be okay. He would want to punch someone if he was Malfoy.

"I'm not sorry either."

The soft whisper came as a complete shock, and Ron had to let go and move back just so that he
could look into Malfoy's face. He could only see the faintest hint of sadness there, almost overwhelmed by the relief, shaking his head at both.

He'd never understand Malfoy.

Draco could see the familiar slack jawed look on Weasley's face, and it made him smile a little. At least some things in the world were the same, and even if Weasley's strong arms still wrapped around him was a new thing, he could probably deal with that.

There weren't many things he couldn't face now that he was finally free.

The cheering crowd heralded Harry's arrival. Seeing the destruction on the field, most people stopped cheering and simply stood there, staring in dismay. Some even went to see if they could help, while one of the young witches refused to let go of Harry's torn robes until a mediwitch gently helped her to sit down.

"Harry!" Ron choked out, his face hurting with the insane grin that replaced the sadness. Not even realizing he was still holding onto Draco's arm, he rushed to hug his friend and managed barely not to tumble them all to the ground.

It was the first hug that meant something, and Harry held onto Ron as hard as he could. "Hi, Ron."

"You're alive! I can't bloody believe it! You're fucking alive!" Not caring that there were ladies present and that his brothers would probably comment on his words later on, Ron laughed out loud. "Did you kill Voldemort?"

There was not really a need to ask that. The earlier cheers had been enough to tell everyone that Harry Potter had indeed rid their world of the Dark Lord.

Harry froze and then tried to pull away. When Ron refused to let go, he sighed, "I did. But I didn't kill him alone. Percy did most of the work."

"Percy?" Ron repeated the name, finally stepping back enough to see Harry's face. He could read from the misery in his eyes that it was not good news. Apparently so could his other brothers, who were now closing in on them. "Oh, fuck..."

Nodding, Harry stood there. He saw Charlie lose his balance as the cursed leg gave in and then Bill was there, trying to help him up. George was shaking his head in disbelief.

Harry watched without words as all the four surviving Weasley brothers crumbled down in shared grief.

It was too much to keep watching for long, and he turned to Draco, who was turning away from the Weasleys as well, as if giving them privacy. "I'm glad you're alive." It was the only thing he could really offer.

"You too."

Harry knew those two simple words meant more to him than the dozens of cheers he'd already heard.

He didn't want to ask if Draco was all right, knowing the question would be utterly stupid. No one was really all right, though in time most would be. Maybe. He didn't know if he would be one of the lucky who might get through today, no matter how he'd survived the battle itself.
"I should try to find..." He couldn't say the names or add that he wanted to see if they were still alive. His family was out there, and even though he didn't want to leave the Weasleys like this, he had to go and look for them.

Draco nodded. "Go. I'll stay here."

"Yeah." Harry knew that was probably best. With a light touch on Draco's shoulder, he left him to search for the other survivors.

It was actually surprisingly easy to find Remus. He was standing near the Quidditch pitch, looking worriedly at the forest.

Walking towards him was as if Harry was living through one of his nightmares. He could see fallen people everywhere; those wearing the polished masks as well as people he'd known most his life. He tried to ignore them, but how could he ever shut out the familiar faces?

They would probably be with him forever, joined by the keening sounds of grief surrounding him.

"Thank Merlin! Harry!" Exhausted joy clear in his voice, Remus took a step towards him. He looked like he'd just spent the night howling at the full moon, so tired he could barely stand.

Harry knew the feeling.

Relieved that not everything was lost, Harry forced a wan smile on his lips as he reached Remus, not looking beyond him at Lavender who was cradling Parvati's limp form in her arms and crying. He didn't want to know. He just wanted to revel in the relief, even if it lasted just for a moment.

"Remus!"

"You're alive!" Not hesitating for a moment, Remus pulled Harry into a weak hug.

Harry held on to Remus. "Are you all right?" He had no idea what could have made him this weak. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. Just a little tired. The Death Eaters brought Lethifolds with them, and Hermione and I had to deal with half a dozen of them." Remus sighed. "And she's fine too. She went to see if she could help Poppy." He had no doubts what would have been the next question.

"Good." One less worry. Harry kept an arm around Remus, doubting the man could stand unaided. He didn't want to test that; Sirius would be really unhappy if he let something happen to Remus now.

The thought made him frown. "Remus? Where is Sirius?" He should be right here.

Swaying slightly, Remus choked out, "I don't know."

Harry bit his lip, refusing to believe anything was really wrong before he had the proof of it. It was the only way to stay sane right now. "We'll find him." It came out instinctively, like so many soothing half truths he'd told Sirius over the years.

It was sad to see how much his words clearly meant to Remus.

"You think so?" There was terrible hope in Remus' voice.

For a moment Harry couldn't say anything, unable to force the words out just in case they were a lie. Then something flickered at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and he could nod. "I know so."

"Really?"
"Yes." Raising his other hand to point, he said, "Look."

He felt Remus sag against him as the familiar black form came loping towards them. "Sirius!" He didn't know why the man had chosen his Animagus form now, and didn't care. He was just happy to see him alive.

The dog didn't make a sound, he just ran faster. His left ear was torn, the side of his head bloodied, but it didn't seem to hinder him at all. There was something small and brown and very limp hanging from his mouth, swinging from side to side as he ran.

"Thank Merlin!" Not even ashamed by the sob escaping him, Remus reached out. He'd been terrified ever since Sirius had disappeared in the middle of the battle, fearing the worst. Seeing Snuffles approach made his knees even weaker, and only Harry's arm kept him standing.

Snuffles made a muffled sound, looking at Remus before stopping in front of Harry. He stood there for a moment, his tail wagging from side to side in a show of glee. Then he coughed out the thing he'd been carrying in his mouth.

A small furry bundle lay still on the ground.

Harry stared at the thing, not even registering Remus slow slide towards the ground. He barely heard his murmured words and ignored the way Snuffles was now enfolded in a tight embrace.

He knew the small form. It had been on the edge of his awareness for so long; first as a humorous part of his best friend, then a memory of pure white hatred. The source of paranoia and suspicion. He had never understood this creature or his motives and now it was lying in front of him, so clearly dead.

Turning his gaze from the dead rat to Snuffles, Harry's eyes misted over for the first time after the awful fight. "Sirius..." He stepped forward, careful not to trample Remus. "Thank you!"

Tears slid down his cheeks. It was all over now.

Snuffles let out a happy bark, licking Harry's outstretched hand and then Remus' face. Somewhere between licks he blurred a little, and then Sirius was there, holding Remus tight. He looked a bit embarrassed with his tongue still trailing half way up Remus' cheek.

Remus didn't seem to mind at all.

They kept bringing the wounded in.

Those who knew how to help, went to work. Those who didn't, stayed out of the way. Madam Pomfrey was proving to be an excellent general herself, ordering mediwitches and -wizards around, organizing an impromptu infirmary right there on the lawn when the real one inside Hogwarts couldn't take in any more people.

Not everyone's hurt needed medical attention. There were small groups sitting here and there by the courtyard, talking quietly or just being together. Most of the people Harry called family were now there, and Harry wished he could join them and stop thinking.

But there were still so many unaccounted for. Some of the small groups sent to destroy the larger Death Eater strongholds had returned in time to actually fight in the battle, some might never come back. There were people coming and going, and Harry was desperately trying to find that one
familiar figure.

He refused to think he might never find him.

Finally someone mentioned the Mansion, more mediwitches rushing here and there as it became obvious they would be needed.

Harry could only stand and wait.

There were Ministry officials everywhere, both those who had fought and those who were here to take care of the aftermath, adding to the chaos. They asked questions no one had answers to, scribbled down things on rolls of parchments, and all gave wide berth to their hero whose mere demeanor was enough to quell even the most eager worshipper.

The torn robes, wild look and blood smudges on his hands might've had something to do with it.

"Harry!"

His name had been called out so many times, it was a miracle he even recognized it anymore. This however was a voice he knew, turning him to seek for a familiar witch in the crowd.

"Arabella?" Harry breathed out, shocked to see how exhausted she looked with fine rock dust on her face, trails of sweat leading from forehead to chin. "What happened?"

She wheezed, unable to speak properly after all the exertion. "The Mansion. Some of it collapsed while we were still inside."

All the happiness from seeing his friends alive turned into an ice cold feeling in the pit of Harry's stomach. "How?" It wasn't really the question he wanted to ask, but it was too difficult to even form it in his mind, impossible to squeeze it out.

Arabella wheezed again, doubling over as wracking coughs shook her whole body. There was blood on her lips as she finally stopped coughing.

"Mediwizard!" Harry yelled.

"They're coming," someone said next to him, pointing at the distance. "They're bringing more people from the Malfoy Mansion right now."

The first thing Harry could see was a mediwitch floating someone on stretchers. His heart started to race as he saw a somber look on her face, mirrored on everyone following her.

Whoever was injured, it was bad.

His gaze locked on the pale face surrounded by messy black hair, and he let out a desperate little sound. Oh no. He wasn't sure he would be able to survive yet another loss like this. "Neville?"

One of the mediwizards shook his head slightly as he moved to check on Arabella. "I'm sorry, Mr. Potter." He sounded both sad and tired. Like everyone seemed to be right now.

Harry could only stare, his eyes impossibly wide. He couldn't do anything, couldn't cry or even let out the scream building inside.

Whatever he'd feared when he'd thought about this day, this was worse than most of his nightmares. All these dead and wounded, the empty and desolate looks on people all around him. His friends dying or losing loved ones.
This was their victory, for the good of their world, so that people could now live in peace. Their glorious day that would be celebrated from now on. The thought made him want to vomit.

The tears he'd cried earlier had been of joy, and now others more bitter were threatening to fall. Ignoring the worried looks coming from the mediwizards, he pulled his robe tighter around him, as if sheltering himself from whatever blow would come next. "What about the others?"

Asking was more frightening than anything, for as long as he didn't know, there could still be hope.

A tired voice rang out from behind the group of Aurors following Neville's stretcher. "There were a few casualties, but most of us did survive. And there is no way anyone can use the Mansion as a refuge again."

Harry stared. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, fear, hope and terrible grief over all the people who had died today, he could only stand there for a moment.

Then he took a step towards the man. Then another one, until he was practically flinging himself at Snape.

"You're alive!" Not caring for a second that Snape might be appalled by this, he held him as tight as he could. "You're alive!"

"What a brilliant deduction." Snape's voice trembled slightly, but that was the only sign of the relief that flooded over him. He'd been so certain that Harry was dead, he couldn't almost believe that he was really here. The fact that he was making a scene in public didn't matter, not this time.

He wrapped his arms around Harry, ignoring everything but this moment.

Taking the embrace as a permission, Harry snuggled closer and said, "We did it. Voldemort is dead! And we're alive!" Nothing else mattered now.

Snape sighed, "Yes, I know." It was more relief than real happiness, but he was going to revel in the emotion anyway. From now on, the past that would come to haunt him would truly be just a memory and not a reality of darkness. "I know."

Maybe there was something else that did matter now. Harry looked up, his gaze a bit wild. He was too happy and too sad and too everything at the moment to think clearly, but there was something he knew with absolute certainty. "You look awful!"

There were abrasions and cuts on Snape's face, fine rock dust covering his shoulders and hair.

Snape snorted, the sound turning into a sneeze.

Still staring, Harry added, "I love you!" It was said with stubborn determination and was about as far from a sweet declaration as it could get.

The dark gaze held nothing but weary amusement as Snape said, "I know that too, Harry. I'm not completely brain dead. Some things are rather obvious, including Gryffindor emotionalism."

Harry could see the faintest flicker of a smile on Snape's face, and knew that if he made a comment about Slytherins being just as bad, for once the man couldn't even pretend to be offended. "Good."

"It may just be that I don't completely hate you either."

Interpreting Snape's words correctly as a declaration parallel to his own, Harry closed his eyes and
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There was a soft knock on the doorframe.

Harry straightened his back before turning to see who wanted his attention, groaning as his neck objected the move with a loud pop. The movement to wipe his hands on his robes was instinctive by now, and he didn't even register it.

Seeing Ron at the doorway, he smiled ruefully, knowing his friend would know exactly what brought such a sound out of him.

"Am I interrupting something?" Ron asked, looking around the small room that was almost devoid of personal objects.

"No, I'm almost finished." The trunk was packed, there were only few random items lying around the room; a few magazines, his broom, and an odd sock or two peeking from under the bed.

All his clothes were already packed, and even the golden ribbon of his Order of Merlin -- first class of course -- was somewhere at the bottom of one of the trunks. He couldn't really remember which one, he was just happy with it out of his sight. He'd never wanted such a burden anyway.

It still amused him to no end that Snape had tossed his own silvery ribbon into the trunk as well, the gesture completely negligent before the man had gone to pack his precious potions with the utmost care.

They didn't have to talk about the trappings of celebrity, both knowing all too well what it brought. Harry was still unable to forget the shock most of the older Ministry officials had been unable to hide when it had become clear that neither Arthur Weasley or Albus Dumbledore had died in the battle.

"So..." Ron didn't step inside the room, leaning against the doorframe instead. "You really are leaving?"

He sounded as if he still had hard time believing it, even though Harry had made the announcement the day after the battle and hadn't swayed from his decision ever since.

Harry nodded, shoving the latest Quidditch Quarterly into the trunk. "Yeah, we're really leaving." He couldn't hide the satisfaction those simple words brought to him.

It was about time. He'd wanted to leave the day after the battle, when the horror wasn't even fully realized, but it had been impossible to really organize anything then. Of course then when their world had grasped the magnitude of the loss and deaths, Harry had stayed for the sake of his friends. Nothing else.

Now it was over. There were no more funerals to be held, no speeches expected from the survivors.

Harry hadn't given one single speech since the words about going and winning the war slipped out of his mouth while he soared above Hogwarts. He hadn't really listened to any of the ones others gave in various small gatherings.

The only words he actually concentrated on were Arthur Weasley's when he spoke in the large memorial service, and that was only because of the choked undertone so evident when their Minister spoke of those who had died fighting, when he'd spoken about Percy.
"You and Snape living in that little cottage in the middle of nowhere?" Ron sounded like he really couldn't believe it. "Harry... You can do anything you want to."

"Yeah." That was the whole point, and he was doing exactly what he wanted to. He didn't think the others would understand it, not yet, but this was what he wanted to do right now; peace and quiet, lots of it, and maybe then he could think about everything he'd pushed aside for so long.

And when all the thinking became too much, he'd have Snape there with him.

Ron shrugged. It was Harry's decision. He just hoped he wouldn't regret it later on.

After picking up the socks from the floor, Harry straightened his back and looked at Ron, seeing clearly that his friend was trying hard not to say anything else. He smiled. "Look at it this way, Ron. People want me to continue being their hero and hunt down everyone who escaped the battle. Others want me to go to Hogwarts and maybe become the next Headmaster. Hell, some even want me to become the next Minister for Magic."

"Yeah." Ron had to join Harry's chuckles at that as well. "That would work well."

Harry knew that there were already good people in the high places of their world, people who would do their jobs well, out of the sense of duty. Who would ever believe he could ever be a good Minister or a Headmaster?

Being the leader of the wizarding world meant responsibility and even more fame and fortune. He didn't want any more of those, ever. It really was time for him to actually start living his life.

Ron waited for a moment and then said hesitantly, as if he still wasn't sure Harry really meant what he'd just said, "I think dad's going to run in the elections. Said he could do some good as the Minister." He was so proud of his family that he could burst, even though underneath that pride was still a sorrow that would never really go away.

"Like I said..." Harry muttered quietly, feeling like his decisions really were the only ones possible. Everything was in good hands, and if their world needed him to deal with everything, whether it was some universal leadership or chasing after the remaining Death Eaters, they were all lost already. "I'll certainly vote for him."

He finished the packing in silence, marveling at all the junk he'd managed to gather during their relatively short stay here. There weren't many new things he treasured, unless he counted the broom Sirius had insisted on buying him, saying it was good luck to have a broom as a gift.

Since Harry didn't like arguing with Sirius, he'd just nodded and thanked him for the new broom.

It had actually been a relief; Harry didn't really like the idea of shopping, especially after the trip to Ollivander's. He had needed a new wand, the mahogany surface still feeling odd to his fingers every time he pushed it under his robes, but the simple expedition had turned into a media circus as soon as he'd stepped into Diagon Alley.

One more thing to confirm that his decision was the right one, not that he really needed more justification for leaving.

"Need some help carrying that downstairs?" Ron offered, gesturing at the trunk even though he was pretty sure Harry had some shrinking potion around.

Therefore he was surprised to see the nod.
"Yeah, thanks."

The two Gryffondors carried Harry's trunk downstairs to the living room, where the floo had finally been opened after months of being sealed. They had already tested the connection, so there would be no surprises.

Harry didn't feel any regrets leaving this place; the house hadn't felt like home for such a long time, and even now it was mostly due to Snape's presence that Harry associated the place with all the things a proper home should be.

The house was nice, but it would have to be someone else's nice big home. He knew Sirius and Remus would make it a great place for him to visit every now and then.

Those two deserved it.

"Harry?"

Turning to look at Ron, Harry was taken back by the clear hesitation on his face. "Yeah?"

"You really sure you want to do this?" Ron absolutely hated saying goodbyes. It didn't matter they'd see each other again in a few weeks on Sirius' birthday. He'd lived with Harry for over seven years. He would miss him. A lot.

Harry could see that this wasn't another tirade about him going away to live with Snape, but something he felt as well. "Yeah. I am." He mirrored Ron's position, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Okay." Ron nodded, trying not to look as unhappy as he felt. "Cool." Damn it, he hated it when his voice cracked like that. This wasn't the end, just going on with life. And it wasn't as if Harry was moving to the other side of the world. He'd be right there, on the other side of the floo, five minutes from anywhere.

He still felt like hitting something.

"I'll be around. And you can always come and visit." Harry had the feeling that not even Snape's presence at their little cottage would keep Ron and Hermione away from there, no matter how busy they were with their lives. "You can help me de-gnome the garden again."

A reluctant grin crept to Ron's lips. "Yeah, sure. I'd love to come and share more chores with you." Not that it actually sounded bad.

"Besides, you'll have your hands full dealing with the Ministry and your new place too."

That made Ron bristle a little, as if he wasn't sure Harry was just saying that or if there was a hidden meaning behind it. "Oh shut up."

"Not saying a word!" Harry raised his hands, grinning at the scowl.

There was really nothing new he could say about Ron's choices. The decision to work with the Ministry was actually a good one, but his new living arrangements had even made Remus laugh out loud -- after Ron had left the room in a huff of course.

Harry was actually happy for Ron, knowing that to him life was full of possibilities. The small flat in Diagon Alley, a career with the Ministry, shagging and fighting with his soon-to-be-famous-Quidditch-player flatmate, they were all good things.
He knew his path would lead away from all this, but seeing his family go for their own dreams was wonderful. Now that Sirius' name was finally cleared, he and Remus could build a real life together, with a real home and work offers. Hermione had already left for University, telling them to write -- which they probably wouldn't -- and promising to come and visit soon.

All their great plans were so different from Harry's, his only intention was to be happy. He wasn't sure he even wanted to plan anything to do; he'd done quite enough already, playing the hero, destroying the villain.

There had been great losses, but he was certain that one day he would be ready to accept it wasn't because of him, just like their victory hadn't been all due to him. The latter part still seemed hard for some people to grasp. The part he had played for their world had been necessary to gather everyone together, and he wasn't needed anymore. He had to wonder if he had ever really been.

It was a better thought than he could have ever imagined.

Now it was the time to be and figure out what he really wanted from life.

He had no idea how that would turn out, but the first steps were clear. There would be a lot to do at the cottage before winter, and he was certain simple work would keep him and Snape busy, even with the help of two house elves.

Far away from the day to day bustle of the wizarding world.

An old memory made him smile. Yes, somewhere he could see the sky, where he could breathe freely. It had never sounded better than right this moment.

Ron heard the footsteps nearing, and for a moment thought it was Snape, especially since Harry was smiling a bit goofily again.

"Good, I almost thought I'd miss this." Not bothering to say words of greeting, Draco walked to Harry.

"I think Snape would have been disappointed. He said there was something he needed to tell you before we leave." Harry saw how his words just made Draco shrug, but there was definitely a wild look in Ron's eyes.

He chose not to comment on that.

Draco adjusted his robes, casting a glance towards the door, "I don't think he'd appreciate me disturbing his packing."

After all, Snape had disappeared downstairs after breakfast with a few words about seeing to his things. He had, however accepted Remus Lupin's hand for goodbye, since it was probable he and Sirius wouldn't be back by the time Harry and Snape left.

It had been a good decision in Draco's opinion. No unfinished affairs, no overly emotional scenes. It was no coincidence that he'd had certain negotiations earlier today, so that the Gryffindors could do whatever Gryffindors did when they were saying goodbye.

"Good idea," Harry said. He knew Snape would want to finish packing in peace. "So how did it go? Did you sign with the Montrose Magpies or the Falmouth Falcons?"

Considering the weird timid looks between Ron and Draco these days, Harry wouldn't have been surprised by him signing with the Cannons.
Draco shrugged, trying to look nonchalant. "Neither. The offers are good, but I haven't made up my mind yet." It was clear he had, but didn't want to talk about it right now.

Harry chose not to press, knowing he'd hear it in time. "Okay."

"Yeah." There was no more fidgeting. "So... This is goodbye then." Draco had known his farewells to Snape would make him feel strange, but he'd never thought it would be just as difficult to say it to Harry.

"Yeah." Harry stepped closer to Draco, the smile on his face only half amused, as if he had something important to say before leaving. "You do know what Hermione and I will do to you if you ever hurt Ron, right?" Seeing the way the grey eyes squinted as if Draco was taking that as a challenge, he added, "It will be exactly the same thing Snape and I will do to Ron if he ever hurts you."

He ignored the choking sounds Ron was making.

It made Draco Malfoy laugh openly. "That does sound fair." Especially since he knew Granger could be just as evil and creative as Snape was if she thought he was mistreating her friend.

"Good." Reaching out, Harry held out his hand again, but this time he didn't let go of Draco's after the simple shake. He pulled him close enough to clasp his arm with his left hand; a brief half-hug that surprised them both. "You know, you're not all that bad."

The words he'd once used for Snape were undoubtedly true with Draco as well.

"Probably not." Then again, Draco did try his best these days. It had something to do with the Gryffindor influence, he was sure. Those moralistic bastards were destroying the last bit of his former grand destiny, making it damn sure he would never become the next Dark Lord.

Which wasn't such a bad thing, really. At least now Harry could go wherever he was going with Snape and live as insanely happy as he could without having to worry about coming to stop him in a few decades or so.

Draco knew he should probably be thinking about something serious right now, but all he could really concentrate on were the offers from Quidditch teams. The heir of Malfoy, no, the lord of Malfoy now, would make a name on the pitch, and maybe then with the rest of their world. The pitch was a good place to start, even though it did sound a bit too frivolous.

Offering Weasley a place to stay was probably another sign of his total disregard of tradition. Of course it would be a good thing to live with the youngest son of the Minister for Magic even if they weren't taking small tentative steps towards something that was beyond casual shagging, especially since Ron's blood was as pure as his was. No matter how grand and well that sounded, the truth of the matter was that it would be nice to have someone familiar there with him when he came home from Quidditch practices.

He patted Harry's arm. "You're not that bad yourself. For a Gryffindor." Salazar Slytherin was probably spinning in his grave.

"How very touching," Snape observed from the doorway, looking at the scene with approval that belied his words.

Harry let go of Draco's arm and turned to Snape. "Farewells usually are." Not that this was anything compared to this morning, when there had been hugs and promises and a suspicious glint in Sirius' eyes that had dissolved into a bout of sniffling as Remus finally pushed him out of the door.
It had been sad, but now there was only anticipation left. Harry's task here had ended with the funerals, and it was time to go before the parties started. He was all for celebrating life and the future, but he preferred to do it alone with Snape, not in a crowd of drunken witches and wizards.

He was ready to look forward instead of hanging onto his glorious past.

Wiping his hands against his robes without even noticing the movement, Harry looked startled when Snape walked next to him and grabbed his hand in a now familiar gesture. He smiled sheepishly and let go of his robes, knowing Snape wouldn't say anything about his silly habit.

There was the barest of caress, Snape's fingers moving over his, lingering on the soft skin of his wrist before letting go.

Ron rolled his eyes.

"Mr. Malfoy." Snape didn't even look at Weasley as he turned to his former ward. "My congratulations on your new career."

Nodding slightly, Draco said, "Thank you, sir." Not that he needed Snape's approval, but it was nevertheless nice to hear it. "I think that playing Quidditch will suit me quite well right now."

Snape's eyes glinted with dark amusement. It was clear that the boy would go far; his intelligence and ambition had not disappeared anywhere even though his choice of company did make one wonder. "Good luck."

He was going to need it dealing with Weasley.

Draco was stunned when the professor offered him his hand, but accepted it immediately, trying his best to ignore the way Harry was beaming at both of them. "You too, sir." He was careful to point his smirk at Harry's direction.

Stepping back, Snape said as an afterthought, "Oh, and Mr. Malfoy? Might I suggest that if you do have the Mansion rebuilt, you'll go for practicality instead of pomp?"

"I will consider that, yes," Draco replied, his lips curling into a genuine smile.

That would be far in the future, when he finally got through with all the paperwork and had the proper funds cleared from the endless maze of Malfoy vaults under Gringotts. There was no doubt in his mind, he would indeed rebuild their family house, but maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to make it a bit more inviting.

Snape nodded, satisfied with the answer. "Mr. Weasley?"

"What?" Ron blurted out.

"Do try to curb your more Gryffindor traits in the future." It was clear that Snape didn't think that was possible. "Though I believe they will help you with your work at the Ministry."

Ron gaped. Was that a compliment or not? Considering that it was the first non sarcastic thing he'd ever really heard from Snape, he couldn't really tell. "Um... Thank you. I guess."

As always, there was a slightest of sneers on Snape's lips as he kept looking at Ron Weasley. It didn't matter that he did indeed endorse the plan the young Weasley had made with Draco Malfoy, or that there was sometimes a hint of reluctant approval in his eyes as he turned his gaze to the redhead these days.
Things had changed, but not that much.

He turned to Harry who was grinning at him like an idiot. "Are you done?"

"Yeah." There would be no need for more hugs or last minute promises to owl and visit. They all knew this was not the end, and making it feel like one would just be stupid. His trunks were packed, and if there were socks left under the bed, Sirius would undoubtedly send them after him, or maybe even use it as an excuse for an early visit.

There was nothing more for him to do here.

"So we can go?" There was a hint of impatience in Snape's voice, as if he was eager to move on as well, already thinking about all the things that needed to do in their new home. There were simple everyday chores as well as a few potions he wanted to brew before Harry started making suggestions about spending the rest of the day in bed. He was determined to at least try to get some real work done before that.

Harry smiled at Snape, reaching out and brushing his fingers against the back of Snape's hand again in a familiar gesture. "Yeah. Let's go home."

The End

End Notes

Betaed by the wonderful Wolfsbride and Ria, with extra help from Jin Fenghuang. Big thanks to Allaire for her suggestions and corrections and to the Hekuna ladies, who were more than patient with me. All remaining mistakes are mine.

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